

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



Letter to the Editor

On July 3, 2020, Dr. Paul Yiu, the Editor-in-Chief and founder of the online journal *Forum Geometricorum* (forumgeom.fau.edu/), sent out a public message to the editors and authors of articles published in this journal. He mentioned that due to a health challenge he retired from his position with Florida Atlantic University in December 2019 and that the publication of new papers in *Forum Geometricorum* ceased with the 2019 volume. With its two decades of existence, *Forum Geometricorum* (2000–2019) represents a highly successful and interesting editorial and academic experience of major importance for the heritage of advanced Euclidean geometry. This journal addressed the need for high quality information in an area closely related to high-school geometry. Dr. Paul Yiu is a highly knowledgeable scholar, whose work is of the highest quality in terms of academic standards, editorial vision and highest care for the published mathematical content. He is a man of superb generosity, who never hesitated to work tirelessly on behalf of the mathematical community. *Forum Geometricorum* is his gift to us all.

—Bogdan D. Suceavă
Professor of Mathematics
California State University, Fullerton

To the Editors

I am writing a biography of the Austro-American mathematician Olga Taussky-Todd (1906–1995) and would be glad to hear from any of her former students, colleagues, or friends, or anyone with reminiscences or with whom she corresponded.

Thank you for your consideration.

—Judith Goodstein
jrg@caltech.edu

Dodging a Bullet

In this letter I give an inside look at a cancelled meeting of the AMS. Someday, when one looks back at mathematics in this unusual period in history, it may be useful to have a few contemporaneous first-hand accounts.

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

I was the local organizer of the Sectional Meeting of the AMS at Tufts University scheduled for March 21–22, 2020. The impetus for this meeting, at least for my department, was to showcase the university and the Department of Mathematics, for although we have made great strides in the last thirty years, Tufts is still not widely known. I must have put in at least one hundred hours over the past two years into organizing this meeting.

Meanwhile, in early 2020, the coronavirus was raging in China and Italy, but there were only a few cases in the United States, mostly concentrated in Washington and California. Throughout January and February, President Trump was assuring the country that there was nothing to worry about; it was no worse than the flu; the virus would weaken when the weather turned warm; it was going to disappear; we had all the tests needed. No one was wearing masks. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was recommending that other than medical personnel, people should not wear masks because “they do not offer protection if not properly worn.” On March 2, there were only two confirmed cases in Massachusetts, both infected from traveling abroad, and no deaths. Later it emerged that a number of people who had attended a Biogen leadership conference in Boston on February 27 had tested positive, but the extent of the infection was still not known.

Of course, we knew to take the pronouncements of President Trump with a grain of salt, but back then even leading government officials and scientists in Massachusetts were minimizing the risk. On March 4, Governor Charles Baker reiterated that the risk posed by the virus was low, a stance he would maintain for several more days. All indications were that the AMS meeting would go on as scheduled. On March 6, I placed an order for a lavish spread for the reception on the Saturday of the meeting. The American Mathematical Society was about to mail seventy boxes of books to Tufts for its book display during the meeting and we at Tufts made arrangements to receive and store them. By Monday, March 9, all preparations for the meeting were in place. A total of 415 participants had preregistered. Counting those who would register on site, we expected five hundred participants. However, since the coronavirus situation was fast developing, there was always a hint of uncertainty.

On March 10, when everyday life still felt normal, the Tufts administration, ever cautious, cancelled the meeting. This was even before the AMS had cancelled anything,

including the Virginia meeting scheduled for the coming weekend, and way before the lockdown ordered by the state. Initially, I felt a rush of disappointment—two years of work down the drain. The cancellation caused massive inconvenience for hundreds of participants, most of whom had by then bought plane tickets and booked hotels. Later that day, because the number of cases in Massachusetts had spiked from forty-one a day before to ninety-two, Gov. Baker declared a state of emergency. Of the ninety-two, a whopping seventy-seven were from the Biogen conference.

As time went on, the number of cases in Massachusetts exploded, from 2 on March 2 to 10,000 a month later and 100,000 two months later with 6,700 deaths. It was then I realized that Tufts had dodged a bullet. If the meeting had been scheduled for two weeks earlier, on March 7–8, it would certainly have taken place. With five hundred people from the four corners of the earth converging at Tufts, the meeting would certainly have become a superspreader event, worse than the Biogen meeting, which had only 175 participants. Many people would have become ill, and instead of being showcased, Tufts would live in infamy.

We were lucky that the meeting was scheduled for when it was, with just enough warning of a disaster to come for it to get cancelled.

—Loring W. Tu
Professor of Mathematics
Tufts University

BC vs. BCE

In “A Word From...” (in the August 2020 *Notices*), why did the editors allow dating Euclid’s *Elements* to 300 BC (Before Christ) rather than to 300 BCE (Before the Common Era), given that BC promotes Christianity and thus discriminates against the roughly 30% of U.S. Citizens and 70% of the world’s population that are not Christian?

—Charles H. Jones
3790 Onyx St.
Eugene, OR 97405
chjones.bus@gmail.com

Your
*member
benefits*
do not
have to be
out of reach.



If you are searching for a job but are not yet employed*, you can still be an AMS member. Choose the rate option that is comfortable for your budget. Then use your benefits to assist your search.

\$0 | **\$20[†]** | **\$51[†]**

[†]Apply up to 20 AMS points to these rates.
One point = \$1 discount.

New to the AMS: www.ams.org/join

Current eligible members who have not yet paid 2021 dues: www.ams.org/account

*Annual statement of unemployed status is required.