The Nominating Committee

An enduring American Mathematical Society urban legend holds that there is an inner circle of elite mathematicians who determine who will be president, vice president, and members at large of the Council. But in reality, it's hard to get anyone to stand for election for these positions, including many alleged to either belong to or be chosen by this legendary inner circle.

This spring, I completed a term on the AMS Nominating Committee, including a stint as its chair. Serving on the AMS Nominating Committee is at once a very fulfilling and a hugely disappointing experience. It is fulfilling because one is witness to the enthusiasm and excitement some members display when asked to serve the Society by standing for election to a position in the AMS. But it is also disappointing in many ways: many excellent mathematicians are not even members of the Society, and of those who are, they don't want to serve, or they are too busy.

The AMS has both volunteer officers and two bodies of volunteer members who are elected to their positions. These bodies determine the policies and direction of the Society. They are the AMS Council and the Board of Trustees (BT). Simply put, the Council determines policy, and the Board has fiduciary responsibility. The Board appoints the Executive Director and determines the budget. The Council determines scientific policy. Six of the eight members of the Board of Trustees are elected by the members (the two Board members not elected are the treasurer and associate treasurer). A majority of the Council are elected directly by the members (those not directly elected are the secretaries, the treasurers, and the representatives of the editorial boards).

Each year the nine members of the Nominating Committee (NC) meet from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. for the first two days of the annual meeting of the Society. These members, elected to three-year terms upon nomination by the president (so each president has put six members on the committee), meet in a small room. They are equipped with a charge, prepared by the secretary, that details the positions to be filled and how many nominees are required. This charge follows carefully the policies adopted by the Council. Among other resources, the NC has available the list of all candidates for the past twenty to thirty years—who has won and who has lost. The NC members are assisted by the AMS Secretary's Administrative Assistant. They have access to MathSciNet and the Combined Membership List. The NC is a committee of the Council, and it reports to the Council; it is the Council which does the nominating. So you will not find mention of the NC in the Society Bylaws.

The NC must identify ten (10) candidates for five vacant positions as member-at-large (MaL) of the AMS Council. (There are fifteen MaLs, five elected each year for three-year terms—re-election is not possible.) It must find two candidates for vice president (VP). (There are three VPs, one elected each year for a three-year term.) It must also find two candidates for trustee. (There are five elected trustees, one elected each year for a five-year term. Reelection one time is permitted by the Council.)

Before the meeting begins, the NC has communicated via email, and usually members come to the meeting with a list of potential candidates. For MaL, their combined list may contain fifty or more names. Each name is considered by the committee. Membership in the AMS is a must. Experience in AMS activities is not so important, because membership on the Council is considered by some to be an entry level position. The list is then rank ordered by secret ballot. Members of the NC take into account the diversity (meant in the broadest sense) of the Council. It tries to limit to less than three the number of members from any one institution. It attempts to ensure that there are candidates from the several different types of educational institutions—from doctoral-granting to four-year colleges. Usually at least twenty names are needed in order to come up with a list of ten to present to the Council.

Selecting VPs is not as difficult mainly because only two have to be found. Still the NC has had to use ten or more names on occasion to find two people willing to stand for election.

The BT often presents a different problem. A member of the Board can be reelected for one term. In fact, it may be desirable to have a BT member be reelected, as it takes somewhat longer for a trustee to learn the position. Having done so, they can then bring this valuable experience to the BT. Thus there is a conflict between the desire to let a standing trustee serve again by running unopposed and the desire by the Council to have contested elections. The Society has lost the services of some excellent trustees by adhering to the "contested election" policy—but democracy has been preserved. It is relatively easy to find a distinguished mathematician who is willing to stand for election to the BT.

Finally there is the problem, faced every other year by the NC, of finding two candidates to run for the president elect position. (We usually talk about "president" because the president elect becomes president after one year.) Finding two candidates for this position is complicated by the necessity of finding a "nominator" for each of the candidates. This nominator has to write an article for the election material extolling the mathematical and other virtues of the candidate. Finding serious mathematicians who have taken the affairs of the Society seriously to be president is becoming an increasingly difficult task. Even with expert arm twisting, the NC often has to conclude its meetings before a final list is ready.

After deciding on the slate, the NC reports to the April meeting of the Council—which really does the nominating. This year the report was completed just days before the Council met. One potential MaL candidate dropped out after the Council had nominated him—showing that the NC somehow failed, and leaving only nine candidates for the five open MaL positions.

A glance back at the history of the AMS shows that many of America's elite mathematicians served as elected volunteers. We need to convince current-day mathematicians that membership in and service to the AMS is vital for our discipline and profession. In particular, when the Nominating Committee calls, please say "Yes".

—Robert M. Fossum
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Letters to the Editor

Ralston Responds to Escobales

I find it intriguing that, when criticizing things I have written in the *Notices*, writers of letters to the *Notices* (Rich Escobales in the August 2004 issue, Wilfried Schmid in the March 2004 issue) focus not on what I have written in the *Notices* but rather on what I have written elsewhere.

My article ("Research Mathematicians and Mathematics Education: A Critique") was not, as Escobales claims, "an update of [my] ideas expressed in other writings on school mathematics" but rather an attempt at an objective evaluation of the activities in recent years of research mathematicians related to school mathematics education. I hardly expected that I could be entirely successful in keeping my well known "prejudices" on this subject out of my article. But I must have been more successful than I had anticipated since Escobales' letter criticizes quotes from two of my previous papers (one from 19 years ago!) but criticizes nothing at all from my *Notices* article.

In commenting on an article of mine about the high school mathematics curriculum, Escobales asks, "Where are the statistical studies supporting Ralston's more radical conclusions?" The answer, of course, is that there are none. But, equally, there are no such studies that validate the current content of school mathematics, most particularly, I might note, the emphasis on pencil-and-paper arithmetic in elementary school mathematics. Instead we have no more than what seems to be the gut feeling of many (most?—no one knows) college mathematicians that pencil-and-paper arithmetic is the only or, anyhow, clearly the best way to teach children what they need to know about arithmetic. In Escobales' case, we have the dogma, unsupported except by anecdote, that, without "mastery of addition and the other algorithms of basic arithmetic", children are "condemned to move about blindly in [the] intriguing world of numbers". And this despite considerable evidence that a curriculum that focuses on pencil-and-paper arithmetic has never been even moderately successful in teaching arithmetic to large numbers of children.

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Is Wallace's Chicken Russell's Turkey?

While my letter carries no mathematical content whatsoever, I felt I had to write this to compliment Michael Harris for his review of David Foster Wallace's "Everything and More" (E & M) (*Notices*, June/July 2004). Harris's review is one of the most enjoyable pieces I have seen in the *Notices* in recent times, and it shows how even an unfavourable review can be an elegant thing. However, I did wonder why Harris did not say more about the origins of Mr. Chicken, whose activities mark the narrative high point of E & M. Unless I am mistaken, Mr. Chicken is not quite an original creation. Isn't that character merely Russell's inductivist turkey—reincarnated as a chicken?

—Gautam Bharali
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How Mathematics Can Be Political

"Mathematicians and mathematics educators must be political!" Johnny Lott declares (*Notices*, June/July 2004, page 607), warning that "All mathematical people…must come together politically if the mathematics discipline is to survive."

Although the former NCTM (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) president does not specify the threats to our millennia-old discipline, he seems to imply that they are: first, the No Child Left Behind Act; and second, the potential failure of "mathematical people" to support NCTM's political advocacy program.

The No Child Left Behind Act does indeed compromise the quality of mathematics education in America's high schools. This is a serious problem—the type which NCTM should naturally be concerned with. But let us not slide with Dr. Lott down a slippery slope and imagine that NCLB ultimately represents a threat to the survival of mathematics. Though not politically correct, we should remember that the formal education of the masses, while of tremendous importance in its own right, is more or less irrelevant to the development of most intellectual disciplines—including mathematics. Universal, compulsory schooling of teenagers such as we have in the United States is a very recent phenomenon. Mathematics, in contrast, is an ancient discipline. Mathematics may indeed benefit from a vast system of high schools, but history shows quite clearly that it is not dependent on them. What percentage of high school students today take even a single course of philosophy? Even one percent? Probably not, yet philosophy continues to draw its adherents. Similarly, if math disappeared altogether from high schools, the discipline of mathematics would continue to thrive. The discipline of mathematics education, however, would not.

Dr. Lott is correct about one thing—we can, as "mathematical people", affect some much-needed change in the classroom by coming together politically. Lobbying for government support of math education research, however, is political action of a fairly ineffectual kind. Such grants certainly benefit those working in the field of mathematics education, but whether or not they actually benefit our students remains an open question. NCTM's political advocacy program, as outlined in Dr. Lott's opinion piece, is, alas, peppered with pleas for government grants. While funding need not be discontinued or even necessarily reduced, there is much that we can do for mathematics education without government money. Indeed, we should generally be seeking ways to take money out of the educational machine rather than throwing more into it. Persistent demands for money, especially when accompanied by patently fallacious stories that mathematics may not survive if it is not

granted, invite accusations of profiteering.

As one who is deeply concerned with mathematics education but only mildly concerned with the discipline of mathematics education, I would like to propose one example of a meaningful and realistic way in which we, as "mathematical people", can bring about a small but important change through political action which takes money out of the system.

By working together, we can pressure publishers to lower textbook prices. A boycott can work wonders. There is no excuse for $70 paperbacks, other than the fact that we as educators passively condone them. We ourselves are largely to blame, and we should work to correct this deplorable situation. Organizing such a boycott would be a great triumph for NCTM or any other math education organization. Of course, no one would receive research grants for such work, but bringing the cost of textbooks down would be (for once!) an unquestionable boon which the mathematics education community could bestow upon our students. This should be reward enough.

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Teaching Loads

In many universities the current teaching load is lowered, or its lowering is discussed. When I was a young professor in France, the teaching load of all professors was 3 hours per week. I certainly enjoyed it a lot, and I would not have come to the U.S. if it had still been so in 1986 when I came. However, I wonder whether we are not going to some sort of collective political suicide guided by what has to be called academic greed.

It first strikes me to have these reductions of the teaching load coming at a time when tuitions are steeply increased, when services to students are strongly diminished (despite the futile speeches on undergraduate education), and when public support is rather weak.

In addition to increasing the number of classes taught in big size lectures, savings will be done by exploiting cheap labor with many adjuncts (without secure jobs and probably without fringe benefits—as already done in many technical colleges) instead of professors. Is it a way we wish to go? Are we not digging a hole for the future? Moreover, after step 1, where reduction of the teaching load is negotiated with administrations by agreeing with teaching more large lectures, are we sure that step 2 (for our followers) will not be teaching these large lectures with a teaching load back to the previous level?

Competition between universities is often mentioned for justifying the present trend. Is it a competition of sheep jumping over a cliff?

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More Recommendations for Minority Mathematicians

Duane A. Cooper hit a home run with "Recommendations for increasing the participation and success of Blacks in graduate mathematics study" (*Notices*, May 2003). His recommendations on the undergraduate courses to be done by prospective graduate mathematics students is the icing on the cake, knowing that the Ph.D in mathematics involves research and in most cases ability to bring to birth a theorem in mathematics. But in many universities, be they predominantly White, Black or mixed, many mathematics students can graduate without being well grounded in those core courses of analysis and algebra. This should then be an eye-opener to those who prepare the mathematics curriculum in many of our universities.

On my own, I strongly recommend more Blacks attending predominantly White colleges for their undergraduate studies in mathematics, but for their graduate studies they have brighter chances of succeeding when they attend predominantly Black universities which to an extent is in line with Cooper's recommendations. I say this because I have a feeling that if a statistics is taken today it will be seen that most Blacks/minorities who graduated from predominantly Black universities have more confidence in themselves and are more "successful" in life than their counterparts who went to predominantly White universities.

Who says self-confidence doesn't have to do with success in life?

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About the Cover

The "Olympia" sculpture, located at the Promenade in Midtown at 14th Street and Peachtree Street, Altlanta, Georgia. Atlanta is the site of the 2005 Joint Mathematics Meetings, January 5–8, 2005.

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