

October 10, 2011

Dear Colleagues,

I write to encourage discussion and comments among members of the AMS about the proposal under consideration by the National Science Foundation (NSF) that NSF's Division of Mathematical Sciences (DMS) be renamed the Division of Mathematical and Statistical Sciences. At the request of the NSF, I attach a letter from DMS Division Director Sastry Pantula advocating this name change; I also attach a particularly cogent response from a member of the AMS leadership.

Please send your views and comments to dmsname@ams.org
(The process to summarize comments is described below.)

Many of us strongly oppose this name change. Such a name change could create an unnecessary and unfortunate divide in the mathematical sciences community. We question whether this portends a shift within DMS away from support of basic research toward mission-oriented research. This could bring the less mathematical aspects of Statistics into the same funding pool as basic research in Mathematical Sciences, thereby negatively impacting resources available for basic research in the Mathematical Sciences, including basic research in Statistics.

While waiting for NSF approval to consult the broad mathematical community, I have discussed this personally with many mathematical scientists, including the leadership of the AMS. The responses I have received have been near-unanimous in their opposition to such a name change. It is significant that three previous DMS Division Directors Peter March, William Rundell, and Philippe Tondeur have written to express their opposition to this name change.

Permit me to give some reasons why such a name change is much more important than "just a name."

1. The mission of the NSF is to fund basic research. Much of mission-oriented Statistics is funded by other federal agencies, hospitals, industry, etc. This name change suggests a move within DMS to relax its focus on basic research.
2. The suggestion of "new resources to all core programs" is far different from any commitment to seek new resources to support the basic research of these programs.

3. The current name (Division of Mathematical Sciences) was crafted to be inclusive. The inclusiveness of DMS has resulted in increased funding for many programs including Statistics. The Mathematical Sciences should work together, emphasizing commonality and presenting the best case for the importance of the Mathematical Sciences.
4. Statistics is only one of 10 programs supported by DMS. In 2010, of the 2978 proposals submitted to DMS core programs, 242 were submitted to the Statistics program. It is natural to ask why Statistics appears to be uniquely selected by DMS for special emphasis.
5. The analysis of big data is indeed important, and the Mathematical Sciences will play an important role in developing fundamental concepts and approaches to manage the "data deluge" and extract useful content. That said, National Science Foundation support of the Mathematical Sciences should energetically embrace basic research in all aspects of the Mathematical Sciences to advance fundamental knowledge and initiate unexpected revolutionary applications.

I encourage you to send your views and comments to
dmsname@ams.org

Our plan is to have a small AMS committee review comments received, prepare a summary of comments (names of responders would be suppressed), give this summary to the NSF, and post this summary on the AMS web page. We are asked to provide the NSF with an initial summary by mid-December, so please respond by December 1 if possible. We also expect to have one or more forums at the Joint Mathematics Meeting in Boston in early January at which this name change will be discussed with NSF leaders.

Best,

Eric

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric M. Friedlander". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Eric" being the most prominent.

Eric M. Friedlander
(President, AMS)