

HISTORY OF SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS OF THE MAA

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A NEW AGENDA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

At its January 1999 meeting, the MAA Board of Governors asked a group of MAA members, officers, and staff to review the status of the Association with respect to changes in mode of communication, demographics, modern technologies, and member attitudes and expectations and then prepare a set of recommendations that would serve as a guide for the MAA during the first three years of the new millennium. The results of this work, further supplemented by a major telephone survey and comparison to over three hundred other associations, were summarized in the spring of 1999 in *A NEW AGENDA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY*, a document that listed five priority action recommendations, including “Facilitate the Formation of Special Interest Groups.”

The planning group acknowledged that previous development of several specially focused groups within the MAA had been spurred by the convenience and low cost of electronic communication. The group concluded that broadening the MAA to formally include Special Interest Groups that are consistent with its mission and support its national unity was a priority, especially given the possibility of organized and affordable communication through ListServes, web-based information, and e-mail. Also, the group’s telephone survey had revealed a very positive response to the notion of special interest groups.

THE MAA TASK FORCE ON SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

In order to ensure that a program of special interest groups be of high quality, responsive to needs of members, and a strength to the MAA, the planning group recommended that guidelines be established addressing organizational structure, operating procedures, and mechanisms for MAA members sharing a common mathematical interest to propose new groups. The MAA Executive and Finance Committees, having endorsed in principle formation of a special interest groups program, established the MAA Task Force on Special Interest Groups during late spring of 1999. The Task Force was chaired by Professor Ed Dubinski who, along with Professor Ann Watkins, prepared an introductory paper from which the Task Force members began the work of developing guidelines.

The early efforts of the Task Force were devoted to drafting a resolution that the MAA establish a program of special interest groups. The final draft of the resolution, which was fully approved by the MAA Executive and Finance Committees and the MAA Board of Governors in August of 1999, officially named the newly established groups “SIGMAAs” – Special Interest Groups of the MAA – and proposed that the SIGMAAs program officially begin in January of 2000. The resolution also outlined conditions

under which SIGMAAs would operate, and those conditions continue to provide the basic structure for SIGMAAs. Following passage of its resolution establishing SIGMAAs, the Task Force's efforts turned to development of application procedures and a model charter for groups applying to become SIGMAAs. The final draft of its "Procedures for Establishing a SIGMAA" was approved by the MAA Executive Committee in October 1999, and the Task Force proceeded to solicit applications from groups wishing to form SIGMAAs. The new SIGMAAs program was officially announced to the membership in an article entitled "MAA Adding SIGMAAs to its Membership Benefits" published in the December 1999 issue of *FOCUS*.

THE FIRST SIGMAA APPROVAL

The Task Force received its first proposal to form a SIGMAA in early December of 1999 from the Association for Research in Undergraduate Mathematics Education (ARUME). ARUME's proposal was reviewed by the Task Force and approved by the MAA Executive Committee just prior to the Joint Mathematics Meetings held in Washington, DC in January of 2000. The announcement that ARUME, now renamed as SIGMAA RUME, had become the first Special Interest Group of the MAA was received with applause from a large group attending the SIGMAA Reception on the afternoon of January 19, 2000 in the Washington Omni Shoreham Hotel.

THE TASK FORCE BECOMES A STANDING COMMITTEE

The approval of the charter submitted by ARUME and good publicity work quickly attracted more applications to form new SIGMAAs. During 2000 and 2001 the Task Force forwarded two recommendations to the MAA Executive committee, which in turn approved the second and third groups. These were the SIGMAA on Statistics Education (SIGMAA STAT-ED), which was an outgrowth of the Isolated Teachers of Statistics group, and the SIGMAA on Business, Industry, and Government (BIG SIGMAA), which was submitted by a large group of mathematicians from academic and non-academic employment settings. With three SIGMAAs established, the Task Force moved on to consideration of a more permanent oversight group for SIGMAAs, an action anticipated in the early development of the program. At MathFest 2001 in Madison, Wisconsin, the Board of Governors passed a motion from the Task Force that the Task Force be disbanded and a new standing committee of the MAA, the Committee on SIGMAAs, be established. Steve Carlson was named the chair of this standing committee.

The membership of the new Committee included a mix of new members and veteran members from the Task Force who were eager to continue the work of the Task Force, which had consisted mostly of reviewing applications for new SIGMAAs, and also to introduce new oversight and support efforts on behalf of the whole group of SIGMAAs. Upon being formed, the Committee already had on its agenda a number of applications

from proposing groups, and within its first year forwarded three recommendations that were approved by the Executive Committee. Thus, the SIGMAAs on the History of Mathematics, Environmental Mathematics, and the Philosophy of Mathematics came into existence. With respect to oversight and support issues, the Committee worked closely with the MAA Budget and Executive Committees to monitor potential changes in financial and operational responsibilities of SIGMAAs, began hosting an Annual Meeting of SIGMAA Officers at the Joint Mathematical Meetings beginning with the January 2002 meeting in San Diego, and will soon publish a SIGMAA Officers On Line Handbook.

During the next two years, approved status had been attained for the SIGMAAs on Mathematics Instruction Using the Web, Quantitative Literacy, and Teaching Advanced High School Mathematics, bringing the number to nine active SIGMAAs.

In 2007 Steve Carlson stepped down and handed the reigns of the SIGMAA program to Amy Shell-Gellasch. At this point the SIGMAA program moved from the stage of development into a stage of refinement. Procedures for developing new SIGMAAs, reporting of annual reports, budgetary matters and a model charter were instituted. By 2009 the current compliment of twelve SIGMAAs is in place with the addition the SIGMAAs on Biology, the Arts, and Math Circles.

With procedures now formalized and a solid core of SIGMAAs active, plans for the next stage of the program were needed. What was the future of the SIGMAA program? Where should it fall within the MAA structure? What were the coming challenges for the program as the 21st century progressed? To start to address these issues, a Strategic Planning and Work group was formed in 2009. Plans were laid to start an annual review process for the SIGMAAs similar to the Section review process already in place.

The SIGMAAs program provides MAA members with a membership benefit that was not previously available within the Association. However, it is the founders and officers of the individual special interest groups that have and do volunteer their time and efforts to make that benefit of value to each and every SIGMAA member. And it is the individual SIGMAA members that make the SIGMAA succeed – by paying dues, by taking advantage of electronic communication to share ideas and solve problems, and simply by sharing a special interest with colleagues.