

Letters to the Editor

Math Circles

In their fascinating article “Cross-cultural analysis of students with exceptional talent in mathematical problem solving” (*Notices*, November 2008), the authors offer six proposals to stimulate national discussion re supporting young scholars with keen mathematical interests. May I add a seventh, namely, that of strongly encouraging the continued growth of math circles throughout this nation, through both increased student participation and increased involvement of mathematics professionals. Math circles provide sustained mathematical experiences for young scholars, a strong culture of support and encouragement of mathematical pursuit, exposure to higher level mathematical ideas and practices, freedom of mathematical creativity and ownership of ideas, and an experience of social acceptance from working with like-minded peers.

Since the publication of “Math circles and olympiads: MSRI asks is the U.S. coming of age?” (*Notices*, February 2006) and the continued work of MSRI, the MAA, and AIM [Mathematical Sciences Research Institute, Mathematical Association of America, American Institute of Mathematics]; of the AMS with its publication of *Circle in a Box*; and of very many individuals, math circles are becoming a solid part of the student mathematics educational landscape. They could benefit *all* students if adopted as part of the national culture (that is, to become “a way of life” as one colleague puts it), all the while continuing to provide a tremendous springboard for those keen to go further with their pursuits. The goals and practices of math circles address many of the issues raised in the November piece and their full support is very much worthy of a seventh call to action.

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Evaluating Teaching in Interviews

In the “Letter from the Editor” that appeared in the December 2008 issue of the *Notices*, the one describing a videotaped lecture interview by a job candidate, one sentence stood out for me. Andy Magid wrote, “The presentation made it clear that the candidate should be an effective instructor.” As I noted in my November 2007 *Notices* article, “Valuing and evaluating teaching in the mathematics faculty hiring process”, using candidates’ research talks to evaluate their teaching effectiveness is a worrisome practice. Although the survey I reported in my article indicated that 76 percent of search committees engage in this practice, there are important differences between talking about one’s research to a group of experts and teaching undergraduate mathematics. In particular, research talks typically do not allow for demonstration of a candidate’s approach to in-class formative assessment and active learning techniques, important components of undergraduate teaching effectiveness. Research talks delivered via video are even less able to convey a candidate’s teaching effectiveness as these talks are essentially one-way conversations without any of the back-and-forth discussion that is often necessary for student learning. Although such talks can help search committees evaluate some components of a candidate’s teaching effectiveness, I would hesitate to endorse their use as more than a secondary method for evaluating a candidate’s potential in the classroom.

—Derek Bruff

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Corrections

The January 2009 issue of the *Notices* carried my article, “A Celebration of Women in Mathematics at MIT”. A few errors have come to light since publication of the article. On page 44 the article stated that in 1968 Karen Uhlenbeck became the first woman C.L.E. Moore Instructor at MIT. I thank Robert Strichartz for pointing out that this distinction actually goes to Nancy Kopell, who started as a Moore Instructor in 1967. Uhlenbeck was a regular instructor during 1968-69. I also thank Dennis Porche for noting that, on page 45, the article did not make fully clear that, when Gigliola Staffilani was hired by MIT as an associate professor in 2002, she was hired with tenure. Also on page 44 the name of former MIT dean Robert Birgeneau was misspelled. Finally, in Table 1 Susan Landau is listed as having earned her doctorate in 1996; the article’s first paragraph correctly records the year as 1983.

—Margaret A. M. Murray

Submitting Letters to the Editor

The *Notices* invites readers to submit letters and opinion pieces on topics related to mathematics. Electronic submissions are preferred (notices-letters@ams.org); see the masthead for postal mail addresses. Opinion pieces are usually one printed page in length (about 800 words). Letters are normally less than one page long, and shorter letters are preferred.