

2020: A Virtual Year

The spring 2020 meeting of the Indiana Section of the Mathematical Association of America (MAA) was scheduled to be held in conjunction with the bicentennial celebration of Indiana University's founding. This celebration was planned to bring together many of the higher education professional organizations that operate in Indiana. They included, among many others, the Indiana Academy of Social Sciences, the Indiana Association of Historians, the Indiana Academy of Science, and the Indiana Foreign Language Teachers Association. This complex conference was to be held at the Indianapolis convention center, while the Indiana College Mathematics Competition was to be held on the nearby IUPUI campus. Unfortunately, as we all know, the celebration was cancelled due to safety regulations and physical distancing practices related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic brought many changes to the operations of the MAA. Its annual summer meeting, Mathfest, was cancelled, but the Association quickly adapted to the new reality. It used its long planned transition to the platform MAA Connects to begin conducting its work electronically. The MAA learned both the value and limitations of Zoom platforms for both "business" and "teaching" purposes. One of the important lessons learned was that workshops and conferences can still be held, often becoming more inclusive and efficient than previously.

This lesson was taken to heart by the Indiana Section which held its first virtual section meeting in the Fall of 2020. Held October 3, 2020, the meeting had 132 registrants, with up to 73 attending at any given moment. Approximately 80 of the registrants were students. There were several out of state participants as well. These numbers represented a major increase in participation in comparison to traditional, in-person, fall meetings. The theme of the meeting was "back home in Indiana" and featured plenary sessions by three female mathematicians who had roots in Indiana. The three were Jennifer Beineke, currently at Western New England University; Amanda Harsy, Lewis University; and Talitha Washington, Clark Atlanta University. (This, as an aside, was not the first section meeting with multiple – and only – female plenary speakers. That achievement occurred at the 2018 spring meeting at Hanover College.) The meeting also featured twelve contributed talks offered in three virtual break out rooms.

The spring 2021 meeting was also held virtually, with more than 115 registrants. The most significant cause for this drop in attendance was a dramatic change in the format of the Indiana College Mathematics Competition. For the first time in its long history, the competition was held in a distributed format with exams being sent to each of the participating schools so that the teams could work together in appropriately safe physical spaces. Seventeen schools participated, involving more than 50 students. The first place team was from Purdue University, with other winning teams from Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology and Valparaiso University.

I close with a personal note that none of these changes were achieved without the tireless work of the leadership of the section. In particular, the chair of the section contributed a yeoman's work at executing these two virtual meetings as he became the local organizer as well as the program organizer. Therefore I want to acknowledge to hard, detailed work that Matt DeLong, of Marion University, conducted during his year as chair of the Indiana Section.