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# The AWARDS Project: Promoting Good Practices in Award Selection

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# The AWARDS Project: Promoting Good Practices in Award Selection

By Betty Mayfield and Francis Edward Su

Every year the MAA honors many members of our community with a wide variety of prizes, awards, and certificates for excellence in teaching, writing, scholarship, and service (see [maa.org/awards](http://maa.org/awards)). The winners exemplify our ideals as an association; consequently, they are often viewed as role models and leaders. So it is important to ask: Do these awards, as a whole, reflect the outstanding contributions of the breadth of association membership?

An MAA task force has been working with the Association for Women in Science (AWIS) to answer that question in regard to gender. AWIS had gathered preliminary data in 2009 from several scientific societies that suggested women were not receiving recognition in the form of prizes and awards from their scientific societies at a rate commensurate with their professional membership.

Concerned by these trends, AWIS asked the MAA and six other professional associations to partner in a successful bid for an NSF grant (“the AWARDS project”) to examine the rates at which women earn prizes and awards in their disciplinary societies, and to develop and implement practices within these societies to address any underrepresentation. Other partner societies included the AMS and SIAM as well as similar groups in chemistry, neuroscience, and geophysics.

When the grant was funded in 2010, David Bressoud, president of the MAA at the time, appointed a task force to represent the association in this undertaking. The task force comprised current and former members of the Executive Committee, the Council on Publications and Communications, and the Committee on the Participation of Women: Betty Mayfield (chair), Frank Farris, Patricia Hale, Martha Siegel, and Francis Su.

Representatives from partner societies attended an initial AWARDS project workshop in 2010 that outlined some relevant issues and questions. At a final workshop in 2012, partner societies gave progress reports and new societies were introduced to the project. In this article, we hope to explain some of the things we learned by participating in

the AWARDS project and some of the recommendations the MAA task force made.

## Why Diversity in Is Important

Award recipients are some of the most visible members of our community, so it is important that our award-selection process recognizes the achievements of the breadth of the association membership and of the profession.

Diversity in award recognition gives visible evidence of the association’s commitment to equity and attests to a society that recognizes excellence wherever it is found. We necessarily focused on gender in our work since that was the aim of the AWARDS project. But, of course, our work has implications for many other

kinds of diversity, such as racial, ethnic, geographic, and type of academic institution.

## How Is the MAA Doing?

Estimates from the MAA membership rolls (where possible to determine gender) suggest that women make up about 25 percent of our membership. Data from 1991–2009 show that women have won awards nearly commensurate with membership rates in the categories of teaching (32 percent) and service (25 percent) and named lecturer (20 percent), but not in the writing awards (10 percent).

Other partner societies showed a similar trend: Women tend not to be represented well in scholarly awards (for writing and research). The reasons for this are unclear. There could be several contributing factors.

## Pipeline Issues

One factor could be pipeline issues that begin long before the point at which papers are being considered for awards. For instance, are women getting papers published at rates commensurate with membership? It appears that they are not. Looking over the articles published in the three main MAA journals over the last five years (2005–2009) reveals these approximate numbers about the (presumed) gender of authors:

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Journal	Number of male authors	Number of female authors
<i>Monthly</i>	321 (91%)	33 (9%)
<i>Mathematics Magazine</i>	89 (83%)	18 (17%)
<i>CMJ</i>	173 (89%)	21 (11%)
TOTALS	583 (89%)	72 (11%)

This raises the next question: Are women submitting articles at rates commensurate with membership? Some editors have examined data on past submissions and are looking into how they can collect this information on current submissions in such a way that the data is collected after the submission in a way that is not linked to the submission itself.

### Implicit Bias

Another potential factor is the problem of *implicit bias*—unintentional assumptions that can influence judgments. The unintentional nature of this bias shows up in many experiments that demonstrate that well-meaning individuals can display bias even if they are not trying to do so. Some famous research shows, for instance, that male and female university professors evaluating CVs for hiring preferred “Brian” over “Karen” even though the applicants had comparable experience. Everyone has implicit associations; this was demonstrated at the initial AWARDS project workshop in memorable ways, such as by taking an implicit association test (for fun, try the ones at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/>).

Research suggests that implicit bias can be mitigated by following some simple practices, such as establishing clear criteria for an award, generating a large and diverse pool of nominees, and appointing diverse committees (whose members can produce a wider pool of potential candidates). It is helpful to remember that these practices are good to follow *even in the absence of implicit bias*—and that they are good for all sorts of committees, at the section and association levels.

Our task force suggested these and several other helpful practices in a brief handout: *Avoiding Implicit Bias: Guidelines for MAA Selection Committees*. This document was endorsed by the MAA Board of Governors at the most recent MAA MathFest. It will be available in the Policies

and Procedures section of the MAA website (under “About Us”) and distributed with all new committee appointments.

### Double-Masked Reviews

In addition, our task force report to the Executive Committee and the Council on Prizes and Awards contained several recommendations to appropriate bodies within the MAA. These included the following: investigating pipeline issues, keeping better data on gender, minimizing the possibility in MAA competitions of “stereotype threat”—a well-established phenomenon in which a stereotyped group underperforms when confronted with a stereotype. We also encouraged the use of double-masked reviewing within MAA journals, which the *College Mathematics Journal* is already doing. At its meeting in Madison in August, the board of governors endorsed a plan for all MAA print journals to move toward double-masked review.

### How You Can Help

It’s easy for members to play a part in making sure recognition comes to all segments of our association, regardless of gender, ethnicity, location, type of institution, or other characteristic.

Learn about MAA prizes and awards, and nominate a colleague. A broad, diverse pool of nominees is the first step in the process.

Refer to the *Guidelines* as you serve on committees to select invited lecturers, choose nominees for section governor, or name a teaching award winner.

Suggest a wide variety of people to serve on MAA and section committees. (This process begins right after the Joint Meetings every year, when there is an online suggestion form available on the MAA website.)

As the MAA seeks to recognize excellence in myriad ways, it is helpful to remember that work can’t be recognized unless people know about it. So find out what your mathematical friends are up to, and encourage them to submit their work to MAA journals or to give talks about their work at national conferences and local seminars. This is how they and their work become known within the MAA, which is an organization that values the participation of all its members. 🍷

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Even well-meaning individuals can display bias.