

An MAA Visit to Congress

By Frank A. Farris

Last March, I visited the offices of two US Senators and three Representatives as part of the MAA Science Policy Committee's Congressional Visit. Our purpose was to create and sustain relationships between legislators and the MAA, urging support for federal programs to improve undergraduate mathematics education.

Our team of seven included MAA President David Bressoud, James Epperson of UT Arlington, Joel Haack of Northern Iowa State University, Herb Kasube of Bradley University, our Executive Director Tina Straley, and Phillippe Tondeur, chair of the Science Policy Committee. Geographic considerations had played a large role in our selection. Since I serve as Governor for the Northern California, Nevada, and Hawaii Section, I was a logical choice to target US Representative Mike Honda, who is a key member of the House Appropriations Committee.

My first day began in the MAA Carriage House, where we received packets to carry to Capitol Hill. The MAA does so much that anyone could talk for an hour about it, but we needed to make our pitch in less than ten minutes. We would begin with information about ourselves, chosen to help our target understand that we are professors with a passion for undergraduate mathematics. After presenting ourselves, we moved to "the ask": requests to support federal funding for the NSF and Education Department (ED) and language for the Fiscal Year 2010 appropriations committee report. Specifically:

The Committee urges continuing undergraduate activities that support curriculum, laboratory, and instructional improvement; increasing the pipeline of talent into STEM, particularly women and diverse populations; and attracting talented individuals into the STEM teaching field.

My first meeting was with Mike Honda's legislative assistant Ed Postonak. It was my first time in any of the congressional office buildings, imposing stone structures that radiate power. Postonak was very receptive. Though unfamiliar with the MAA, he liked our pitch. I learned later that our full half hour of discussion was highly unusual under these circumstances.

Then I was due for a solo meeting at the office of California Senator Barbara Boxer. Her staff member Patrick Scandling took the meeting. We discovered common ground, as Scandling had taught high school mathematics through Teach for America. A little digging revealed that he had studied mathematics at Davidson College with Rich Neidinger, just the sort of excellent teacher who represents the best of the MAA.

After lunch, Joel Haack and Tina Straley were waiting to join my meeting with California Senator Dianne Feinstein's legislative assistant Olyvia Rodriguez. Our small conference room was scheduled for a different meeting in ten minutes; we talked fast. Feinstein's commitment to K-12 STEM education made

our task easy, and yet the staffer was not aware of the MAA, showing that we all have work to do.

We met for dinner and compared notes: Not everyone had encountered with people who were as enthusiastic about the MAA and the value of NSF programs as my targets had been.

The next morning I started with a meeting in a hallway outside the offices of Representative Jerry Lewis. Lewis is another key player on the appropriations committee. Legislative Assistant Rachel Khallili listened attentively. Since I know Lewis is a fiscal conservative, I tried to serve as a personal witness that money spent on MAA programs has a high rate of return.

After lunch came the high point of my visit, an in-person meeting with my own Representative Zoe Lofgren, whom I have admired and supported for years. Lofgren found it refreshing to hear a request for *language* that describes broad principles, rather than one more request for earmark funds. Time was short; after ten or so minutes of enjoying how good it felt to talk with someone who gets what we do and wants to help us do it better, my last meeting of the day was over.

As I started the long trip home, I enjoyed thinking that these five short meetings planted seeds that may result in better, smarter funding for mathematics education. I thought back over my pitch. It had turned out differently each time, but here is an idealized version:

I'm Frank Farris, a mathematics teacher from Santa Clara University. I represent the Mathematical Association of America and I'm here to talk with you about funding for undergraduate mathematics education. I've personally received some federal funding: I attended an NSF Summer Science Training Program at San Diego State University, back in 1972 when I was 15. The enthusiasm for mathematics that I caught from my teachers is just what I try to pass on to my own students. The NSF also funded a good chunk of my graduate education. This created in me a sense of service, a desire to spread the infectious love for mathematics that I had caught from my teachers all those years ago. Part of my service includes editing *Mathematics Magazine* [waving the February 2009 issue], a journal that stimulates students and reminds faculty why we loved mathematics in the first place. Over my 25 years at Santa Clara University, I have taught dozens of students who went on to become mathematics teachers. This year I was proud to write my first letter of recommendation for a student applying for one of Santa Clara's initial round of NSF-funded Robert Noyce Teaching Scholarships. The MAA is a great source of anecdotes about how effective it is to invest in math education. We do a lot to get young people involved in mathematics, which we call the "foothold" of STEM education. We also work to improve teacher training and sustain teachers. I can assure you that every dollar of federal money we receive is a dollar well spent. I urge you to do all you can to improve funding for mathematics in our country. Let me show you some materials that spell out the details... 