LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Responses to “A Word from… Abigail Thompson”

Thank you to all those who have written letters to the editor about Abigail Thompson’s “A word from…” in the December Notices. I appreciate your sharing your thoughts on this important topic with the community. We are posting the letters in the order in which they were received. Letters received by December 31, 2019 will be added to this website.

—Erica Flapan, Editor in Chief

Re: Letter by Abigail Thompson

Dear Editor,

I am writing regarding the article in Vol. 66, No. 11, of the Notices of the AMS, written by Abigail Thompson. As a mathematics professor, I am very concerned about ensuring that the intellectual community of mathematicians is focused on rigor and rational thought. I believe that discrimination is antithetical to this ideal: to paraphrase the Greek geometer, there is no royal road to mathematics, because before matters of pure reason, we are all on an equal footing. In my own pursuit of this goal, I work to mentor mathematics students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, including volunteering to help tutor students at other institutions. Their success, despite their non-traditional backgrounds, is a great confirmation of my belief that great mathematicians can come from anywhere, and that we must help those whose histories have left them at a disadvantage compared to more stereotypical mathematics students.

I am nonetheless in complete agreement with Dr. Thompson that demands for ideological conformity are just as antithetical to the ideal of reason to which we mathematicians strive. We must remain free to hold our own ideologies, as well as to debate policies and methods for implementing those ideologies. This includes allowing professors of mathematics to debate how best to ensure that our community can be fair, open, and welcoming to people of all backgrounds, and not requiring that everyone subscribe to the same ideas without question. Thompson is correct to say that the UC system’s policies are troubling. I am grateful for her letter.

Sincerely,

Blake Winter
Assistant Professor of Mathematics, Medaille College

(Received November 20, 2019)

*We invite readers to submit letters to the editor at notices-letters@ams.org.

Letter to the Editor

I am writing in support of Abigail Thompson’s opinion piece (AMS Notices, 66(2019), 1778–1779). We should all be grateful to her for such a thoughtful argument against mandatory “Diversity Statements” for job applicants. As she so eloquently stated, “The idea of using a political test as a screen for job applicants should send a shiver down our collective spine.” It is especially pleasing to find her article grounded in the history of a similar incident and so generous to those who feel differently.

In addition, I thank Erica Flapan for publishing this article. Avoiding troubling issues is always the easiest path. It is good to see the Notices willing to explore controversial topics that are of great importance to the mathematical community and to academia in general.

Well done!

—George E. Andrews
Past President, American Mathematical Society

(Received November 21, 2019)

Abby Thompson’s opinion piece

To the editor:

I applaud your running Thompson’s piece about the ‘diversity criterion’ in hiring.

I am not yet sure of my position on this matter. I can see several ways of looking at the issue. But I find Thompson’s essay thought provoking and well reasoned, and it will contribute to my understanding of the issue.

I know that certain segments of academia will disagree with Thompson’s view. That is not at issue. I know too that certain segments will disapprove of Thompson’s opinion being aired in the Notices. I write to let you know that my feeling is otherwise. Whatever one’s opinion about the ‘diversity statement’ issue, it is important to hear reasonably argued opinions other than one’s own.

Is there a need to balance Thompson’s piece with an ‘equal and opposite’ piece? Not necessarily, unless such a

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Blake Winter
Assistant Professor of Mathematics, Medaille College

(Received November 20, 2019)
piece contributes in the same way to the discussion. It is enough to call the question, as Thompson does.

I thank you for keeping the Notices fresh and useful in the field.

—Mark Saul, PhD
Executive Director, Julia Robinson Mathematics Festival
A program of the American Institute of Mathematics

(Received November 21, 2019)

Letter About Abby Thompson

To the editor,

I applaud Professor Abby Thompson’s principled stand against mandated diversity statements (AMS Notices, 66(2019), 1778–1779), and I also want to congratulate the Notices for publishing her opinion piece. *Loyalty Oath Redux*, in the form of mandated diversity statements, will not advance the cause of either higher education or social justice.

—H. Wu
Professor Emeritus of Mathematics
University of California at Berkeley

(Received November 22, 2019)

Abigail Thompson’s piece in the December Notices

Dear editor,

I am appalled and greatly disappointed by the AMS’s decision to publish Abigail Thompson’s piece in the December Notices. You have greatly damaged the respectability and credibility of the entire AMS by bestowing its imprimatur on a piece whose main argument is flat-out fear mongering, by building a false equivalency between certain debatable hiring practices and McCarthyism.

To make matters worse, the apology offered on the AMS’ twitter by the Notices’ Editor-in-chief reveals a deep lack of understanding of both the issue at hand and the responsibilities of her position. The issue is not that “[the] piece could be interpreted as representing the views of our professional society,” but rather that by choosing to publish it, the Notices (and the AMS at large) is effectively endorsing if not its content, at the very least its tactics.

Of course the Notices should be a forum for discussion of all sorts of issues that affect us as mathematicians, but said discussions ought to be conducted in a professional manner. I expect the Notices to NOT give a platform to ad hominem attacks and other similar logical fallacies often used to mask the lack of substantive arguments. Thompson’s essay does not pass this simple test, as it is very much centered on an attention-grabbing comparison that many people will find obscene instead of reasoning and facts that would support the author’s point.

I expect the AMS to take responsibility for the misguided decisions that allowed this to happen, and also take the opportunity to improve the editorial practices at the Notices.

Respectfully,
Alejandro Chávez-Domínguez
Assistant Professor
Department of Mathematics
College of Arts & Sciences
The University of Oklahoma

(Received November 22, 2019)

The math community values a commitment to diversity

We are a group of concerned mathematicians writing in response to AMS Vice President Abigail Thompson’s editorial, invited by the AMS for publication in the December 2019 edition of the Notices. In this editorial, Dr. Thompson states her personal opinion against the mandated use of faculty diversity statements in hiring decisions and compares such requirements to McCarthyist loyalty oaths.

We are all members of many mathematical societies, including the American Mathematical Society. Some of us serve on committees in these societies or are chairs of committees in these societies. Some of us have been chairs of departments, some of us are or have been chairs of search committees, and some of us have written or reviewed diversity statements as part of search processes. We have all thought deeply about the role of diversity statements and related tools, such as student success statements.

We are compelled to write because the AMS leadership’s actions have harmed the mathematics community, particularly mathematicians from marginalized backgrounds. We are writing because we support diversity statements as one tool to encourage a more inclusive and equitable mathematics profession. We are writing because we wish to correct the misleading impressions readers might have of such statements from Thompson’s editorial: Thompson’s opinion does not represent the opinions of many other members of the mathematics community. We are writing because not everyone is in a position to raise their voice.

We are all members of many mathematical societies, including the American Mathematical Society. Some of us serve on committees in these societies or are chairs of committees in these societies. Some of us have been chairs of departments, some of us are or have been chairs of search committees, and some of us have written or reviewed diversity statements as part of search processes. We have all thought deeply about the role of diversity statements and related tools, such as student success statements.

We are compelled to write because the AMS leadership’s actions have harmed the mathematics community, particularly mathematicians from marginalized backgrounds. We are writing because we support diversity statements as one tool to encourage a more inclusive and equitable mathematics profession. We are writing because we wish to correct the misleading impressions readers might have of such statements from Thompson’s editorial: Thompson’s opinion does not represent the opinions of many other members of the mathematics community. We are writing because not everyone is in a position to raise their voice. We are writing because it matters how our community and its leaders talk about diversity, especially in our profession’s most prominent publication. We are writing because we are disappointed by the editorial decision to publish this piece which contradicts the AMS’s commitment to diversity affirmed in its own diversity statement (www.ams.org/diversity). Clearly, this is something that people needed to talk about, but the AMS has chosen to spark this conversation by giving its imprimatur to a piece that undermines productive discussion and causes real danger and burden to the marginalized members of our community.

Diversity statements are widely used in academic hiring as one component to assess candidates’ qualifications for the job. Each statement one requires as part of a hiring
process—research, teaching, mentoring, service, or diversity—helps paint a picture of how a candidate will contribute to the work of an institution. Increased use of diversity statements reflects a growing recognition in higher education that faculty contribute in positive ways to the campus community by acknowledging, appreciating, and collaborating with groups of students, staff, and fellow faculty who are diverse along varied axes. In acknowledgment that this is part of the work of a faculty member and of the hiring process, we recommend that graduate programs explicitly prepare their graduates to contribute to this work and to write and talk about it meaningfully, and we commend the programs already undertaking this work.

There are plenty of legitimate questions about how to use diversity statements effectively and how (more broadly) to create diverse and supportive faculties. In order to reduce bias in the evaluation of candidates, hiring committees evaluate statements according to criteria that indicate evidence of these important contributions, grounded in the missions of higher education in general and their institution in particular. Asking for and evaluating diversity statements are not quick solutions to the complex challenge of justice and inclusion in higher education, but they can help hiring committees to evaluate candidates’ skills in doing this portion of our professional work.

Diversity statements help assess a candidate’s ability to effectively teach a diverse group of students. If our goal as mathematicians and educators is truly to reach as many students as possible, thinking about diversity and inclusion is necessary. Good teaching is necessarily inclusive. If we willfully ignore an important area of pedagogy that demonstrably helps more students succeed in math, then we will continue to reproduce systems of inequity, and we will do a great disservice to our students. We will therefore not be effective teachers.

Suggesting that actively attempting to include more students in mathematics is equivalent to the Red Scare is ignorant (about both history and the present) and dangerous. Claims of “reverse racism,” which equate critiquing privilege with oppressing the privileged, have a long and unsavory history in and beyond higher education. Without understanding the history in which these discussions are rooted, it is possible to profess support for the ideal of equality while acting in ways that lead to exclusion and inequity.

While Dr. Thompson attempts to spin this issue with partisan wording, diversity statements are a small yet necessary step towards creating a more equitable and inclusive community. Higher education in the US is shifting; student populations we serve are changing, and our understanding of how to better serve all students is advancing. We need a rehumanization of mathematics that can affirm students’ cultural funds of knowledge while examining and combating its own roles in supporting power structures. We need leadership at all levels, from professional societies to presidents, boards, deans, and chairs, to recognize this reality, advocate for students and faculty from a variety of backgrounds, and move us forward.

Dr. Thompson’s preface that the letter is her “personal opinion” does not alleviate our concerns, nor does the fact that she seems to be referring primarily to the use of these documents at the UC system. The fact remains that the Notices made an editorial decision to give Thompson’s essay a national (indeed, international) platform, and in a prominent position within the publication. Notices is a publication of the AMS, and Dr. Thompson is identified as an AMS officer in her byline. According to Notices editor Erica Flapan, Dr. Thompson’s position in the AMS leadership led the AMS to solicit her letter. These contextual details send a message to the profession about how diversity is viewed by those with power and responsibility in the AMS and a major university department. The AMS and Notices bear responsibility for amplifying views that fly in the face of research-based practices and that falsely equate evidence-based approaches to teaching and professional practice with the blacklisting of people based on political ideology, all in direct contradiction of the AMS’s stated commitment to diversity.

AMS’s own diversity statement claims, “The American Mathematical Society is committed to promoting and facilitating equity, diversity and inclusion throughout the mathematical sciences... We reaffirm the pledge in the AMS Mission Statement to ‘advance the status of the profession of mathematics, encouraging and facilitating full participation of all individuals,’ and urge all members to conduct their professional activities with this goal in mind.” While merely publishing Dr. Thompson’s letter demonstrates the AMS’s lack of commitment to this statement, the fact that it was written by and credited to an officer of the AMS raises even more serious questions about the statement’s sincerity.

We strongly disagree with the sentiments and arguments in Dr. Thompson’s editorial, and we hope that the AMS will reconsider the way that it uses its power and position in the mathematics communities in these kinds of discussions. However, we primarily write this letter to our fellow mathematicians and students of all kinds who might have wondered if inclusion work is valued in our community. We want students and faculty, especially those with multiple identities that are minoritized in mathematics, to know that many mathematicians see this inclusion work as integral to our community and identity.

Signed,

Aaron Kaestner, North Park University
Aaron Weinberg, Ithaca College
Abba Gumel, Arizona State University
Abeer Hasan, Humboldt State University
Adam Avilez, Mesa Community College
Adam Castillo, Florida International University
Aditya P. Adiredja, The University of Arizona
Adriana Salerno, Bates College
Letters to the Editor

Aida Alibek, University of Illinois at Chicago
Aisha Mechery, Bryn Mawr College
Ajeet Gary, New York University
Alejandra Rincón Hidalgo, ICTP
Alexander Diaz-Lopez, Villanova University
Alexander Halperin, Salisbury University
Alexander Hoover, Assistant Professor, University of Akron
Alexander Rasmussen, Yale University
Alexander S. Moore, Virginia Tech
Alexandra Neulon, Colgate University
Alexis Byers, Youngstown State University
Alice Mark, Vanderbilt University
Alice Nadeau, Cornell University
Alicia Prieto Langarica, Youngstown State University
Alison Lynch, California State University, Monterey Bay
Alison Marr, Southern Utah University
Alissa Crans, Loyola Marymount University
Aliza Steurer, Dominican University
Allison Henrich, Seattle University
Amanda Hattaway, Wentworth Institute of Technology
Amanda Knecht, Villanova University
Amanda Ruiz, University of San Diego
Amber Rosin, Cal Poly Pomona
Amber Verser, Bowling Green State University
Ami Radunskaya, Pomona College, Claremont
Amie Wilkinson, University of Chicago
Amy Beth Prager, NCCIT
Amy Ksir, United States Naval Academy
Amy Parrott, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Amy Velchoff, Texas State University
Amy Wehe, Fitchburg State University
Amzi Jeffs, University of Washington graduate program
Ana Rita Pires, University of Edinburgh
Ander Erickson, University of Washington Tacoma
Andrea Arauza Rivera, California State University, East Bay
Andrea Heald, University of Washington
Andrea Young, Ripon College
Andre Mejia, University of Pennsylvania
Andrés R. Vindas Meléndez, University of Kentucky
Andrew Bernoff, Harvey Mudd College
Andrew Cooper, University of Pennsylvania
Andrew D. Jones, Jr., Florida A&M University
Andrew Schaffer, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo
Angie Hodge, Northern Arizona University
Anil Venkatesh, Adelphi University
Anita Yadavalli, University of Minnesota
Anita O’Mellan, Youngstown State University
Ann Clifton, Cedar Crest College
Anna Haensch, Duquesne University
Anne Catlla, Wofford College
Anne M. Ho, University of Tennessee
Anschel Schaffer-Cohen, University of Pennsylvania
Anthony Bonato, Ryerson University
Anton Dochtermann, Texas State University
Anurag Katyal, Palm Beach State College
Arin Demjenjan, York University
Areeba Ikram, Colorado School of Mines
Aris Winger, Georgia Gwinnett College
Asamoah Nkwanta, Morgan State University
Ashlee Kalauli, University of California, Santa Barbara
Audrey Malagon, Virginia Wesleyan University
Axel Brandt, Northern Kentucky University
Bahar Acu, Northwestern University
Barbara Fantechi, Sissa, Trieste, Italy
Belin Tsunenijninie, Santa Fe Community College
Ben Blum-Smith, The New School
Ben Ford, Sonoma State University
Benjamin Braun, University of Kentucky
Benjamin Coté, Western Oregon University
Benjamin Dickman, The Hewitt School (NY)
Benjamin Gaines, Iona College
Benjamin Levitt, Tri-Institutional MD-PhD Program
Berit Givens, Cal Poly Pomona
Bianca Viray, University of Washington
Bill Rosenthal, CLUNY (retired)
Blake Farman, Lafayette College
Bradley Elliott, Emory University
Brandy S. Wiegers, Central Washington University
Bremame Swart, The Citadel
Bret Benesh, College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University
Brian Birgen, Wartburg College
Brian L. Walter, The Evergreen State College
Brian Lindaman, California State University, Chico
Brian P. Katz, Smith College
Brittany Stephenson, Lewis University
Brittney Miller, Coe College
Brooke Shipley, University of Illinois at Chicago
Bruce Reznick, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Bruce Yoshiwara, Los Angeles Pierce College, retired
Caglar Uyanik, Yale University
Caitlin Beecham, Georgia Institute of Technology
Calvin Jongsmma, Dordt University
Cameron Byerly, University of Georgia
Cameron D. Hill, Wesleyan University
Carla Cederbaum, University of Tübingen, Germany
Carmen Caprau, California State University, Fresno
Carol Schumacher, Kenyon College
Carolyn M. James, University of Portland
Carrie Diaz Eaton, Bates College
Carrie Muir, Whatcom Community College
Carter Johnson, University of California, Davis
Casey Monday, University of Cincinnati
Casey Warmbrand, Arizona State University
Catherine Buell, Fitchburg State University
Cathery Yeh, Chapman University
Chad Topaz, Williams College
Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, University of New Hampshire
Charles D. Camp, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo
Cheryl Eames, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
Cheryl Grrood, Swarthmore College
Chiheon Kim, Kkakao Brain
Chloe Urbanski Wawrzyniak, Rutgers University
Chris Rasmussen, San Diego State University
Christian Jäh, Georg-August Universität Göttingen
Christina Edholm, Scripps College
Christina Eubanks-Turner, Loyola Marymount University
Christine von Renesse, Westfield State University
Christopher Duffy, University of Saskatchewan
Christopher Hanusa, Queens College, CLUNY
Kyle Petersen, DePaul University
Lateefah Id-Deen, Kennesaw State University
Laura Lopez Cruz, CUNY Graduate Center
Lee Worden, UCSF
Leonardo Javier Rodríguez Gutierrez, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Lily Khajaví, Loyola Marymount University
Lindsey Bosko-Dunbar, St Norbert College
Lior Pachter, California Institute of Technology
Lisa Bromberg, Springfield College
Lisa DeMeyer, Central Michigan University
Lisa Marano, West Chester University
Lola Thompson, Oberlin College
Lori Ziegelmeier, St Norbert College
Matthew K. Voigt, University of California San Diego
Maarten McKubre-Jordens, University of Canterbury
Madeline Brandt, University of California, Berkeley
Mario Banuelos, California State University, Fresno
Martha Precup, Washington University in St. Louis
Martha Shott, Sonoma State University
Mary D. Shepherd, Northwest Missouri State University
Mary E. Pilgrim, San Diego State University
Mary K. Arthur, Washington State University
Mary K. Porter, Saint Mary’s College (IN)
Matilde Lalin, University of Montreal, Canada
Matilda Marcolli, Caltech, University of Toronto, and Perimeter Institute
Matt Davis, Muskingum University
Matthew Ando, University of Illinois
Matthew Cathey, Wofford College
Matthew G. Jones, California State University Dominguez Hills
Matthew K. Voigt, University of California San Diego
Matthew Salomone, Bridgewater State University
Matthias Beck, San Francisco State University
Matthias Kawski, Arizona State University
Max Lahn, University of Michigan
Megan Breit-Goodwin, Anoka-Ramsey Community College
Megan Cream, Lehigh University
Megan E. Sawyer, Southern New Hampshire University
Megan Selbach-Allen, Stanford University
Melanie Brown, Champlain College
Melanie Puwarzki, Roosevelt University
Melissa Sutherland, SUNY Geneseo
Meredith L. Greer, Bates College
Meredith Sargent, University of Arkansas
Michael Dougherty, Colby College
Michael J. Barany, University of Edinburgh
Michael Lacey, Georgia Institute of Technology
Michael Robert, University of the Sciences, Philadelphia
Michael Ruddy, Max Planck Institute for Mathematics in the Sciences
Michael S. Gagliano, California Lutheran University
Michael T. Schulz, Utah State University
Michael Vischak, The Kinkaid School
Michael Wills, Layton Christian Academy
Michelle Manes, University of Hawaii at Manoa
Michelle Snider, IDA/Center for Computing Sciences
Michele Washington, University of Michigan
Mikael Vejdemo-Johansson, CUNY College of Staten Island / CUNY Graduate Center
Mike Tait, Villanova University
Milos Savic, University of Oklahoma
Mindy Capaldi, Valparaiso University
Mitch Haeuser, Iowa State University
Mitchell T. Keller, Morningside College
Moira McDermott, Syracuse University
Molle Shultz, University of Michigan
Monica L. Miles, Cornell University
Monica VanDieren, Robert Morris University
Moshe Cohen, State University of New York at New Paltz
Natalia García-Colín, Sociedad Matemática Mexicana
Natalie Downey, University of Colorado
Natalie Sheils, UnitedHealth Group
Nate Brown, Penn State University
Nathan Ryan, Bucknell University
Nathan Warnberg, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
Neha Gupta, Georgia Tech
Nicholas Battista, The College of New Jersey
Nicholas Fortune, Western Kentucky University
Nicholas A. Castro, University of Arkansas
Nicole Eklinter Meier, Grinnell College
Nicole Infantino, West Virginia University
Nicole M. Joseph, Vanderbilt University
Nina Fefferman, University of Tennessee
Nina White, University of Michigan
Nitsa Movshovitz-Hadar, Technion - Israel Institute of Technology
Noah Weiss, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire
Olivia Borghi, University of Washington
Omayra Ortega, Sonoma State University
Oscar Vega, California State University, Fresno
Paige Helms, University of Washington
Pamela E. Harris, Williams College
Parker Glynn-Adel, University of Toronto Mississauga
Patrick Bahls, University of North Carolina, Asheville
Paul Salomon, John Burroughs School
Perla Myers, University of San Diego
Letters to the Editor

To the American Mathematical Society:

We write with grave concerns about recent attempts to intimidate a voice within our mathematical community. Abigail Thompson published an opinion piece in the December issue of the Notices of the American Mathematical Society (https://www.ams.org/journals/notices/201911/rnoti-p1778.pdf). She explained her support for efforts within our community to further diversity, and then described her concerns with the rigid rubrics (https://ofew.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/rubric_to_assess_candidate_contributions_to_diversity_equity_and_inclusion.pdf) used to evaluate diversity statements in the hiring processes of the University of California system.

The reaction to the article has been swift and vehement. An article posted at the site QSIDE (https://qside institute.org/2019/11/19/diversity-statements-in-hiring-the-american-mathematical-society-and-uc-davis) urges faculty to direct their students not to attend the University of California-Davis, where Prof. Thompson is chair of the math department. It recommends contacting the university to question whether Prof. Thompson is fit to be chair. And it recommends refusing to work for the Notices of the American Mathematical Society for allowing this piece to be published.

Regardless of where anyone stands on the issue of whether diversity statements are a fair or effective means to further diversity aims, we should agree that this attempt to silence opinions is damaging to the profession. This is a direct attempt to destroy Thompson’s career and to punish her department. It is an attempt to intimidate the AMS into publishing only articles that hew to a very specific point of view. If we allow ourselves to be intimidated into avoiding discussion of how best to achieve diversity, we undermine our attempts to achieve it.

We the undersigned urge the American Mathematical Society to stand by the principle that important issues should be openly discussed in a respectful manner, and to make a clear statement that bullying and intimidation have no place in our community.

Signed,
Scott Aaronson, University of Texas at Austin
Vyacheslav M. Abramov, retired
Dan Abramovich, Brown University
Colin Adams, Williams College
Alejandro Adem, University of British Columbia
Karim Adiprasito, U Copenhagen and Hebrew U Jerusalem
Adebisi Agboola, UC Santa Barbara
Arseniy Akopyan, IST Austria
Roger L. Albin, University of Michigan
Ian Alevy, University of Rochester
Kenneth S. Alexander, U. Of Southern California
Daniel Allcock, U.T. Austin
Ekaterina Amerik, Université Paris-Sud
Vrege Amirkhianian, ATU retired
David Anderson, Ohio State University
George E. Andrews, Pennsylvania State University
Todd Arbogast, University of Texas at Austin
Scott Armstrong, Courant Institute, New York University
Richard Arratia, University of Southern California
James Arthur, University Professor, University of Toronto. Past President of American Mathematical Society, 2005-2007
David Auckly, Professor Kansas State University, Director Indigenous Math Circle Communities
Rubén A. Martínez Avendaño, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México
Pedro Fortuny Ayuso, University of Oviedo, Spain
Blanca Ayuso de Dios, Universitaria Milano-Bicocca
Eric Babson, UC Davis
Pavel Bacherikov, University of California at Berkeley
David Bachman, Pitzer College
Hyungryul Baik, KAIST
Matt Bainbridge, Indiana University
Scott Baldridge, Louisiana State University
John Baldwin, Boston College
Tatiana Bandman, Bar-Ilan University, retired
Jessica Banks, University of Liverpool
Rodica Barbu, Ohio State University
Dror Bar-Natan, University of Toronto
Alexander Barvinok, University of Michigan
John Baxter, Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota
Yuri Bazlov, University of Manchester, UK
William Beckner, The University of Texas at Austin
Richard Bedient, Hamilton College
Alexander Beilinson, University of Chicago
Jennifer Beineke, Western New England University
Taylor Belcher, SC. Governor’s School For Science and Mathematics
Gregory Benford, UC Irvine
Arkady Berenstein, University of Oregon
Professor Alexander Berkovich, Math Dept. UF

Vicki-Lynn Holmes, Hope College
Victor Ocasio-Gonzalez, University of Puerto Rico-RUM
Victor Piercey, Ferris State University
Vikram Kamat, Villanova University
Virgil U. Pierce, University of Northern Colorado
Vitaly Lorman, University of Rochester
Volker Ecke, Westfield State University
Wendy M. Smith, University of Nebraska
Whitney George, University of Wisconsin - La Crosse
Widodo Samyono, Jarvis Christian College
William Malone, Temecula Valley Unified School District
William Worden, Rice University
Xander Faber, IDA/Center for Computing Sciences
Xiao Xiao, Utica College
Ximena Catepillan, Millersville University of Pennsylvania
Yan Zhuang, Davidson College
Yang Xiao, Brown University
Yumeen Ayub, George Mason University
Yousuf George, Nazareth College
Yuri Santos Rego, UC Santa Barbara
Ziva Myer, Duke University
Letters to the Editor

John Berman, UT Austin
Mladen Bestvina, University of Utah
Joseph A. Biello, University of California, Davis
Stephen Bigelow, UCSB
Erica Billingsley, Western Kentucky University
Yuri Bilu, University of Bordeaux
Ilia Binder, University of Toronto
Joan Birman, Professor Emeritus, Barnard College, Columbia University
Michael Biro, University of Connecticut
Julie Blackwood, Williams College
Ivan Blank, Kansas State University
Robin Blankenship, Morehead State University
Richard Borchers, U.C. Berkeley
Nigel Boston, University of Wisconsin
Lewis Bowen, University of Texas at Austin
Philip L. Bowers, Florida State University
Latham Boyle, Perimeter Institute
Jason Bramburger, University of Victoria
Michael Bramley, student member of the Royal Statistical Society
Alex Branton
Jonathan Breuer, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Martin R Bridson, University of Oxford
Mark Brittenham, University of Nebraska
Bill Browder, Professor Emeritus, Princeton University
Eric Brussel, California Polytechnic State University
Leonard Bruton, FRSC, FIEEE, P.Eng., Emeritus Professor, University of Calgary, Canada
Robert Bryant, Duke University
Daoud Bshouty, Dept of Maths, Technion, Israel
Robert B. Burckel, emeritus professor, Kansas State University
Alex Buchel, Professor, Western University
Leonid Bunimovich, Georgia Tech
Efstathia Bura, TU Wien
Robert Busch
Adam Buskirk, North Dakota State University
Dani Byrd, University of Southern California
Larry Cahill, Professor, UC Irvine
Jack Calcut, Oberlin College
Andrei Calderaru, Professor of Mathematics, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Justin Campbell, Caltech
John Carlson, USC
Gunnar Carlsson, Stanford University
Erik Carlsson, U.C. Davis
Matt Carter, Williams College
Bill Casselman, UBC
Eduardo Cattani, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Gustavo Emilio Ceparano, The University of Texas at Austin
Abhijit Champanerkar, CUNY
R. Douglas Chatham, Morehead State University
Jeff Cheeger, Courant institute
Ivan Cheltsov, University of Edinburgh
Thomas Chen, UT Austin
Vladimir Chernov, Dartmouth College
Alexey Cheskidov, University of Illinois at Chicago
Dobrinka Chieko, The College of New Jersey
Alexandre Chorin, Mathematics, UC Berkeley
Vasileios Choukousis, University of Connecticut
Katie C Christensen, Furman University
David Cimasoni, University of Geneva
Mirela Ciperiani, University of Texas at Austin
Darin Clark, UWO
Stephen L. Clark, Missouri S&T
Justin Clarke, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Ethics, Ottawa University
Sally Cockburn, Hamilton College
Ionut Ciocan-Fontanine, Mathematics, University of Minnesota
Jim Conant, AoPS Academy
James Conway, UC Berkeley
Daryl Cooper, UCSB
Octav Cornea, University of Montreal
Carl C Cowen, Prof. of Mathematics, I U P U I
David A. Cox, emeritus, Amherst College
Phebe Cramer, Williams College
Michael Cranston, University of California, Irvine
Thomas Crawford, Suartmore College
Danny Crytser, St Lawrence University
Nicholas Castillo, PhD Student OSU Mathematics Department
Milica Cudina, The University of Texas at Austin
Marc Culler, University of Illinois at Chicago
John Cullinan, Bard College
Michael Cvikel, Professor Emeritus, Technion - Israel Institute of Technology
John P. D’Angelo, University of Illinois
Mimi Dai, University of Illinois at Chicago
Jeffrey Danciger, UT Austin
Donatella Danielli, Purdue University
Panagiota Daskalopoulos, Columbia University
Donald M. Davis, Lehigh University
Chandler Davis, University of Toronto
Michael Davis, Ohio State University
Rafael de la Llave, Georgia Inst. of Technology
Jesus A. De Loera, UC Davis
Richard De Veaux, Williams College
Percy Deift, NYU
Charles Delman, Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, Eastern Illinois University
Andrzej Dendzinski, The Ohio State University
Satyan Devadoss, Fletcher Jones Professor of Applied Mathematics, University of San Diego
Robert L. Devaney, Boston University
Lev Deych, Physics Department, Queens College of CUNY
Moshe Dinowitz, CUNY Graduate Center
Anna Dobrina, OSU
Robert G. Donnelly, Murray State University
David R Dorman, Middlebury College
Vladimir Dotsenko, Professor, University of Strasbourg
Peter Doyle
Bogdan Doychinov, Elizabethtown College
John Drew, Williams Liberty
Vladimir Drinfeld, University of Chicago
William Dunbar, Bard College at Simon’s Rock
David Duncan, James Madison University
Molly Dunkum, Western Kentucky University
Susan Dunn, Williams College
Gerald Dworkin, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy emeritus, UC Davis
Andrew Dykstra, Hamilton College
Anton Dzhumay, University of Northern Colorado
Letters to the Editor

Joshua Howie, University of California, Davis
Mark Hughes, Brigham Young University
Paul Humphreys, University of Virginia
John Hunter, UC Davis
Mee Seong Im, National Academy of Sciences, United States
Military Academy and Army Research Laboratory
Alexander Ioffe, Professor Emeritus, Technion, Israel
Nezam Iramparast, Western Kentucky University
Ingrid Irmers, ICM SUSTech
Alan Isaac, American University
Krishnamurthy Iyer
Elham Izadi, UCSD Mathematics
Ivan Izmestiev, TU Wien
William Jaco, Oklahoma State University
Adam Jacob, UC Davis
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William Johnston, Butler University
David Joyce, Clark University
Aaron Kaestner, North Park University
Uwe Kaiser, Boise State University
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Deepak Kamlesh, DPhil Candidate in Mathematics, University of Oxford, UK
Todd Kapitula, Calvin University
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Anton Kapustin, California Institute of Technology
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Louis H Kauffman, Professor Emeritus of Mathematics, University of Illinois at Chicago
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Steve Kerckhoff, Stanford
Bruce Kessler, Western Kentucky University Mathematics
Evgeniy Khain, Oakland University
Parviz Khalili
Mizan R. Khan, Professor, Eastern Connecticut State University
Michael Khaned, Technion - Israel’s Institute of Technology
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Michael Khasin, SGT Inc.
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James Kierstead, Victoria University of Wellington
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Dmitry Kleinbock, Acting Chair, Department of Mathematics, Brandeis University
Alexander Kleshchbev, University of Oregon
Thomas Koberda, University of Virginia
Patrice Koehl, UC Davis
Ilya Kofman, CUNY
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Aryeh Kontorovich, Ben-Gurion University, Computer Science
Vladimir Kontorovich, Department of Economics, Haerford College
Peter Kuchment, Texas A&M
Nicholas Kuhn, University of Virginia
Ramya Kumar
Dione Kunkel, The George Washington University
Vadym Kurylenko, University of Hamburg
Laurent Laffleche, University of Texas at Austin
Kevin Lamb, University of the Pacific
Michel L. Lapidus, University of California, Riverside
Christopher J. Larsen, Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Kyle Larson, University of Georgia
Ruth Lawrence-Naimark, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Sean Lawton, George Mason University
Christophe Lecomte, member of the AMS
Michelle LeMasurier, Hamilton College
Christopher J. Leininger, University of Illinois
Mark Levi, Penn State
Nate Levi, University of California Davis
Genadi Levin, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Michael Levinit, University of Reading
Yehuda John Levy, University of Glasgow
Azriel Levy, Dept. of Mathematics, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Erica Li
Tao Li, Boston College
Anthony Licata, Australian National University
Max Lieblich, University of Washington
James Lin
Nati Linial, The Hebrew University
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Maria Lioudyno, University of California-Irvine
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D.D. Long, UC Santa Barbara
Vincent Longo, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
John Lott, UC-Berkeley
Monika Ludwig, TU Wien
Dan Lynch, Williams College
Misha Lyubich, Stony Brook University
Shiqian Ma, UC Davis
Blair F. Madore, SUNY Potsdam
Francesco Maggi, University of Texas at Austin
Leonid Leonid Makar-Limanov, Wayne State University
Peter Makienko, Instituto de Matematicas
Fyodor Malikov, University of Southern California
Vladimir Mandelshtam, UC Irvine
Fedor Manin, UCSD
Benjamin Mann
Christopher Manon, University of Kentucky
Cy Maor, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Raffaele Marcovecchio, Italy
Luana Maroja, Williams College
William J. Martin, Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Andrei Martínez-Finkelshtein, Baylor University
Howard Masur, University of Chicago
Jasmin Matz, U Copenhagen
Ben McCarty, The University of Memphis
Michael McCoy, Franklin & Marshall College
Duncan McCoy, Université du Québec à Montréal
Dusa McDuff, Barnard College
William H. Meeks III, Professor of Mathematics, UMass Amherst
Moo Mele, University of Delhi
Anton Mellit, University of Vienna
Paul Melvin, Bryn Mawr College
William W Menasco, University at Buffalo-SUNY
Dean Menezes, UCLA
William Messing, School of Mathematics, University of Minnesota
Ina Mette
David A. Meyer, UC San Diego
Nicholas Meyer, University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Juan Migliore, University of Notre Dame
Michael Mihalik, Professor of Mathematics, Vanderbilt University
Steven J Miller, Williams College
Willard Miller, University of Minnesota
Chris Miller, Ohio State University
Kenneth C Millett, University of California, Santa Barbara
Michael Mills, Psychology Department, Loyola Marymount University
Guido Misić, Professor Emeritus, ETH Zürich
Dorina Mitrea, Baylor University
Boris Mityagin, Professor Emeritus, AMS Fellow; Ohio State University
Boughalem Mohammed, PhD student, University Regensburg
Aydin Mohseni
Richard Montgomery, UC Santa Cruz, distinguished professor
John Morgan, Professor Emeritus, Columbia University
Prof. Yoav Moriah, Dept of Math, Technion Israel
DaShawn M. Morris, American Soldier
Henri Moscovici, Ohio State University
Jean-Christophe Mourrat, Courant Institute, New York University
Tomasz S. Mrowka, MIT
Sujoy Mukherjee, The Ohio State University
David Mumford, Emeritus Professor, Harvard and Brown Universities
Julien Murzi, University of Salzburg
Alexander Nabutovsky, Professor of Mathematics, University of Toronto
Bruno Nachtergaele, University of California, Davis
Ramin Nami, Occidental College
Fedor Nazarov, Kent State University
Yuri Neretin, Pauli Institute, Vienna; Moscow State University
Walter Neumann, Barnard College, Columbia University
Andre Neves, University of Chicago
Eran Nevo, Hebrew University
Nicholas Nguyen, University of Kentucky
Dr. Ngoc Nguyen, Western Kentucky University
Yi Ni, California Institute of Technology
Dennis Nieman

Arjun Nigam
Barbara Nimershiem, Franklin & Marshall College
João Nogueira, University of Coimbra
Emily Norton, TU Kaiserslautern
Jonathan Novak, UC San Diego
Dmitry Novikov, Weizmann Institute of Science
Alexei Novikov, Penn State University
Kevin O’Bryant, CLUNY Staten Island and The Graduate Center
Serge Ochanine, University of Kentucky
Crichton Ogle, Ohio State University
Michael Olinick, Middlebury College
Ebeñezer de Oliveira, Ohio State University
John Oprea, Professor Emeritus, Cleveland State University
Matthew Osborne, Ohio State University
Victor Ostrik, University of Oregon
Valentin Ovsienko, CNRS, France
Nicholas Owayd, Colby College
Peter Ozsvath, Princeton University
George Pappas, Michigan State University
Ori Parzanchevski, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Natasa Pavlovic, University of Texas at Austin
Casey Perin, University of California, Irvine
Peter Perry, University of Kentucky
Laura J. Person, State University of New York-Potsdam
Timothy Petau, UT Austin
Yakov Pesin, Penn State University
Jonathan Peterson, Purdue University
Ina Petkova, Dartmouth College
Yehuda Pinchover, Technion – Israel Institute of Technology
Ross G. Pinsky, Department of Mathematics, Technion-Israel Institute of Technology
Daria Poliakova, Copenhagen University
Carl Pomerance, Dartmouth College Emeritus
Wai Yan Pong, CSU Dominguez Hills
Sorin Popa, UCLA
Erik Postma, Maplesoft
Benedikt Pötscher, University of Vienna
Leonid Potyagailo, University of Lille, France
Filip Pramenko, University of Primorski
Adam Prenosil, Department of Mathematics, Vanderbilt University
Kenneth Price, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Jozef H. Przytycki, George Washington University
Elbridge Gerry Puckett, Full Professor, Department of Mathematics, UC Davis
Joshua Pughe-Sanford, Georgia Tech
You Qi, University of Virginia
Maksym Pramukhov, University of Primorski
Andrei Przybylo, University of Missouri
Shawn Rafalski, Fairfield University
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Da'Shawn M. Morris, American Soldier
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Andre Neves, University of Chicago
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Nicholas Nguyen, University of Kentucky
Dr. Ngoc Nguyen, Western Kentucky University
Yi Ni, California Institute of Technology
Dennis Nieman

John Ratcliffe, Department of Mathematics, Vanderbilt University
Animesh Ray, Professor, Keck Graduate Institute
Margaret A. Readdy, University of Kentucky
Robert Redfield
A Response to “A Word From…” in the December 2019 Issue of the AMS Notices

There is a false equivalence underlying the entire argument behind Abigail Thompson’s essay in the December 2019 issue of the AMS Notices. Thompson draws a comparison between the loyalty oaths of the 1950s in the University of California system on one hand, and the diversity statements that are currently required by applicants for positions in that same system on the other. Loyalty oaths were an insidious outgrowth of the Red Scare that gripped the nation at the outset of the Cold War. Public figures like US Senator Joseph McCarthy and California State Senator Jack B. Tenney¹ were capitalizing on the allure of fascist political techniques during an era when citizens had well-founded fears of nuclear war. Their tacit goal was to sow fear of the “other” in order to maintain their own power. The explicit goal of diversity statements is to promote equity in the workplace, in higher education, and in the marketplace of ideas. I fail to see how these are comparable.

Thompson also misrepresents how the rubrics for evaluating the diversity statements are to be applied. Here is what the Berkeley Office for Faculty Equity and Welfare says:

Consider creating a cut-off score for advancing equity and inclusion, below which a candidate would not move forward in the search process (would be considered below the bar), regardless of their scores in other areas, similar to what would be done for research quality or plans.

¹Senator Tenney repeatedly introduced legislation requiring loyalty oaths, which ultimately forced the hand of the President of the UC system.
For example, if 5 points are given for various components of advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (e.g., understanding 5 points, track record 5 points, and plans 5 points), assign a value below which a candidate would not be considered competitive and would not move forward regardless of their scores in other areas (e.g., any single 0 or 1 out of 5 would disqualify a candidate from further consideration). Set a high bar.5

These are stated as recommendations, and it is left to the faculty to decide how important equity and inclusion are to their department. Thompson’s approach is to appeal to emotion, and presents no evidence that this is having a negative impact on any actual mathematics department’s hiring practices.3 The AMS editors have failed the membership by publishing a prominent essay by an esteemed officer whose arguments are fallacious and scientifically ill-founded.

Additionally, Thompson asserts, “Politics are a reflection of how you believe society should be organized.” No, politics is the exercise of power in service to an ideology. Individual and institutional values are a reflection of how you believe society should be organized. The University of California is displaying its institutional values by requiring a commitment to diversity. It has the authority to promote this vision by recommending that each department utilize a policy of inclusion and equity in their hiring practices. Thompson has opted to politicize this issue by exercising her power in her capacities as chair of the UC Davis mathematics department and Vice President of the AMS.4

Racist and sexist policies—both written and unwritten—are obstacles for many Americans who would like to seek higher education and opportunity. This is documented fact, not politics. Professors who are mindful of this fact will present an antiracist and antisexist face for the University of California system. Values, not politics. The UC system is taking an active role in addressing these facts and promoting these values. In doing so, they continue to uphold Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun’s words: “In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently.”5

This opinion is my own, and may not represent that of my employer.

—Dr. Xander Faber

IDA/Center for Computing Sciences

(Received November 25, 2019)

In Response to Prof. Abigail Thompson

Dear Sir/Madam,

Abigail Thompson’s article which appears in the December 2019 issue of the Notices of the American Mathematical Society deserves a thorough airing.

I disagree, very strongly, with, in my view, its very limited sense of the scale and scope of the mathematics community and its conflation of the use of diversity statements in some hiring practices for mathematics jobs with McCarthyism.

I recognize that the AMS has worked and continues to work assiduously to address the issue of underrepresentation. However, the evidence, much of it documented and disseminated by the AMS, makes very clear that the actual outcomes, i.e., are we as a community demonstrably more diverse than we were ten years ago, indicate that much work still needs to be done in order for us to be truly a community of equity and excellence.

In a deep sense, this essay, from a Vice President of the AMS, even though Prof. Thompson makes clear that she speaks for herself and not for the Society the article’s tagline prominently identifies her as a Vice President of the AMS, makes a compelling argument for the need for diversity statements in hiring.

For context, consider the following questions: how many tenured African American professors of mathematics are there in the UC system? Closer to my home, how many African American assistant professors do we have on the tenure track in the entire CUNY system in mathematics?

At Medgar Evers College, where I have worked for almost twenty-five years, we have two, yes two, tenured mathematicians of African descent. The pace of change, when viewed from my vantage point is painfully slow. I note, for some perspective, that Black Americans have received just one (1) percent of the doctoral degrees in mathematics granted over the last decade.

How do we change this?

We must become a community that holds, as a priority, for the discipline of mathematics, the critical importance of increasing the number of African American and other mathematicians of color.

How do we do this?

It is evident that we must hire mathematicians who have demonstrated some evidence of their willingness to work on this challenge. I.e., if we are serious, our intent must be accompanied by some supporting infrastructure, an appropriate set of policies and practices aimed at achieving our desired ends. Therefore, requiring that applicants write

2Read Part 1 of the Candidate Evaluation tab at https://ofew.berkeley.edu/recruitment/contributions-diversity/support-faculty-search-committees.

3By contrast, UC Berkeley has produced an extensive report that documents the effect of hiring with a diversity focus in mind: https://ofew.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/searching_for_a_diverse_faculty_data-driven_recommendations.pdf.

4In the published article, the words “This essay contains my opinions as an individual” are jarringly juxtaposed with the heading “Abigail Thompson, a Vice President of the AMS” in larger blue font.

5Justice Blackmun wrote this while contemplating the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment during the 1978 case Regents of the University of California v. Bakke.
some form of diversity statement is but a small piece of such an infrastructure. A diversity statement is simply an element of one’s Teaching Philosophy. It is not a political identity.

I close by reiterating: research requires new ideas; new ideas come from new people. Excellence in mathematics is a function of diversity. We, the mathematical community, elide this truth at our peril.

Be well.

Terrence

—Terrence Blackman, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Mathematics
School of Science, Health & Technology
Medgar Evers College, CUNY

Visiting Professor
Department of Aeronautics & Astronautics
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

Member, Executive Council
The National Alliance for Doctoral Studies in the Mathematical Sciences

—Building a New American Community in the Mathematical and Statistical Sciences
https://www.mathalliance.org

(Received November 27, 2019)

Thank You (Article by A. Thompson)

Dear Notices,

Thank you for publishing the article by Prof. Thompson “A word from...” in the December issue. We read it with interest, as it brings readers’ attention to a subject of universal (in our opinion) importance. It also demonstrates personal courage of the author and the editor, as the expressed viewpoint was likely to stir a controversy.

We are concerned about the online campaign against the Notices and personally Prof. Thompson, following the publication of her article. It is a sad irony that the reaction of Prof. Thompson’s online opponents only adds value to her argument that our times share some common features with darker periods in history.

We strongly believe that boycotts and the “cancel culture” have no place in academia. They reinforce fear, shame, and self-censorship, and eventually hinder our ability to search for the truth. Finding an optimal balance between various approaches to improve functioning of the academic institutions, while respecting interests of different groups, as well as individual freedoms and non-mainstream opinions, is not an easy task. We view the article of Prof. Thompson as an important contribution to a civilized discussion on this topic.

Sincerely,

Iosif Polterovich
Université de Montréal

(Received November 27, 2019)

Supporting Letter

Dear Erica,

I would like to express my gratitude for your courageous decision to publish the opinion article by Abigail Thomp- son in the recent issue of the Notices. And these feelings extend to all who supported you in this decision.

Free expression of opinion, which this article contains, is absolutely crucial in any policy making, and I find it very troubling that some people try to suppress debate by intimidation—something one would expect in a totalitarian regime and not in the USA.

I observed a triple irony in some reactions to Abigail’s article.

1. The bullying and intimidating responses only make Abigail’s analogy with McCarthyism so much more convincing.
2. The participants in the hounding campaign commit the very offences that they profess to be against, and do so in a much worse way.
3. The campaigners’ loudest objection is to the very thing (the analogy with McCarthyism) they themselves are most guilty of.

You and Abigail have my full support and admiration.

With best wishes,

Mark Levi
Mathematics Department
Penn State University

(Received November 27, 2019)

Real and Fake Fight for Diversity

The heated debate in the US mathematical community that followed the publication of the article “A word from...” by Abigail Thompson in the December issue of the Notices of the AMS crossed the Atlantic. This short letter is an opinion of an individual from its other side. It is of course difficult to compare the systems and traditions of different countries, but such a comparison could still be useful, especially when the debate also crossed the boundaries of cordiality...

Hiring committees in France never ask candidates for diversity statements, but most of my colleagues (all that I know) participate in a number of different ways in the long fight for inclusion and diversity. There are many programs, such as “Math en Jeans,” “Fête de la Science,” etc. All of them popularize mathematics in high and elementary schools, one goal of these programs is precisely to attract students from a variety of backgrounds. People are happy to participate in these programs, there are always many volunteers. The administration also contributes. In particular, students pay nothing for their education, and they
have a full social security cover. The scientific community vigilantly follows all the changes proposed by the administration and the government, and protests when some parts of this system are threatened.

A mandatory diversity statement in the hiring process does not seem to be an efficient way to improve the diversity. How can a hiring committee see the difference between sincere and “fake” diversity statements, written (or copied from the internet) by a desperate candidate? Isn’t it more useful to work with the administration, sponsors, government?

Something tells me that people who do this real work are not the same who write the most compelling diversity statements, or organize a witch-hunt against Abigail Thompson. At least, it is clear that her article in the Notices is sincere, it contributes to the real fight for diversity. Respect your future colleagues, spare their energy, and invite them to participate in the real work to improve the diversity, rather than torture themselves with writing statements in stereotyped language!

—Valentin Ovsienko
CNRS Researcher, France

(Received November 28, 2019)

Letter to the Editor, Notices AMS on: Diversity

Dear editor,

In my opinion, diversity is an important social and academic value, the pursuit of which can also be an important means for academic excellence. One reason we need to pay special attention to diversity is that there are various mechanisms against it, which in and of themselves are harmful to academic life and excellence, such as dominance and, at times, even bullying by members of majority/power groups. On this and other issues, academic institutions have the right and duty to form academic policies and pursue them, and also the obligation to allow free debate about these policies.

If you feel uncomfortable about making a one-time statement about a policy you disagree with, and I can certainly understand this feeling, think about how uncomfortable it is to be a member of a minority group that cannot freely express her or his views, and who faces unjust judgment, and at times even hostility, on a regular basis.

—Gil Kalai
Hebrew University of Jerusalem and IDC, Herzliya

(Received November 28, 2019)

Letter to the Notices of the AMS

In an essay in the December 2019 issue of the Notices, Abigail Thompson describes the mandatory "Diversity Statement" (mDS) that mathematics job applicants to UC Schools must submit together with their regular applica-

...
A Letter to the Notices

I applaud Abigail Thompson for her thought-provoking and brave essay (December 2019 Notices) arguing against mandatory diversity statements from academic job applicants. While we should undoubtedly try to reduce barriers to participation in mathematics, requiring diversity statements is a political litmus test that should have no place in any university that values truth and free expression.

In fact, as Dr. Thompson describes, the rubric used for grading these statements recommends a low score to any candidate who merely states they will treat students equally regardless of background; to get a high score on these statements one needs to describe activities “promoting different identity groups” and have a strong “interest in dimensions of diversity that result from different identities.” Whatever one’s position on promoting people based on the identity group they belong to (as opposed to treating them as individuals) or on the kind of intersectionalism alluded to above, it cannot be denied that this is a political/philosophical stance, and so this rubric necessarily excludes people who may not agree with this stand.

Incidentally, one of the oft-mentioned benefits of diversity is that one needs multiple viewpoints and perspectives to solve difficult problems. However, the term “identity” as used in the context of diversity statements is never interpreted to include political or philosophical dimensions. This means that the high-scoring applicants, who are therefore likely to get the job, are of a relatively homogeneous political bent, which ironically goes against the very essence of viewpoint diversity and negates the benefit mentioned above.

Sincerely,
Abhishek Saha
Queen Mary University of London

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I am writing to express my strong support for your decision to publish Abigail Thompson’s piece in the December Notices of the AMS.

I am truly dismayed by the vitriolic attacks on her and the AMS for allowing an open exchange of opinions on an important and controversial topic. Please do not cave in to such pressure tactics. In standing up for Abigail’s right to express her opinion, you will serve the best interests of your readers, of the AMS, and of academics at large.

Regards,
Victor Vianu
Professor of Computer Science
UC San Diego

* If you insert the following into a google search, the first thing which comes up is a pdf with the rubric for Berkeley: rubric_to_assess_candidate_contributions_to_diversity_equity_and_inclusion-1.pdf

(Received December 5, 2019)

(Received December 8, 2019)
Dear AMS editor,

I was saddened to see the reaction from some of our colleagues to Prof. Thompson’s opinion piece in the last edition. Though my opinion may differ from hers, I support her freedom to express her opinion publicly. The fact that there is disagreement should encourage us all to have an open and respectful discussion in our community of what are the best strategies to achieve a diverse community. The personal attacks that she has been confronted with are uncalled for. Let’s remember that part of diversity is the freedom to have and express diverse opinions.

Regards,
Shachar Lovett
Associate Professor
Computer Science and Engineering
University of California, San Diego

(Received December 8, 2019)

Dear Editor,

I was delighted to see the December Notices of the AMS publish Abigail Thompson’s thoughtful article. I was equally shocked and disappointed to see the subsequent attacks on the AMS. The AMS Notices did what it is supposed to do: Promoted then open exchange of thoughtful opinions on an important and controversial topic. Please continue on your mission.

Regards,
Yannis Papakonstantinou
Professor of Computer Science and Engineering
UC San Diego

(Received December 10, 2019)

Universities that want to value diversity are requiring diversity statements as a way to demonstrate this to the applicants. What can possibly go wrong with that? Unfortunately, an unintended and yet pervasive effect of the diversity statements is as some recommendation letters. Unfortunately, the focus on diversity statements only takes attention away from this important topic.

Regardless of their intent, it definitely hurts the image of young women mentioned that way (as well as, of course, of women as a group) in the community’s eyes.

At my university, we also have (not fully mandatory, so far) diversity statements for all our merit actions, happening roughly once every three years. Some faculty do the same, listing collaborating with (often senior!) women, inviting women to conferences, etc as their contribution to diversity. Some list their appointing as editors women who are a lot more distinguished than most of the rest of the editors of their journal as expanding professional opportunities for women. While few people write such insulting statements, what is disturbing is the fact that the evaluators behave as if it is OK, communicating to the broader community that it actually is OK.

Needless to say how humiliating and discouraging it is for women to constantly read things like that even in regards to the highest achieves in the community. I believe people writing those things don’t necessarily genuinely believe in the inferiority of women they mention in such a disparaging way. It is just that few have done real diversity-related activities, and the most impudent ones among the others feel compelled to list something, sometimes also encouraged by the success of their federal support applications, where they routinely include similar things. Then, the clueless ones copy from their successful friends. Luckily, many people never read those statements, but everyone who actually reads them as business as usual, will only get their biases strengthened as a result.

I have always appreciated the inclusive atmosphere of my community in mathematical physics, where I have long felt a sense of belonging. Many people in this community have, directly or indirectly, strongly contributed to the diversity and inclusion through both creating the respectful climate and through their support and encouragement of colleagues, in particular, of me, which has greatly enabled my growth. It is crucial, however, that to them I was never a commodity to be reported upon, as is implicitly encouraged by the diversity statements.

I strongly believe it is important to work on improving climate and inclusivity in general, and some of the steps already made in this direction have been good. For example, I am grateful for the education I received on internal biases. I am someone who would not have had a chance in academia if affirmative action had not existed when I was hired in 1993. Yet, it was at the time when I had already done some very important work, and preferential treatment shouldn’t have been needed in my case, in an ideal world without biases. I support efforts that encourage fairness in the hiring process, and in particular open hiring committees’ eyes on all sorts of biases (gender, minority, lesser institution...) that could affect their own evaluation as well as some recommendation letters. Unfortunately, the focus on diversity statements only takes attention away from this important topic.
Moreover, I believe that at tenure track hiring, which is largely about promise, the difficulties that affect most women and minorities at the early stages should be taken into account, in a sensible way. It may also be justified to resolve some other ties taking into account the role model considerations. However, I think that the often present push to increase percentage of women beyond what is currently reasonably warranted by merit, only multiplies the biases, is very damaging for the community’s perception of women as a group, and thus is very harmful for the climate. As one example, I was recently on a committee to select the winner of an important prize. It went to a female mathematician. I am sure that most people who don’t closely know her or her work, when learning the news, thought “of course, they wanted to select a woman”. Yet her gender had zero influence on our considerations, there was no push on the committee, and she was selected from all the applications purely on scientific merit according to the prize criteria. The value of this well-deserved prize is not at all the same for her as it would have been if she was a man. As another recent example, I was on a committee that had to select a couple of graduate students. I suggested a student, arguing that she was the most accomplished one on the list. As if not hearing my arguments, a diversity-minded colleague immediately suggested to also add another female student, who was one of the least accomplished. If both were selected, what message would it have sent to them as well as the other students? An unfairness present in some selections inevitably leads to it being multiplied by a large factor in people’s perception and viewed as a universal phenomenon, thus to highly increased prejudices. I don’t think this is the desired outcome.

I also think it is good to hire people who will not have a negative effect on the atmosphere, those who are supportive to students and colleagues, and not disrespectful, indifferent, or discouraging. Yet, diversity statements are a very poor, if not a counterproductive, tool for making such a distinction. Genuine activities that lead to improved inclusion should definitely be valued, just like any other important service. Yet, if the word comes out that co-authoring papers with women no longer counts, the same people will rush to have some relevant diversity checkmarks. But will a workshop for women run by a person who believes in their inferiority be a positive contribution? In practice, much of the diversity activism it would encourage will be fake or tone-deaf, and ultimately only harmful to the climate.

In my own experience, some of the best contributors to a positive climate have been strong mathematicians who show interest in the work of others. An excellent example is Jean Bourgain. He was interested in good mathematics and showed zero prejudice. He strongly influenced careers of a number of prominent men and women at formative stages. He conveyed respect and always talked in a subtly encouraging way. I knew the fact that I was a woman was irrelevant to him, and all this gave me great inspiration and encouragement. I see him as a great contributor to diversity and an inclusive climate.

People with checkmark diversity activities would pass the UC diversity rubric barrier. Would Jean Bourgain?

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