

Paying for Paid Referees

In the May and October issues of the *Notices* (vol. 54, pp. 589 and 1119), Michael Fried proposes that mathematical journals should pay referees. Of course, it would be nice if we referees (yes, I was and also am referee of many papers) would get paid and good referees certainly deserve it. But where would the money come from? Mathematicians have been making big efforts (even leaving editorial boards in protest for high prices), with strong support from the AMS and its *Notices*, to make journals less expensive, so libraries (and individuals) can afford them. Clearly, paying referees would make journals considerably more expensive.

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(Received December 23, 2007)

The Mathematical Research Communities

I read the report “Building a research career” (*Notices*, Feb. 2008) with amusement and skepticism. What amused me was the yuppiespeak: “...provide them with structured activities aimed at building social and collaborative networks...” What next? Should a young mathematician consider investing in a Rolodex? Lest I appear to cavil at a well-intentioned idea, let me clarify that facilitating bonds between young researchers is a superb idea and one that is overdue. What makes me pause is the jamboree aspect of the Mathematical Research Communities (MRC) idea.

Firstly, consider this: “Careful choices of conference topics over the years will ensure that a wide range of mathematical areas is covered.” Really? Given that two of the three MRC conferences in 2008 involve a measly 20 participants, one fears that either: (a) Each MRC Conference would have to be considerably more narrowly defined in order to attain critical mass with a mere 20–25 participants; or (b) An ostensibly

broadly conceived MRC Conference would actually devolve into catering (pandering?) to a fashionable clique within the broadly-defined subject area. Whether or not scenario (b) ever arises, it seems to me that a majority of peridocctoral researchers will have to make their way into the world in the traditional style while they wait for a “structured activity” to come their way.

There is a strong undercurrent of passion and risk-taking inherent in doing good mathematics. While most math today is collaborative in nature, any aspiring mathematician has to learn how to independently conceive of a research project. This necessitates a certain loneliness in which the mathematical individuality can develop, and the risk of crashlandings as the young mathematician learns to invent. The MRC would, I am sure, nurture a happy school of professionals, all of whom would know each other, and would be on first-name terms with a clutch of conspicuous and energetic senior mathematicians. But are we convinced that the quantum of self-reliant mathematicians and well-conceived research projects would be markedly smaller if the MRC never existed?

If all this did not involve public money—and the imperative to be efficient with it—I would not be writing this. I too have been in collaborations, in my peridocctoral years, with peridocctoral colleagues. We got together because of an affinity of interests, and *not* because we were put into a talented persons’ summer camp by the AMS. Yes, we would definitely have appreciated access to funds that would have enabled us to meet face-to-face at crucial junctures when the collaboration needed it. Perhaps, if the MRC had recognized this type of need, it could have spread its money among a larger number of needy cases. After all, it costs less per capita when one unit of a research group is funded to fly, say, once a year, to meet up with a (static) colleague than to host a jamboree wherein 100 percent of a small target group has to be flown/fed/housed.

Of course, the first idea does not make a splash. It is disheartening that the AMS nowadays feels compelled, in so many things, to make a splash.

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(Received February 2, 2008)

My Teach for America Experience

John Haws recommends that young mathematicians apply to Teach For America, a national non-profit that places teachers in some of the highest needs school districts in the country. In his article, he shares his successful experience in “making a difference” in the lives and educations of the students he taught, as well as emphasizing that he benefited from “the insight, skills, and confidence” that he gained while teaching in the Rio Grande Valley.

I am following a trajectory similar to his: as I was finishing my undergraduate education, I successfully applied to Teach For America, taught in a high school in Newark, NJ, for three years, and am now pursuing an M.S. in math.

To those who, after reading Mr. Haws’ article, would apply to Teach For America, I would offer some words of warning. Nothing in my life, before or since, left me so physically, emotionally, or spiritually drained as any one day of teaching, let alone the struggle to persist week after week. Furthermore, I feel as if nothing could have prepared me for the task I took upon myself. In November of my first year of teaching, the word at the forefront of my mind was inadequacy; specifically, my own inadequacy at teaching math to the young people in my classes.

Furthermore, when I ultimately left my school, I had very few illusions about the amount of change that my presence had brought about. When I started in September of 2004, I was the teacher with the least seniority (not to mention virtually no training

in math education). Had I remained another year, in September of 2007 I would have been the math teacher who had been at the high school for the third longest amount of time, out of nine teachers. Furthermore, my department chairperson was frantically searching for four math teachers for the following year. All of the above is to suggest that the problems that faced the school where I taught, and which are replicated in hundreds of schools across the country, can at best be alleviated, and then, only slightly, by any one person's short-term commitment.

If I were in a position to recommend a course of action to young mathematicians, I would plead with them to become involved in math education. If Teach For America were the vehicle that young mathematicians choose to begin teaching, I would support their choice because, undoubtedly, without the committed participation of a sizeable part of the mathematical community, the problems faced by our youth cannot be solved. But I would also caution the young mathematicians that they should not let themselves be fooled. The problems that need solving have something to do with innovative teachers and curricula, as Haws suggests, but they have much more to do with a set of institutions that systematically direct resources away from the vulnerable and towards the powerful in our society. Teach For America never names these institutions, so let me do that here: institutional racism, segregation, capital liberalization, the military-industrial complex. Young people who commit to working to ensure that schools everywhere are going to have the teachers they need ought to be aware that those are the obstacles they are fighting to overcome.

I don't say this to make the reader despair that nothing can be done, but as a matter of intellectual honesty, and as an encouragement to analyze the full scope of the challenge and its implications.

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(Received February 5, 2008)

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