

Commentary

In My Opinion

Promoting *Excellence*

In a conversation this past summer, after describing his department's recent struggles over the selection of a department chair, a friend summarized, "The only thing wrong with [the new chair] is that he really wants the job." Resurrection of this somewhat familiar lament surprised me, because the 1999 report from the AMS Task Force on Excellence tackled this very perspective head on and, in my view, made a cogent, persuasive case against it.

The report, *Towards Excellence: Leading a Doctoral Mathematics Department in the 21st Century*, was described at length, with full table of contents, in the December 1999 issue of the *Notices* (pp. 1418-1419). More than 80 percent of the 2,500 copies printed to date have been shipped. Widespread distribution does not imply widespread examination, of course, and because of a total lack of reaction evident from the AMS secretary's office, I fear that, like many lengthy official reports, *Towards Excellence* has been lightly perused, quickly shelved, and easily forgotten.

It deserves more careful processing. I urge faculty members who have never picked up the report to read closely at least the first four chapters. Occasionally provocative, sometimes bland, it provides useful material for contemplation and debate. Its nonstandard, central message is: "To ensure their institutions' commitment to excellence in mathematics research, doctoral departments must pursue excellence in their instructional programs." Also unusual by not claiming to present a unilateral solution to the funding problems the Task Force originally set out to examine, the report suggests a collection of changes in goals and operations that could make departments more effective and that could possibly help them prosper. The Task Force fleshed out the following specific recommendations for departments:

- 1) Develop a plan.
- 2) Make a commitment to quality undergraduate instruction.
- 3) Support outreach. Determine the department's potential role in helping its state and local community, and develop an appropriate outreach mission for the department.
- 4) Broaden the preparation of graduate students. Prepare graduate students for their profession and for the jobs they will obtain, not just for doing research.
- 5) Support diversity.
- 6) Build strong relationships on campus. Faculty should make building strong relationships with other departments and the campus administration a conscious department goal.
- 7) Invest in strong leadership.
- 8) Individualize faculty workloads.
- 9) Expand the reward system.

These will not all be unanimously endorsed or readily implemented. Instead, reactions to the specific items surely will vary from place to place, and individuals will resonate with some points but dislike others. For example, even

before the appearance of *Towards Excellence*, my own department, a unit of what is called the flagship in a state university system, consciously decided to support outreach and to engage in new outreach ventures; we remain far from consensus, however, about the desirability of expanding the reward system, let alone about the appropriate mechanisms for doing so. Participation (July 2000) in a departmental assessment of faculty performance for distribution of merit raises served as a forceful reminder of my personal ambivalence about assigning comparative weights to research versus other professional activities. This is just an excerpt of another story, and, as the report spells out, all departments have their own stories to tell. Nonuniformity is what the Task Force observed and what it evidently expects. By challenging certain recognizable attitudes and making its recommendations, the Task Force, it seems, deliberately has sought to encourage mathematics departments to take new positions in the life of their own universities.

The Task Force also made four relatively noncontroversial recommendations to the AMS itself:

- 1) Continue the focus group discussions begun by the Task Force on Excellence.
- 2) Conduct a workshop for new department chairs each year at the annual meetings of the AMS and MAA.
- 3) Organize a resource group of experienced department chairs to serve as consultants for departments that need a self-assessment.
- 4) Initiate expanded data services for doctoral departments.

As a brief aside, here is a summary of the Society's reactions to date. It has pledged strong institutional commitment to fulfilling item (4), the most substantial of these recommendations: it has been seeking systematically to identify additional types of useful data for collection and has been responding to specific data collection requests, when possible, from departments and committees. The AMS Committee on the Profession, as part of its regular operation, organized the workshop called for in (2) at the January 2000 Joint Mathematics Meetings and plans to organize another in January 2001. The same committee is considering implementation of items (1) and (3).

Common criticisms of the Task Force report are that it devotes too little attention to research and it overemphasizes teaching as the fundamental mechanism for fulfilling an institutional mission at the expense of other effective options, like interdisciplinary activity. See for yourself if the criticisms are valid. And after reading the case presented there about investing in strong leadership, reexamine your views on the likely effectiveness of any potential leader lacking a desire to be department chair. Copies of *Towards Excellence* can still be obtained, either in book form by sending e-mail to res@ams.org with the subject line "Book Order" and with full mailing address in the body of the message or by downloading off the Web at <http://www.ams.org/towardsexcellence/>.

—Robert J. Daverman, Associate Editor