

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



Leaving the AMS

In 2022, having been a member of the AMS for more than 30 years, I decided not to renew my membership for another year.

Here are my reasons:

With grave concern, I see the growing use of DEI statements as a required component for job applications, in particular in mathematical sciences. In my opinion, it has an enormous corrosive effect on the math community and education in this country. Even if one is required to say “I passionately believe that water would certainly wet us, as fire would certainly burn”, the routine affirmation of one’s beliefs as a precondition of making a living constitutes compelled speech and corrupts everyone who participates in the performance.

I grew up in the Soviet Union, where people had to affirm their fealty to ideals and the leaders embodying those ideals, on a daily basis. As years went by, I observed the remarkable ease with which passionate communists turned first into passionate pro-Western liberals and then into passionate nationalists. This lived experience and also common sense convince me that only true conformists excel in this game. Do we really want our math departments to be populated by conformists?

Currently, the compelled speech of the compulsory DEI statements affects mostly people at the beginning of their careers, that is when they are most vulnerable. The sheer logic of bureaucratic expansion suggests that those who position themselves as experts in evaluating the merits and judging the sincerity of the DEI statements will find new venues to apply their skills, affecting other demographics.

The AMS does nothing to investigate these developments. About 25 years ago, when one of the universities decided to close its PhD program in math, the AMS saw it urgent enough to dispatch a fact-finding mission. Now, as we have a social experiment on a national scale, with potentially devastating consequences, the AMS demonstrates a remarkable lack of curiosity.

I can think of several reasons for this detachment.

First, it can be that the majority of members see nothing wrong in the DEI statements, or consider them a welcome development. I, for one, would be interested to find out if this is indeed the case. A couple of years ago, several letters were circulated and published that painted an inconclusive, to say the least, picture. As far as I can tell, the discussion ended having barely started. Wouldn’t it be useful to have it restarted, now that we have seen more results of the DEI proliferation?

Second, I anticipate an argument that the AMS is “not involved in politics”. But this is the kind of “politics” that, rephrasing Pericles, will get involved with you, whether you like it or not, and hence inaction is just as political as action.

Third, people can be simply afraid to voice their opinions (admittedly, the line between the second and third reasons is blurred). The fears of being accused of having certain pernicious attitudes and creating an unsafe environment, as well as the fear of losing one’s livelihood are not without merit. However, compared to the standards set by the totalitarian movements of the past these repercussions may not seem like such a big deal. The more we are afraid to talk and act now, the more debilitating the fear becomes, and the more devastating will be the effect of our inaction.

Sincerely,
Alexander Barvinok

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