

Graduate School Recommendations

My thanks to Bernard Deconinck and Jan Medlock ["The Burden on Graduate School Recommenders," *Notices*, December 2014] for pointing out the burden imposed on recommenders by our current patchwork of application procedures for graduate school in mathematics, and for including the paragraph used by Robert Strichartz to address this issue in the letters he writes.

For many years, my own choice was to avoid completing online references whenever possible (mathjobs.org being a pleasant exception); until recently, most graduate programs would accept such letters upon request, often despite official posted policies to the contrary. However, the tide has clearly turned, and several programs now respond indicating that, while they are willing to accept hard copy, they cannot guarantee that their committee will read them.

Both the short- and long-term solutions proposed by the authors provide a better approach, with less risk of jeopardizing the recommendee's chances: Add a disclaimer to letters where necessary, and agitate for a uniform, mathjobs-style alternative. That latter step will succeed only if strongly supported by the AMS and its members.

Readers may enjoy the further discussion of this issue I found on an old (and apparently inactive) blog at onlinereferences.blogspot.com.

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Does the Fields Medal or Attracting Mates Ruin the Future of Geniuses?

While reading, with great interest, János Kollár's [4], I couldn't help thinking about another such study, of Satoshi Kanazawa [3], who finds that the decrease in productivity after major achievements is not specific to mathematics, but can be found in

all creative fields, literature and painting included. In the fashionable style of "evolutionary psychology," in which human behavior and motivation is seen zoologically, Kanazawa finds that "genius" is the expression "of young men's proximate competitive desires, whose ultimate function in the ancestral environment would have been to increase reproductive success." In that view, mathematical achievement is a form of engaging in "cultural display in order to attract mates". Kanazawa attempts to show that this is so by amassing statistical evidence, for the fact that "marriage has a strong desistance effect on [...] genius," in the form of productivity graphs that show both women and unmarried men do not have the early peak and precipitous drop experienced by males who have achieved their goal of "attracting mates."

G. J. Borjas and K. B. Doran [1], however, completely ignore Kanazawa, and compare the Fields medalists with a very debatable list of "contenders" (picked among the "plenary speakers" at ICMS, all of them awardees of other prizes: Abel, Wolf, Cole, Bôcher, Veblen, Salem). That list conveniently misses Paul Erdős, whose independent elementary proof of the PNT (one of the results for which Atle Selberg received it (see [2], [5])) put him perhaps somewhat closer to "contendership" than the "plenary lecturers" chosen. It also misses Igor Shafarevich (although it lists his co-author Ilya Piatetski-Shapiro). If Erdős had been on that "top contender" list, he would have confirmed Borjas and Doran's finding that top contenders do (in this case *incredibly*) far better than medalists in terms of number of publications and their impact. Kanazawa would have said: I told you so, Erdős never cared about "attracting mates." Erdős, who lived to be eighty-three, would also have messed with the neat "conclusion" regarding the early demise of "top contenders" (whose "average age of death" is 60.5). Shafarevich, alive at ninety-one, would have also been of no help for the desired conclusion.

Whatever one thinks of the recurring fad of "evolutionary" approaches, an exclusionary focus on one distinction, as if fame and historical significance of results in mathematics depended only on it, seems to be an even narrower focus.

References

- [1] G. J. BORJAS and K. B. DORAN, Prizes and productivity: How winning the Fields Medal affects scientific output, *Journal of Human Resources* (2015).
- [2] D. GOLDFELD, The elementary proof of the prime number theorem: an historical perspective, www.math.columbia.edu/~goldfeld/ErdosSelbergDispute.pdf.
- [3] S. KANAZAWA, Why productivity fades with age: The crime-genius connection, *Journal of Research in Personality* 37 (2003), 257–272, personal.lse.ac.uk/kanazawa/pdfs/JRP2003.pdf.
- [4] J. KOLLÁR, Is there a curse of the Fields Medal?, *Notices of the AMS* 62, no. 1 (2015), 21–25.
- [5] J. SPENCER and R. GRAHAM, The elementary proof of the prime number theorem. With a note on the controversy by E. G. Straus and a postscript by Carl Pomerance, *Math. Intelligencer* 31 (2009), no. 3, 18–23.

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Diversity Trumps Ability

Publishing Abigail Thompson's article "Does Diversity Trump Ability?" in the *Notices* was appropriate ["Does Diversity Trump Ability?", by Abigail Thompson, October 2014; see also Letters to the Editor, January 2015]. Her counterexample to the statement of Lu Hong and Scott Page, published in the *Proc. Nat. Acad. Sci. USA*, is correct. Claiming the opposite by referring to an additional **Condition 3** published three years later in Professor Page's book, but not included in the *Proceedings* paper, is disingenuous.

Diversity versus ability, particularly in regard to admitting students and hiring faculty, is a highly politicized constitutional issue. In their

paper, Professors Hong and Page attempted to support the diversity by an incorrect mathematical argument. There has been nothing uncivil or uncollegial in pointing out the error. It merely affirmed that "We live in the society and have eyes."

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IdeaLab is a one-week program aimed at early career researchers (within 5 years of their Ph.D.) that focuses on a topic at the frontier of research. Participants are exposed to a problem whose solution may require broad perspectives and multiple areas of expertise. Senior researchers introduce the research topic in tutorials and lead discussions. The participants break into teams to brainstorm ideas, comprehend the obstacles, and explore possible avenues towards a solution. The teams are encouraged to develop a research program proposal. On the last day, they present their ideas to one another and to a small panel of representatives from funding agencies for feedback and advice.

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