

# Commentary

## In My Opinion

### The AMS Is Us

For many years—most of my career—the AMS struck me as an amorphous, ethereal organization, located somewhere along the East Coast, and run by unspecified influential, omniscient mathematicians. Perhaps the overlords lived in Washington, DC, and also directed the NSF; maybe the two organizations even met concurrently to set mathematical policy. While wrapped in the mystery of ignorance, the issues of geography, composition, and purpose seemed rather irrelevant to me. More consequential personally was the recurrent reality of the AMS meetings: sectional meetings, the annual January festival now called the Joint Mathematics Meetings, an occasional Summer Research Conference, and even one Summer Institute. They sustained and stimulated my research existence. In retrospect, publications probably should have carried more impact. Several volumes from the Colloquium Publications Series formed a small part of my personal library, supplemented sporadically by various conference proceedings. Except for the *Mathematical Reviews*, whose subordinate relationship to the AMS was unduly obscure, the Society's journals loomed larger than its books on my mental horizon, too easily taken for granted but nevertheless useful for the obvious reasons. Participation shaped the difference; the heart of the AMS was its meetings.

Vague mental impressions of the Society arranged themselves in sharper focus rather quickly in the 1990s, after the forging of a strong link due to my unexpected appointment as an associate secretary. Until 1999 the prominent connection has continued to be through meetings. The AMS associate secretaries—four in all, one for each of the geometrically unbalanced territories—pilot virtually all aspects of AMS meetings within their sections, and they rotate responsibility for shepherding and implementing scientific programs of national meetings and of the new phenomenon, joint international meetings. National meetings, which have endured through or despite a complexity elaborated in extensive scheduling agreements between the AMS and the MAA, represent an overdetermined system. Sectional meetings, which operate under fewer constraints, offer flexible formats and direct user input. An exemplary model for events sponsored by a member-driven society, they are easily assembled, readily transportable, cost effective, and valuable to the participants.

Ease of assembly, the crucial point here, stems from deploying the workload over a broad base. Briefly, here is how that is accomplished. The meeting becomes viable once a site is arranged, through happenstance or persuasion. Additional form emerges with the selection of Invited Speakers, usually four of them, by a small AMS program committee. Although those four have a pronounced effect, the character of the event depends most critically upon the collection of 8–15 Special Sessions. Together with people

making local arrangements, the Special Sessions organizers, a significant cadre of whom ordinarily come from faculty at the host institution and from Invited Speakers or their designates, do the foundational spadework, basically by issuing invitations to speak in their sessions. With rare exceptions, travel funding is arranged by participants themselves from their own pockets or institutions. In spite of this financial handicap, organizers report a high invitational acceptance rate. Ultimately speakers provide abstracts, make their lodging arrangements, and deliver talks; organizers suggest a schedule; the AMS publishes a meeting program and abstracts booklet; and people get together and do mathematics. Repeatedly I have heard postmeeting testimony that individual workloads are unexpectedly light, small compared to the concerted effort required to put together, say, a non-AMS research meeting from scratch, in part since so many logistical details such as publicity, housing arrangements, and the program schedule are handled through the AMS.

What about Special Sessions organizers outside the special cadre? Either they are solicited or they volunteer. Volunteers, those who “lob proposals over the transom”, are in short supply. One reason, I suspect, is a widespread, mistaken belief of its being too presumptuous on the proposer's part, that the overlords would not approve. To the contrary, associate secretaries, the people closest to the events, welcome the lobs. And unless local constraints dictate otherwise, there is room for more spontaneous suggestions. I have solicited several Special Sessions for every South-eastern Sectional meeting occurring over the past six years. In itself that is no problem; the frequency and speed with which people allow a twisting of their arms makes me believe that large numbers appreciate, perhaps even anticipate, being asked. A more genuine problem, though, is the proportion of Special Sessions hatched by solicitation. Neither associate secretaries nor sectional program committees maintain extensive enough networks to effectively solicit proposals across the full spectrum of available topics. More lobs, please!

Members today almost certainly carry other misconceptions, like my own, about what the AMS does and how it functions beyond its endeavors concerning meetings. One misconception that should not be allowed to persist, however, is that we have a closed society dominated by a tight inner circle; it is not, does not strive to be, could not survive if it were. The process of shadowing Robert Fossum, my predecessor as secretary, throughout 1998, traveling to meetings of policy committees and wading through reports about far-reaching activities, made it clear that the number of members playing an active role in AMS governance is huge. And, finally, opportunity to expand these circles of involvement is available: the secretary's office would be pleased to receive suggestions (self-suggestions included) of people, new blood, to serve on the Society's 100+ committees.

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