

The Origins of Project NExT-IN

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Project NExT-IN was established in the spring of 1996, supported by a grant of \$2,600 from the Mathematical Association of America. Its purpose was to extend the work of the still-young Project NExT into the Indiana Section by reaching out to new faculty who were unable to participate in the national level program. Both the national program and the section program have evolved considerably since those early years, so in this blog I hope to document the origins of Project NExT-IN.

Project NExT was established by the MAA in 1994 with a grant from the Exxon Education Foundation. Its purpose, then and now, was to improve the teaching and learning of mathematics, engaging new faculty in research and scholarship, finding exciting and interesting service opportunities, and helping them participate in professional activities. It also provides the participants with a network of peers and mentors as they assume these responsibilities. Because of the limited amount of funding, participation was initially determined by a competitive application process. There were approximately 60 Fellows nationwide during each of its first several years, in spite of significant interest among new faculty across the country.

To address this demand issue, the MAA established a grant program that would enable each of the 29 sections to establish their own regional version of the program. The Indiana Section received one of these mini-grants to establish Project NExT-IN, one of the pilot sections to form a program and provide feedback to Christine Stevens and James Leitzel in their guidance to other sections on how to manage their own programs.

Bonnie Gold (Wabash College), took up this challenge on behalf of the Indiana Section. Her proposal, submitted by Don Miller (St. Mary's College) and chair of the section that year, called for a program "to assist new or recent Ph.D.'s in their first four years to become better, more thoughtful teachers and active members of the professional community of mathematicians." Funding would allow a significant fraction of the junior faculty within the state to participate if they so desired.

Under Bonnie's leadership, program co-organizers Mary Porter (St. Mary's College) and Kirk Weller (Bethel College) – Project NExT'ers themselves – prepared two workshops for participants and their mentors. The participants applied in response to a letter sent to each of the department chairs and MAA liaisons in Indiana. The 13 participants came from 10 different institutions and represented a majority of the new junior faculty in the section.

The first workshop was held on the Friday before the section's annual fall meeting. It was held at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology and consisted of several panel discussion sessions. The morning sessions, held without the mentors present, covered topics in emerging pedagogies and balancing responsibilities. After meeting their mentors at lunch, the afternoon sessions covered collaborative learning and assessment techniques. There was a colloquium presented by Laci Babai, the section's invited speaker, dinner, and a reception hosted by the Rose-Hulman faculty.

The second workshop was held in conjunction with the section's spring meeting, held at Franklin College. Embedded within the section program, the workshop consisted of a panel of three of the participants describing the experiences during the year, a session with two presenters, one

speaking on technology in abstract algebra and the other on undergraduate research. The participants and their mentors ate lunch together at designated tables.

A programming element that didn't work was an electronic discussion group. It was rarely used, probably because of the small number of participants and mentors and the ease, at the time, of using the state's SUVON system which enabled free long-distance calls between the universities and colleges in Indiana. Ten of these first participants eventually assumed leadership roles in the section and at their home institutions. Several followed up this program by participating in Project NExT; in 1999 there were 24 national Project NExT Fellows working in the section.

Project NExT-IN continued in this basic format until 2010, with new co-organizers being selected from former participants every two years. In 2010, Project-IN reorganized itself to be more integrated into the section meetings, largely because of the dwindling number of junior faculty being hired with in the state. It continues to thrive today.

Source material for this blog was obtained from documents within the "Project NExT-IN" folder, held at the MAA archives in the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas, Austin. That folder also includes the names of all of the participants, mentors, panelists, and speakers participating in 1996.