Citation

The American Mathematical Society, through its Committee on the Profession, is pleased to recognize the Graduate Research Opportunities for Women (GROW) Program with the 2020 Mathematics Programs That Make a Difference Award. GROW is an annual series of conferences that nurture, mentor and expose undergraduate women to the opportunities that await a career in mathematics. Funded by the National Science Foundation and participating universities, the GROW Program is in its fifth year and has served hundreds of participants. Over this short span, GROW has built a community which, as much as the conference programming itself, has helped to make the mathematics profession a more appealing place for women to live and work. Through feedback, GROW steadily improves and creates best practices for future iterations as well as for replication. Activities at GROW include research talks where scholars discuss not only their results but their varied routes through academics, giving a personal touch and dispelling the straight-and-narrow myth around career paths. There are also panel discussions about graduate admissions. Conference-goers come with questions about preparation, the importance (or not) of GRE scores, how to approach letter writers, and so forth. Other meet-and-greet activities aim to connect participants to experts in a potential field of interest. The community-building aspect of the gathering is crucial for female students in a majority-male profession; the feeling that one is not alone can boost confidence. The program includes inspirational talks by iconic female speakers that make a big impression on the participants. As one conference attendee who is now in graduate school writes in her support letter: “I gained confidence, personal and professional connections, and exposure to various careers in mathematics…. I met many women who assuaged my mounting fears about applying and succeeding in graduate school…. Sharing my fears and concerns about graduate school with other women who were either entering or attending graduate school was one of the most helpful aspects of GROW.” The AMS commends the GROW Program for its success in bringing more persons from underrepresented backgrounds into the mathematical profession.
About the Program
The GROW workshop series encourages female-identifying undergraduates to consider research in mathematics as a discipline and a career. For the past five years, approximately eighty students have gathered over a weekend in October for a mixture of research talks, panel discussions, and opportunities to meet students and scholars from across the country. The participants share meals and have numerous opportunities for networking and mentoring. GROW is designed to encourage women to think and know about mathematics and to feel confident about the options for graduate students, as well as providing them with resources for their future success.

The first iteration of the GROW series was designed by Bryna Kra at Northwestern University, and she, along with more than forty volunteers, led organization of the conferences at Northwestern from 2015 to 2017. Since then, GROW has moved first to the University of Michigan in 2018, with Sarah Koch and Karen Smith as lead organizers, and then to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2019, with Zoi Rapti as the lead organizer. The next iteration will be at the University of Chicago in 2020. Over 350 students from across the United States have already participated in GROW, and participants have represented more than seventy-five undergraduate institutions.

The panel discussions cover what constitutes research in mathematics, with panelists sharing stories of their trajectories, an introduction to the varied options for careers in academia, and a wealth of information on the nuts and bolts of applying to graduate school in mathematics. A highlight of each meeting has been the Saturday evening dinner, with leading figures (including Alexandra Bellow, Dusa McDuff, Ingrid Daubechies, Kristin Lauter, and Marisa Eisenberg) giving inspirational talks.

About the Award
In 2005, the American Mathematical Society, acting upon the recommendation of its Committee on the Profession (CoProf), established the Mathematics Programs That Make a Difference Award in order to profile those programs that are succeeding and could serve as a model for others. Specifically, the committee seeks to honor programs that:

1. aim to bring more persons from underrepresented minority backgrounds into some portion of the pipeline beginning at the undergraduate level and leading to an advanced degree in mathematics and professional success, or retain them once in the pipeline;
2. have achieved documentable success in doing so; and
3. are replicable models.

Preference is given to programs with significant participation by underrepresented minorities.

This recognition includes an award of US$1,000 provided by the Mark Green and Kathryn Kert Green Fund for Inclusion and Diversity.

For a list of previous recipients of the Mathematics Programs That Make a Difference Award, see the AMS website at https://www.ams.org/make-a-diff-award.

—Elaine Kehoe with information from Bryna Kra

Credits
Photo from GROW 2017 is courtesy of the Department of Mathematics, Northwestern University. Photo from GROW 2019 is courtesy of Zoi Rapti.

Read more about the Graduate Research Opportunities for Women Program on page 724.