

Launching into the Next Two Years

David Bressoud

This is an exciting and challenging time to be taking on the presidency of the MAA, six years shy of its centennial. The economic situation is difficult. Those of us in academia find our colleges and universities squeezed from many directions. Public funding is drying up. Endowments are taking a hit. Student enrollments are increasing as people enter or stay in college to improve their chances of finding employment or to postpone entering the job market. At the same time, there is greater demand for financial aid. We are all being asked to do more with less.

The MAA itself is not immune to these economic difficulties. We have always run a lean operation. Even before the financial crisis we were struggling with declining print subscriptions to our journals, a symptom of the broad transition from print to electronic delivery. Our financial reserves, which had come within a whisker of equaling one year's operating expenses, have been set back. We are concerned about whether membership numbers will hold up as our members find themselves under increasing financial strain.

For all of these institutions, the MAA included, this is a time to refocus on the core mission, to think about what is really important, and to direct our resources not just to preserving but to strengthening that which is essential to who we are. The year and a half since my election has been a time of learning about the MAA and coming to understand all it is and all it does. I would like to devote this inaugural column in *MAA FOCUS* to reflections on this core mission of the MAA. Given my own proclivities, I will do this through an historical lens.

The MAA was founded in 1915 to provide a home for *The American Mathematical Monthly*. This and our other journals and publications have always been at the core of who we are, "The preeminent

provider of expository mathematics" (from the Vision Statement of the MAA, <http://www.maa.org/aboutmaa/visionstatement.html>). Immediately following its founding, MAA Sections began to appear, establishing the other central feature of the MAA: This is a grassroots organization that relies on local networks and volunteers.



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In the 1940s and '50s, the mission deepened. The MAA took on responsibility for guiding and shaping the undergraduate curriculum, what would become CUPM (Committee on the Undergraduate Program in Mathematics) and eventually encompass other education committees. And the MAA began what would grow into AMC (American Mathematics Competitions), AIME (American Invitational Mathematics Examination), USAMO (USA Mathematical Olympiad), and the training of the U.S. team to compete in the International Mathematical Olympiad. These were natural outgrowths of the original vision. If we are to take seriously our task of sharing good mathematics as broadly as possible, we need to encourage and provide outlets for mathematically talented

young people, and we must work to improve the undergraduate preparation of future users of mathematics.

Two other significant and natural expansions occurred in the 1990s. The first was *Project NExT* (New Experiences in Teaching). It was no longer enough for the MAA to provide opportunities for college faculty to get together and guidance in how to make their teaching more effective, it also needed to make a special effort to support, encourage, and nurture new faculty. In the tradition of the original Sections that created local networks, one of the strongest aspects of *Project NExT* has been the formation of cohorts of Fellows who continue to support each other via listservs and gatherings at meetings.

The second new program, officially launched in 2000, was the creation of the SIGMAAs (Special Interest Groups of the MAA), communities built around common interests that, in this electronic age, do not need geographic proximity in order to flourish. I find it very appropriate that the first of these was SIGMAA on RUME (Research on Undergraduate Mathematics Education), a community of people dedicated to the use of research to better understand how we can improve undergraduate education.

This, then, is our core. We are a grassroots organization of many interwoven communities coming together to share our enthusiasm for mathematics with each other and the rest of the world and to sustain each other as we identify and encourage mathematical talent and prepare the next generations who will use mathematics. Our focus always has been and needs to remain on collegiate-level mathematics, but that focus reaches beyond those who are likely to be future members of our communities. It encompasses the preparation and support of K–12 teachers and the education of all college students.

Three Years of MAA Reviews

Fernando Q. Gouvêa

In January 2006, the MAA unveiled a book review site called *MAA Reviews*. Initially a part of MathDL, it has since been spun off as an independent part of the Association's online presence. As it reaches its third birthday, the site features reviews of more than 2,100 books. It incorporates the MAA's list of books recommended for library acquisition, which today includes some 1,300 titles.

Three factors came together in 2005. I had been running a book review column on MAA Online, and it was popular with visitors to the site. It was time to think about how to expand and enhance that service. The second component was the decision to stop running *Telegraphic Reviews* in the *American Mathematical Monthly*. The old TRs were essentially a database of recent mathematics books, and by moving them online we could cover more books and make the whole thing searchable.

Finally, there was the question of how to update the MAA's list of library recommendations, known to insiders as the "Basic Library List." My Colby colleague Tom Berger was then in charge of this project, and he suggested that the ideal would be to have a large online database of books in which we could simply flag those that we were recommending to libraries.

It is a humbling task to take on the leadership of this sprawling and dynamic organization, but, as I said at the beginning, I am excited about these next two years. There are opportunities to build on our many strengths as we provide services to help our members be the very best mathematicians and educators they can be, even in tough times, and to continue communicating the beauty and importance of mathematics. 🌐

David Bressoud is DeWitt Wallace Professor of Mathematics at Macalester College and President of the MAA. For an interview with David Bressoud see page 6.

On the strength of all that, I proposed to Don Albers, then MAA Director of Publications, that we create what is now *MAA Reviews*. It took some time to develop the software. Meanwhile, I started amassing reviews and data. I was then "the secret master of *MAA Reviews*," because I was editing something that didn't yet exist. We went live three years ago with several hundred reviews, and the site has never stopped growing. I owe a huge debt of thanks to the two groups who made this possible: publishers of

mathematics books and my battalion of reviewers.

Happily, once we had the site going, most publishers of mathematics books were eager to send us stuff. We record all the books we get. Each book has a page with the basic information and an image of its cover;

whenever possible we also post the table of contents. So every book that publishers send to us gets at least a listing. Next comes triage. We would, of course, like to review them all, but that's not really possible. So we designate about half of the books we get as "reviewable." They go to a big table where they sit until someone chooses them.

If the cooperation of publishers is important, the work of our many reviewers is essential: Without it, there just wouldn't be *MAA Reviews*. They're a great crowd of people. Whenever they're ready to do a new review, I send them a list of what's on the "to

