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## How to Have Lunch in the Time of COVID-19

*Kristin DeVleming  
and Andrew Kobin*

Life as an early-career mathematician got a lot harder in 2020. While everyone is facing their own personal and community challenges during a global pandemic, those of us without tenure or a permanent position face an especially steep climb as the world responds to COVID-19. In the face of uncertainty, the two of us decided to focus on preserving something simple: chatting over lunch. Over an ongoing series of informal discussion panels, entitled “Lunch in the Time of Covid,” we have explored topics that affect early-career mathematicians, including the job market, police violence against Black Americans, mentoring, and staying productive as a researcher. Our intention is to build community and start conversations, some of which will last the rest of our careers. We hope to continue this series even as the world recovers from COVID-19 and have provided concrete suggestions for those of you interested in starting your own version of “Lunch.”

### How it Started

The idea for “Lunch in the Time of Covid” came from the “hallway” at a virtual conference in the early days of the pandemic, where the organizers first met and discussed the pandemic’s unique affect on early-career mathematicians. Disillusioned by the lack of voices from our generation on a Q&A panel, Kristin wrote up a list of tips for young mathematicians that spoke to the anxieties many of us were feeling at the time. Several email conversations later, we

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proposed hosting an informal discussion about these topics—a “brown bag lunch”—and with that, we set to work.

The actual format of “Lunch in the Time of Covid” has changed very little since its inception. The conversation should be informal, possibly changing topics organically according to what participants have on their minds. For each topic, we invite three “distinguished panelists” to lead the discussion and share their experiences with the audience. We often propose a few initial questions for the panelists to start with, but the discussion is largely led by questions and comments from the audience. As the conversation warms up, participants chime in with questions, offer their own experiences, share links, or just verbally encourage each other. Once you get people chatting about something they are passionate about, others feel empowered to add their voices too, and the enthusiasm compounds. In a way, this was always the primary function of these events: to provide a space for diverse voices on critical topics for our generation of mathematicians.

### What We Do

Organizing a panel—not to mention a series of panels—takes work, but if you plan things out ahead of time and remain flexible about things you cannot control, you will save yourself unnecessary work later.

Ultimately, we began with a short list of topics to discuss over lunch. We have volunteer note-takers who keep track of topics that come up and any resources that are shared during the meeting, and we save the Zoom chat from each lunch. We have also found that each discussion organically yields topics and panelists for future lunches. For example, during one lunch, participants shared the names of several impactful mentors and allies, and we were able to reach out to these people as panelists for a later lunch on allyship.

Between panels, we keep lists of future topics and potential panelists. This makes it easy to start planning events well ahead of time and match a topic to panelists that have expertise or have had an impact in that area. About two weeks out from an intended date, we invite panelists for a specific topic, and if some decline, we work down our list until we have the panel chosen. Because these are informal lunch conversations, we have been able to shift our days/times to accommodate our speakers, although this may not always be possible.

After the first lunch, Andrew created and started maintaining a website<sup>1</sup> for “Lunch in the Time of Covid,” where we share information and registration details about upcoming events, as well as the notes, links, and miscellanea from past events. This has become a great resource in its own right, featuring calls to action in the mathematics community (including a letter to the *Notices* urging the community to boycott collaboration with the police), suggestions for further reading (or listening: participants on June 19 were eager to share their favorite podcasts), and

<sup>1</sup><https://www.andrewkobin.com/lunch-in-the-time-of-covid>.

a partial list of bridge and post-baccalaureate programs in math in the United States.

We advertise through a mix of email, social media, and word of mouth. We maintain a list of participants from past lunches and are able to email reminders about upcoming meetings and advertise on online platforms like the Algebraic Geometry Discord channel (as both organizers are algebraic geometers). Additionally, participants advertise to their departments and colleagues.

### How to Start Conversations

Our primary goal with “Lunch in the Time of Covid” was (and still is) to start conversations about issues that are affecting young mathematicians. With this in mind, each lunch starts as a panel discussion but slowly becomes a broader discussion where anyone can contribute. No matter your time constraints as an organizer of an event like this, it is wise to include time near the end for the audience to make their voices heard. This can be a formal Q&A, perhaps with questions collected throughout the panel as many webinar platforms allow, or a more informal call for audience members to chime in. (In the spirit of our more informal format, we opted for the latter with great success.) Fortunately, all of the lunch topics after the first week were suggested by past audience members, so we can say with confidence that our audience is passionate about being involved and sharing their experiences.

We have been very open about our own limitations—both organizers are white and have a postdoctoral position. For this reason, we make extra efforts to invite panelists and participants that have different experiences than us. Early on, we began reaching out to trusted mathematicians in our lives who, in one way or another, are not traditionally represented at these types of events. We asked them who would make a good panelist, what topics we should not neglect, and generally how we were doing so far. We have received valuable advice at every step of the way, and continue to benefit from the wisdom of these peers and mentors. Beyond broadening the conversation, we want to send a clear message that all are welcome in these conversations. For anyone who is considering planning a similar event in the future, we encourage you to think early and often about *who* your audience is and *how* you are serving their needs.

### How to Keep the Momentum Going

After the first week, all of our topics have been developed from audience suggestions. Often, a participant shares their passion and experience for a particular topic and they are able to serve as a panelist in a future lunch. This is one of the real strengths of an event series, as opposed to a stand-alone event: we have been able to dedicate time and future events to focus on important topics brought up by the audience. However, even with a one-time panel, you can solicit feedback ahead of time. As with all things organizational, reach out to people you trust to diversify your perspective

on what is important and what should be emphasized. Furthermore, as one participant pointed out, planning an event like this *with someone*, particularly someone whose background or viewpoints are different than your own, is good experience for the types of collaboration and service that you will be doing the rest of your career.

### In Conclusion

Based on participant and panelist feedback, “Lunch in the Time of Covid” has been an essential series of conversations for many early-career mathematicians. Both organizers saw a need for an online community to discuss what things are really like during a global pandemic. We encourage anyone who sees a similar need in their community to follow our model (or their own path!) as we continue to face the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the unique benefits of going virtual during the global pandemic has been the ability to host these lunches for participants across many branches of mathematics and start conversations and community-building that would be unlikely to happen otherwise. Even as the world recovers from COVID-19, we believe in the importance of these informal discussions and hope to inspire others to start something similar.



Kristin DeVleming



Andrew Kobin

### Credits

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Photo of Andrew Kobin is courtesy of the author.

## Unconscious Bias in Academic Mathematics

### *Danny Krashen*

In recent years, as a society, we have made significant progress at reducing explicit sources of bias. We now understand that we cannot explicitly discriminate on the basis of gender, race, and other protected categories in a range of situations. On the other hand, it has also become strikingly

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