

# MAA and Science Policy

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Many MAA members might not realize that MAA is involved in national science policy, but it is. Presenting a discipline's perspectives on research funding issues to national policy makers has long been an activity of professional organizations. See, for example, the governmental affairs sections of the web pages of American Institute of Physics, the American Chemical Society, the Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics, and the American Mathematical Society. But Washington decisions can also affect *undergraduate* mathematics, which is among MAA's most central interests. Consequently the jobs of the MAA President and the MAA Executive Director include presenting MAA policy perspectives on pending federal decisions with undergraduate ramifications.

Where do MAA's science policy positions come from? According to the MAA constitution, only the MAA President and Executive Director may speak for MAA on science policy issues. The Board of Governors can be influential in shaping MAA science policy, and the MAA also has a Science Policy Committee (SPC) whose charge is to assist the Association "in anticipating, responding to, and initiating changes in the educational, the financial, and the policy environments that may impact the work of the MAA and its members." (To see some of what SPC has traditionally done, go to the MAA home page ([www.maa.org](http://www.maa.org)) and then choose "Science and Professional Policy" within the "Special Groups" pull-down menu.)

The MAA President and Executive Director are both *ex officio* members of SPC and can seek committee advice whenever the need arises. For example, some years ago the SPC formulated talking points that the MAA President and Executive Director could use in case they were asked for comment on what seemed to be a controversial educational proposal from the White House. Perhaps the most important SPC action in recent years was to recommend that MAA engage the services of a professional government relations firm. The Board of Governors agreed, and the firm of Lewis-Burke Associates (LBA) was chosen.

Among LBA's first activities on behalf of MAA was to organize a two-day Washington meeting of the Science Policy Committee on March 22 and 23 of this year. The purpose of the meeting was to get SPC members to meet with congressional and executive branch officials, to present MAA's positions on several science funding issues in person. On Monday, March 22, the SPC met senior staff members of the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the goal being to prepare committee members for meetings with congressional staffers, scheduled on Tuesday.

Monday's meetings included extended discussions with David Radzanowski who is in charge of Science and Space Programs in the White House OMB; with Rosemary Haggett, Director of the NSF Division of Undergraduate Education; and with Bill Rundell, Director of the NSF Division of Mathematical Sciences. Both Joel Widder (of Lewis-Burke) and David Radzanowski (of OMB) made it clear that budget times will be very bleak in the near future. The NSF visitors briefed SPC on the programs in their directorates that contribute to undergraduate mathematical education. Both NSF visitors agreed with Radzanowski's prediction of lean budgets for the next few years and recently an important congressional appropriations subcommittee has proposed a 2% budget cut for NSF in the 2005 fiscal year, confirming Radzanowski's gloomy predictions. In addition, the SPC spent a considerable amount of time trying to understand the intricacies of an administration proposal to move NSF's Mathematics and Sciences

Partnerships (MSP) program from NSF to the Department of Education, where it would be consolidated with a second MSP program already in the Education Department. As explained below, the MAA opposes this proposed shift.

At the end of the day on Monday, SPC worked with Lewis-Burke Associates staff to formulate a page of talking points. Themes were taken from scheduled congressional testimony of MAA President Ron Graham (see pages 21-22 in the May/June 2004 issue of FOCUS) and reflected the day's conversations with NSF and OMB officials. A copy of the talking points page was left with each staff member visited on Tuesday and is available on the SPC website, mentioned above. The talking points focused on mathematics as a cornerstone of the nation's technical workforce preparation program, currently a hot issue in Washington. They urged Congress to reverse previous years' declines in the budget of the NSF Division of Undergraduate Education, one of two NSF divisions that support undergraduate mathematics, and called for increased support for the VIGRE and REU programs in the NSF Division of Mathematical Sciences because of their importance to undergraduate mathematics. The talking points also argued that the NSF Math and Sciences Partnership Program should *not* be shifted to the Department of Education, because, to quote President Graham's congressional testimony,

The MAA believes that if transferred to the Department [of Education], MSP funds will likely be distributed via block grants, which could spread the money too thinly to do any real good and which will, in all likelihood, result in much of the funding being redirected at the state level to programs outside the scope of MSP's original intent.

On Tuesday, after some SPC members visited the offices of their own senators and representatives, SPC met as a group with Jeff Smith who is the senior adviser to Senate Minority Leader Daschle on science policy; with Kara Haas and Jim Wilson from the staff of the House Science Committee; with Tracy Locklin of the Senate Health and Labor committee; and with Jennifer Miller of the House VA, HUD and Independent Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee. (In spite of its name, the Senate Health and Labor Committee is the authorizing committee for both the NSF and for the Department of Education, and the House VA, HUD and Independent Agencies Committee is the appropriations committee in charge of NSF.) With small variations, the message to each was (a) that, using relatively small expenditures, NSF has been very effective in focusing nation-wide efforts of college and university mathematicians on several important undergraduate issues and in fostering educational improvement in the U.S., and (b) that relatively small additional allocations in the 2005 budget (now in the planning stage) would yield a lot of "bang for the buck" in terms of enhancing the nation's scientific and technical workforce preparation effort. We had been warned that "Washington runs on anecdotes" and so we did our best to wrap our messages in stories from our personal experiences with undergraduates and undergraduate teaching.

Everyone with whom the SPC met was courteous and many were enthusiastic about the issues that we presented. While some SPC members had never visited the offices of a congressman or senator before, by the end of the day, all of us felt that presenting MAA's perspectives "on the Hill" was something we could confidently and comfortably do.

While members of SPC and the Lewis-Burke staff were pleased with the efforts launched in March 2004, all agreed that this cannot be a one-time effort. The multi-year task will be to build linkages with congressional staffers and federal agency program officials who will come to understand MAA's science policy positions, and to call upon MAA representatives for advice on issues related to undergraduate mathematical education. If you want to help in this effort, please contact MAA Secretary Martha Siegel ([msiegel@towson.edu](mailto:msiegel@towson.edu)) to volunteer for appointment to the SPC.

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