A Student's Guide to Large Meetings

MATHEMATICAL ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

What are these meetings?

There are two large (over 1000 participants) meetings that the Mathematical Association of America (MAA) holds annually. Each January the MAA, along with the American Mathematical Society (AMS), organizes the Joint Mathematics Meetings. With approximately 5000 people in attendance, these meetings are held in large cities, either at the convention center or split amongst two large hotels. The winter meeting has talks on a myriad of subjects dealing with research, teaching, students, and recreational math, among others. Each August the MAA holds MathFest, which draws between 1200 and 1500 participants and tends to be more focused on mathematics accessible to undergraduates. At either meeting you can listen to talks, participate in student workshops or events like Math Jeopardy, or give a talk or present a poster on your own work. In order to get the most out of your experience it helps to know what to expect and that is where this guide comes in.

How do I sign up for a meeting?

Once you decide you want to attend a meeting, talk with your department chairperson or a faculty advisor. These people can help you (a) navigate the registration process for attending or giving a talk, and (b) request money from the department, the Dean, the MAA, or elsewhere to defray your costs. Registration information is online at the MAA website (www.maa.org) as well as in the special meetings issues of FOCUS (the news magazine of the MAA).

What are the different types of talks?

Invited addresses are hour-long talks given by well-known mathematicians. These are general talks in front of a large audience with divergent interests. The speaker will make sure the talk is suitable for everyone. The room fills up, so go early to get a good seat.

Invited paper sessions are sets of talks, usually with a theme (example titles *Algebraic Topology* and *Teaching Techniques in Real Analysis*). The organizers of the session are looking for the top experts in that area. Each speaker gives a 15 or 20-minute talk which is usually more specialized than an invited address. While all the talks fit a theme, it does not mean all the talks mesh together. You do not have to attend the first three talks to walk in and enjoy the fourth one. Although the mathematics may sound intimidating, anyone can attend these talks as well.

Contributed paper sessions are for people who have something to speak about, but the topic does not fit any special session. They are volunteering to give their talk, rather than being invited. Some contributed paper sessions have a theme (*Mathematics of Sudoku*) while others are just titled *Contributed Paper Session* and may contain totally unrelated talks.

Some things worth noting:

- Both contributed paper sessions and invited paper sessions tend to run 2—3 hours. You do *not* have to stay the entire time. It is acceptable to enter or exit between talks.
- This is not like being in a classroom. The lecturer will be giving an overview of results rather than a detailed, proof-filled talk. You do not have to take notes. If you really like what you hear, walk up to the speaker after the talk and ask if he/she has a copy of the paper. A speaker will be happy to share, or you can give your email address and get an electronic copy.
- Typically the first part of a talk is introductory and very general. Toward the end, especially at research talks, things tend to get very technical. Do not worry if it gets too deep. This happens to everyone except experts in that field.

How do I decide which talks to attend?

The web site for the MAA (www.maa.org) contains links to both MathFest and the Joint Meetings homepages. There you can find the programs for the meetings. If you want, a program book will also be sent to you along with your name badge a few weeks before the start of the conference. In the program are the titles and times of each talk or session. Making a list of what sounds interesting to you will be helpful.

How do you know what is interesting? Look at the abstracts. An abstract for a math talk is a short description of the content of the lecture. These are meant to whet your appetite and help you decide whether or not to go to that talk. Abstracts will be posted online and, when you arrive at the meeting, you can find the abstracts in book form. When you write everything out, you will find the inevitable time conflict: two talks, occurring simultaneously, both of which sound really good. This happens and you just need to choose, maybe at the last moment.

Keep an eye on the MAA web site for new ways to find out about the meetings. During MathFest 2007 the MAA put up a wiki page accessible through the meeting's web site. It was constantly updated before and during the meeting, and had pages of events for both undergraduate and graduate students and a guide to the meetings written by different special interest groups. This was a fast method for getting information out to participants. The MAA will continue to look for innovative means to connect with people.

Is anything else going on?

With are so many people at a meeting, there needs multiple events besides talks to keep people engaged. Meetings are a very sociable time. You'll see reunions for students and faculty from various universities. There are groups devoted to a common interest (e.g. mathematics and knitting) getting together for a receptions. Both national meetings host a reception for first-time attendees as well as for undergraduate and graduate students. Every day, the Student Hospitality Center is open to give students a place to relax, find important information, and connect with their peers. Panel discussions (*How to Apply for Jobs in Academics*), activity sessions (*Origami, Polyhedra, and Mathematics*), and games (*Math Jeopardy* and *Who Wants to be a Mathematician*), all of which are for students, will be going on. Awards are given for the undergraduate talks at MathFest and the undergraduate poster session at the Joint Meetings.

Finally, there is the exhibit area. Booths are set up by various publishing companies, software designers, recruiters, and merchants of all types. Here you can find the biography of Euler that you want to read, a DVD on the art of Escher, the latest version of MAPLE, the MAA yo-yo, or the t-shirt which expresses your love of π or e (or even γ). This guide would be remiss if it did not also mention all the FREE STUFF. To attract you to their booths, exhibitors give away tote bags, Frisbees, mugs, pens and pencils, pads of papers, and buttons. There are also raffles for books, ties, gift baskets, and even (sometimes) computers. Pay attention to the Wiki or bulletin board outside the exhibit area to see when free food (sponsored by various sellers) is being offered.

What else should I know?

When trying to make up your list of where to go and what to do, don't forget the resource right in front of you. Talk to the faculty at your school. They have the experience, plus, if your school is helping you with some of the cost, there may be some events they will require you to attend. That aside, be warned that going to meetings is expensive. There are ways to cut the cost down. You do not need to stay at one of the major hotels. Usually cheaper hotels are within walking distance to the meeting site. Find roommates for the meeting, either with other students from your institution or using the roommate service at the MathFest or Joint Meetings web pages or via the meeting wiki. Bring, or buy, a cheap cooler. Once you've arrived find a market and buy snacks, breakfast and lunch food, and drinks. Going back to your room for lunch and eating a sandwich and chips is much cheaper than spending $10 on fast food.

This guide is an update of an article written by Dan Kalman which appeared in the November 1998 issue of *Math Horizons*.