

Whither VIGRE?

The article “VIGRE turns three” in this issue of the *Notices* raises two important questions on which I would like to comment.

1. Should program officers at the National Science Foundation (NSF) seek to influence how mathematics departments train their graduate students and mentor their postdocs? My answer to this question is “Yes, please do.” In the Cornell mathematics department many issues are settled by a curious variant of mathematical induction: “We’ve done things (e.g., graduate education) like this for thirty years, so why change?” The mandatory curriculum review associated with our VIGRE grant brought about a thorough restructuring of course offerings in the general area of analysis, where for decades new courses had been added and old ones atrophied without any attention to the overall structure.

Two other positive influences of the VIGRE program that are well documented in the accompanying article are the broadening of mathematics education at all levels and the requirement of mentoring of postdocs. A fourth mandate of the VIGRE program that has created a considerable amount of unhappiness is its insistence that all recipients of funds must be U.S. citizens, nationals, or permanent residents. At the graduate level this means that fellowship offers are made to domestic students who rank well below some foreign students who only get offers of teaching assistantships. At the postdoc level, after one subtracts about thirty NSF postdoc recipients from the domestic applicant pool, the discrepancy in the quality of applicants is even more pronounced.

An old cartoon says: “Gravity: It’s not only the law, but it’s also a good idea.” I think that the same quote applies to the NSF policy. As several committee reports have concluded, the United States must cultivate its own mathematical talent to retain its leading stature in mathematical research. An important first step in repairing the pipeline is a good job market for mathematics Ph.D.’s, which in turn will encourage more students to go to graduate school.

2. Is it a failure of the VIGRE program that some of the most prestigious mathematics departments do not have grants? Benedict Gross’s remarks at the recent VIGRE meeting made it clear his answer was “Yes.” Using a fishing metaphor that I cannot remember exactly, he said in effect that the VIGRE program should invest its money where the best students are. Another vote for “Yes” comes from Calvin Moore, who in the full-length version of his report (excerpts of which appear in the accompanying article) says, “Mathematics departments in institutions such as UC Berkeley, MIT, and Stanford will continue to flourish with or without VIGRE grants, but it is evident that NSF through its decisions on VIGRE grants will end up picking

and choosing winners from among departments that are less well-established and without access to other resources.”

In support of “No” one can argue that (i) there will be a greater effect on the pipeline by awarding VIGRE grants to departments that have seen their graduate programs and research support reduced in the last ten to twenty years as a result of increasing competition for a dwindling supply of students and federal funds, and (ii) distinguished departments that have strong support from alumni and other private sources may have chosen to free themselves from NSF interference by opting out of the VIGRE program.

My recommendations. I agree with Calvin Moore when he says, “One immediate step that should be taken by NSF is to conduct a thorough review of the VIGRE program. This review should engage the mathematical sciences community, should address questions about the proper role of NSF, issues of flexibility within general program goals, the balance of support for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows between VIGRE and other programs, and, most important, should address the mechanisms and process for review and evaluation of VIGRE projects.”

The first meeting of VIGRE directors that I attended at NSF in the fall of 2000 was useful because we were able not only to hear about what had been successful in other programs, but also to discuss issues and concerns with NSF program officers. The last two VIGRE meetings held in the spring of 2001 and 2002 have been gatherings with 100-plus participants and a one-way flow of information, primarily aimed at educating potential recipients of VIGRE grants about what makes for a successful proposal.

Given the current situation, in which many VIGRE grant holders are anxiously trying to guess the future evolution of the program and many in academia are unhappy about the decisions and policies of the VIGRE program, there is a pressing need for a much smaller meeting with a two-way exchange of information. Participants should include representatives from schools that have VIGRE grants, as well as from schools that have lost their grants or have never received one. However, the meeting should be kept small enough to allow for discussion in small groups.

The VIGRE program is an important part of the portfolio of the Division of Mathematical Sciences. If it fails, then the consequences for the funding of mathematics will be drastic. However, in order for the VIGRE program to succeed, there must be a dialogue between the NSF program officers and those of us in the trenches, who must implement the overall ideas of the program in ways that are appropriate for our own departments.

—Rick Durrett
Cornell University
Associate Editor, the Notices

Letters to the Editor

A Boycott by Passport

A number of our colleagues are participating in demands organized by groups of European scholars who, in light of the Middle East conflict, would bar all Israeli nationals from academic conferences, publication in scholarly journals, and participation on editorial boards. One boycott effort gathering signatures on the Web asks readers to sign on to the following statement that will hurt mostly our junior colleagues: "I will attend no scientific conferences in Israel, and I will not participate as referee in hiring or promotion decisions by Israeli universities, or in the decisions of Israeli funding agencies. I will continue to collaborate with, and host, Israeli scientific colleagues on an individual basis."

Although this appears to be directed against institutions, in practice (as illustrated below) it is an attack on individual scholars and their academic freedom. Some who at first agreed to participate in this boycott have since asked to have their names removed from the petition. However, this takes place after the damage has been done. The "unsigning" always is less newsworthy than the "signing".

As mathematicians devoted to the advancement of knowledge, we condemn all actions that deny academic freedom to individuals solely on the basis of their nationality. So far, we have not seen any actions taken against mathematicians as a result of the above call. However there have been incidents in other fields.

On June 18, 2002, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that two distinguished Israeli scholars have been dismissed from the boards of two academic journals published in Great Britain. A senior lecturer in translation studies at Bar-Ilan University was dismissed from the editorial board of *The Translator*, and a professor at Tel Aviv University's School of Cultural Studies was dismissed from the international advisory board of *Translation Studies Abstracts*. These actions are reported to have been taken in response to

demands of some European scholars who would essentially bar all serious contact with Israeli nationals. No suggestion was made in either case that the dismissed board member had written, said, or done anything that this group deemed improper or that indeed was even relevant to the political issue involved. Had such a suggestion been made, our concern would be not less but different. At issue would be the bounds of civil discourse, the right to express opinions, and the place of politics in academic life—difficult issues all. But what was done in the present instance is far simpler: Two individuals were dismissed for no other reason than their nationality or citizenship. We find it particularly ironic that two journals dedicated to translation should have compromised the very openness that facilitates the building of bridges, carrying understanding from one side of a divide to the other.

Such a boycott by passport is deplorable and against the spirit of free academic inquiry and scholarship.

We applaud the editors of the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* who have protested this boycott and their colleagues at other journals in that field who will publish editorials against it. We also salute others in the academic world who have raised their voices against this attack on the very nature of the free marketplace of ideas.

We request that the *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* publish this letter and that the Council of the American Mathematical Society pass a resolution opposing nationality based boycotts.

—Irwin Kra
SUNY at Stony Brook

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Editor's Note: The above letter has been endorsed by dozens of mathematicians, whose names are listed on the Web at <http://www.math.sunysb.edu/~irwin/boycott.pdf>, and the plural pronouns in the letter reflect this fact. Consideration of the issue is on

the agenda for the January 2003 meeting of the Council.

—Harold P. Boas

Responses to Kra

I join the signatories of Irwin Kra's letter, "A Boycott by Passport," in condemning academic boycotts. However, the letter does not go far enough. Kra points out that the two Israeli scholars who were dismissed from the editorial board of British journals in translation studies were singled out purely on the basis of their nationality and leaves open the question of what action might have been acceptable if "either...dismissed board member had written, said, or done anything that [the supporters of the boycott] deemed improper or that...was...relevant to the political issue involved."

An academic boycott based on political views would be every bit as objectionable as one based on nationality. Both violate the principle of the universality of science, embodied in the statutes of the International Council for Science (ICSU), which are adhered to by the AMS as a member of the International Mathematical Union. This principle, as enunciated in ICSU's Statement on Freedom in the Conduct of Science, "affirms the right and freedom of scientists to associate in international scientific activity without regard to such factors as citizenship, religion, creed, political stance, ethnic origin, race, colour, language, age or sex," rights which "are embodied in a variety of articles in the International Bill of Human Rights...."

The issue is not merely theoretical. According to the Ha'aretz daily, although the president of the European Society for Translation Studies, Yves Gambier, condemned the dismissal of the two Israeli editors, his objections to their dismissal were based entirely on his approval of their left-wing political affiliations. It is as if he were proposing a political litmus test for inclusion of Israelis in academic life. Given the current climate in Europe, there is a real danger that this kind of academic McCarthyism could take root.

If science and scholarship normally flourish unimpeded by the great differences in political views among researchers and scholars, it is precisely because people keep their political views separate from their professional judgments.

—Peter B. Shalen
University of Illinois at Chicago

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The recent intensification of the conflict in the Mideast has led to a wide range of responses, from many different political perspectives and from all over the world. This is a flash-point not only in global and American politics, but also in the coffee rooms of American academia. In this situation it is wise for each of us to respect the political judgment of others, and not to lump together widely varying groups whose positions are opposed to our own.

The letter from Irwin Kra falls into this error.

The letter begins with an assertion that unnamed individuals are organizing boycotts which "would bar all Israeli nationals from academic conferences, publication in scholarly journals, and participation on editorial boards." I don't know of any such boycott calls. The only petition identifiably discussed by Kra can be found at <http://www.pjpo.org/>. This commitment has been signed by a large number of academics, including many distinguished mathematicians, mainly in France and Britain. Its principal clauses are quoted in Kra's letter, and have very little to do with the measures described in the opening.

Rather than address the actual terms of this petition, Kra goes on to describe the case of a British professor of translation who dropped two Israelis from the editorial boards of two journals she heads. This action in fact appears to violate the letter and the spirit of the PJPO petition. Citizenship certainly has nothing to do with the PJPO undertakings.

Tarring all signers with this brush seems unfair, and "A boycott by passport" inaccurate and needlessly provocative. Broadsides open us to the very charges of attacks on freedom

that Kra levels at the PJPO petition. Let's avoid them.

Haynes Miller
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Technology
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Unemployed Mathematicians

I found the 2001 Annual Survey in the August 2002 issue very interesting and quite disturbing. As pointed out, yes—the results are skewed...if anything the unemployment rate is much higher than what is depicted in the article. For new mathematicians looking for work, the AMS picture is too optimistic and the field is losing a number of very talented individuals. Yes, there are a number of individuals who did not respond to the survey—because you do not even know we exist and we are all unemployed.

Case in point—I received my Ph.D. from a very distinguished university in England in applied mathematics. I have very impressive academic credentials and a few years of international industrial experience as a PM and academic. Not only am I a Fulbright Scholar, but I have also worked for the U.S. Congress, EU Government, and universities throughout Europe.

In returning to the U.S., I have sent out over 1,000 CV's to academic and industrial organizations and to date I have received only five positive responses. The reason the five institutions were interested in me—they thought my Ph.D. was in economics and that I was a banker. The overwhelming majority of responses have not given me a chance because of my Ph.D.—I am either too overqualified or too experienced! I am not alone on this issue, nor am I an outlier...trust me.

What I find most interesting is that if there are 150–300 applicants for every position advertised—then how can the unemployment rate be only 3.7 percent? Maybe the survey is primarily contacting people who are being employed and have not already fallen out of the mathematical framework.

So to make a long story short, having a Ph.D. in mathematics has only hurt my career and my professional prospects. Currently I am serving wine

for a living with no benefits and no health insurance. Due to my education in mathematics, I cannot even get a job at a bank being a teller or bag groceries for forty hours per week because HR managers feel that I am overqualified.

So maybe I should return to school and study something useful that will help me get a job. Oh, did I mention that is impossible? The lending institutions tell me I already have a Ph.D., so they will not help me fund another one. To add insult to injury, academic departments refuse to accept people who already have their Ph.D.'s into new programs. Why don't I just do a postdoc since that is what comes next? Well, it appears that the departments are taking care of their own and hiring their people—if I am wrong, then please tell me why 350 applications have been returned with "Thanks but no thanks; we have found an internal person to fill the position."

If one more person tells me how lucky I am to have such an impressive record and amazing academic history...I am going to scream. I would love to stay in this field, but how can I and continue to eat? I had to move in with my grandmother...my extraordinary mathematical skills and computer programming ability can't even help me pay the rent.

Interesting article; shame it is so off the mark and out of touch with reality.

—R. Pefferly Ph.D.
*(Pummelled + Humiliated +
Depressed)*

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