

Guidelines for MAA Selection Committees: Avoiding Implicit Bias¹

Committees are urged to keep these practices in mind as they choose invited speakers, nominate teaching award winners or candidates for office, suggest new members for their committees, and undertake many other tasks. While these *Guidelines* were developed in the context of prizes and awards, they will be helpful to virtually every MAA committee, at the Section as well as the Association level.

Implicit bias

The MAA gives awards to mathematicians to recognize excellence in teaching, writing, scholarship and service. We choose speakers for national and Section meetings who are excellent expositors. We elect leaders who are knowledgeable and hard-working. Those selected are regarded as role models, so it is important that each selection process recognize a group who reflects the breadth of the Association membership and of the profession. Diversity in recognition gives visible evidence of the Association's commitment to equity. While selection committees strive for fairness in selecting winners based on established criteria, studies have shown that unconscious, unintentional assumptions can sometimes influence judgment -- this is the problem of *implicit bias*. For instance, data gathered across many professional societies show that women do not receive recognition at a rate commensurate with their numbers in the profession. In recent years, MAA data on gender show that women are more likely to receive awards for teaching or service than for writing or as a named lecturer. While the reasons are unclear and deserve further study, implicit bias may be one possible factor. The following guidelines may help selection committees avoid implicit bias.

Composing committees

Appoint diverse selection committees and committee chairs. Diverse committees provide access to a wider set of networks from which to cultivate nominations and suggestions. Committee members and chairs from underrepresented groups may cushion against unintentional stereotyping.

Cultivating nominations

"Nominations" can refer to a site for a Section meeting, an invited lecturer for MathFest, or the recipient of a Meritorious Service Award, for instance.

Generate a large and diverse pool of nominees. Pólya Lecturers, Section officers, and teaching award winners are selected based on established criteria, so this step is crucial to ensuring that the pool of nominees contains as many eligible candidates as possible (especially those whose work is outstanding but less well-known). When appropriate, committees should consider including a call for nominations in electronic newsletters, using listservs (e.g., SIGMAAs and Project NExT), and other ways

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to generate nominations. Where the list of possible nominees is not constrained to a relatively small group (as in a set of articles appearing in a specified journal), committees should invite nominations for awards with notification of their deliberations in *FOCUS* and on the MAA website. Increasing awareness of an award among all MAA members has the side benefit of increasing interest in the award and making the selection process more transparent and inclusive.

In particular, publicize the award or position among underrepresented groups. When appropriate, encourage groups such as AWM, the Committee on the Participation of Women, NAM, SACNAS, and institutions exemplary in their support of women and minorities to make nominations.

Periodically review and discuss practices for building a pool of nominees. Examine lists of nominees, short-lists of nominees, and past “winners” for historical patterns with an eye towards gender or other under-represented groups.

Periodically review the description and guidelines. Particular attention should be paid to the language used to describe the award or position --- e.g., are the words used associated more often with males than females? --- as well as restrictions that could disproportionately affect certain groups--- e.g., do age limits affect women who take time off to raise a family? For suggested changes, make recommendations to the Council on Prizes and Awards.

Selecting recipients

Discuss the process and criteria that will be used to evaluate nominees *before reviewing nominations*. Develop a rubric that matches published criteria. Research has shown that implicit bias can enter via unintentional “criteria-shifting” after nominees are discussed.

Make a personal list of top nominees *before hearing the recommendations of any other members*. This avoids the undue influence of one member and ensures that the list of viable nominees is as large as possible before discussion begins.

Look for hidden gems. Pay special attention to suggestions from atypical sources. Some department chairs have lots of experience and are pros at writing letters of recommendation; others are not. Take the time to look carefully at every nomination.

Create short lists via *inclusive* rather than *exclusive* methods. For instance, select candidates that are outstanding, rather than finding reasons to eliminate candidates from consideration.

Ensure that every committee member’s voice is heard. Do not let any committee member remain silent.

Take adequate time to make a decision. Research has shown implicit bias is mitigated when committees have time for thoughtful reflection and discussion, instead of making snap judgments.

Avoid potential conflicts of interest. Often candidates are so well-known that associations with selection committee members are unavoidable. In all discussions, members should make clear any connection they may have with a person under consideration, and recuse themselves if appropriate. And of course committee members are expected to abide by the MAA Conflict of Interest Policy as described on the MAA website.