

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



Consider Poster Sessions Linked to Special Sessions

We are writing to suggest that the AMS consider adding the option for linked poster sessions to each organized special session.

In organizing our Joint Mathematics Meetings 2016 sessions, we had in mind 16 different talks that presented a carefully designed sampling of the area we were aiming to explain and illuminate. Since we were given enough time for only 8 talks, 8 had to be dropped. In addition to this, we ended up receiving reasonable requests for inclusion in the session.

We suggested to the conference organizers that we be given a room in the evening for a poster session to accommodate everyone but were told that the logistics were overwhelming and that this was not possible. We can imagine that doing this at that late date may really have been a problem, so we have no complaint about those who organized the 2016 JMM!

Creating linked poster sessions would allow organizers to craft a better presentation of progress and results in an area or focus of interest, as well as accommodate spontaneous submissions. It would also liven things up—well designed poster sessions are often preferable to sessions of talks.

We suspect that we were not the only organizers to find ourselves having to redesign a session due to being given fewer talk spots than requested, and we are quite certain that most sessions receive self-nominations, some of which would be nice to accept!

While this would cost a bit more, there would of course be a greater number of registrations as a result of the additional presenters. Adding a bit of ingenuity to the solution of the problem would almost certainly help to reduce the costs of the poster sessions as well.

We believe that the effort would be amply repaid in the form of a richer, more diverse conference.

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Free Speech at Universities

AMS members may be interested to learn that, at his university's graduation ceremony in December 2015, University of Michigan President Mark Schlissel's remarks focused on the "horrible mistake" the university had made in 1954 in punishing three faculty members for their noncooperation with the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities. Two of these faculty members were fired, including mathematician Chandler Davis.

The context of these events over sixty years ago was the McCarthy period, when many parts of American society were subjected to political intimidation, and toleration for dissenting ideas was low. When Professor Davis was called to testify before a congressional committee, he refused to answer political questions on the basis of the first amendment rather than on the more common grounds of the fifth amendment. His reasoning was that the government cannot regulate political speech (first amendment) and thus it has no right to compel citizens to answer questions about their political beliefs or the political beliefs of their colleagues.

As a result of this action, Professor Davis was quickly fired from his tenure-track position at the University of Michigan, despite strong support from the Mathematics Department. He was also convicted of contempt of Congress and served six months in federal prison after losing his case

before the Supreme Court. For more information about the political persecution of mathematicians during this time, see Professor Davis's article "The Purge" in the book *A Century of Mathematics in America, Part I*, published by the AMS in 1988.

After his dismissal from the University of Michigan, an academic blacklist prevented Professor Davis from getting other faculty positions in the United States. However, he was welcomed by the University of Toronto, where he is now Professor Emeritus after having served the AMS in various capacities, including as Vice-President.

Twenty-five years ago the Faculty Senate of the University of Michigan established an annual Lecture on Academic and Intellectual Freedom to commemorate the injustice to the three faculty who had been targeted in 1954. Now the President of the University has also called attention to this history, which affected many mathematicians and which can provide lessons for the future.

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