

## Mentoring

From the panel “Encouraging and retaining women and other underrepresented groups”  
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(Note: I respectfully suggest a more appropriate title for this panel is, “Encouraging and retaining an inclusive, diverse community”. By continuing to employ the language of segregation, we help lock segregation into place.)

By and large, I believe this is a mentoring issue. To be successful, we need to do two crucial things:

- (1) believe in people;
- (2) challenge them.

With regard to (1): We need to make sure these people *know* we believe in them. This is critical if challenges we set them are to be seen as encouragement and as opportunities to blossom and excel, rather than as messages that “nothing you do is ever enough.”

With regard to (2): As mentors, we need to set high but attainable goals for our students and junior colleagues. Sometimes we must adjust, up or down, what we assess as attainable for someone. However, we must be truly aware, fighting the subtle and thinly veiled prejudices our society is constantly broadcasting, so that we can properly reassess what we measure as attainable for any given individual.

That said, note that we need to *have* opportunities to encourage and retain others in our community. Such opportunities are not always readily available, so we need to actively seek, and even create, these opportunities.

It is critical to get each member of our community to speak at conferences. (In my experience organizing this conference for many years, the women are reluctant to volunteer to speak, and when they do, they too often volunteer only to give the shortest talks possible. One way I’ve responded to this is to write the participants that not everyone’s request could be accommodated – then I assign the women to speak for longer.) We need to require people give talks and to learn to believe in their own voices.

We must also recognize that the degree to which the community is supportive of others in their mathematical pursuits is quite powerful in its effect, professionally and personally. Cool, calculated civility, a chilly climate in the profession, mathematical isolation can defeat or deter even the strongest spirits and intellects.

We need our community to be committed to supporting and including diversity in our profession, to the extent that the community voluntarily engages in social activities that welcome and embrace diversity among the individuals in our profession.

We need enough people fighting for this goal of an inclusive, diverse community so

that the burden does not fall to only a few. We need enough people helping that we can continue to march on, while members of the community take breaks from this continuing battle and focus on their own careers and personal concerns.

We cannot get lazy. When we have success we need to celebrate; but this should be like  $y = x^3$  having a critical point but not an extremum at  $x = 0$ . (As I tell my Calculus students, “It’s just resting!”) We need to rest sometimes; we need to celebrate and to renew our energy. And then we need to keep marching forward to our goal.

We must never forget that this profession is comprised of and furthered by individuals, with individual needs, goals, pressures, and desires. But we must also not forget that we are a community.

**Addendum:** Two things said to me that dramatically changed what I thought possible for myself:

- (1) Beginning my research with Tom Shemanske, he said, “If you get an idea for a project, take a month and check it out.”
- (2) Just less than two years out of graduate school, teaching at St. Olaf and visiting Bill Duke for a few days at Rutgers, Bill took me down to IAS with Henryk Iwaniec. Strolling in the woods, Henryk said to me, “When you get a sabbatical, you should come here for a year, or at least a semester.”

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