

# Avoiding Implicit Bias: Guidelines for MAA Selection Committees

*Prepared by the AWIS-MAA Joint Task Force on Prizes and Awards, August 2011*

*Approved by MAA Board of Governors, August 2012*

## Significance of awards<sup>1</sup>

The MAA gives awards to mathematicians to recognize excellence in teaching, writing, scholarship and service. Award recipients are regarded as role models and leaders, so it is important that the award selection process recognize the achievements of a diverse group that reflects the breadth of the Association membership and of the profession. Diversity in award recognition gives visible evidence of the Association's commitment to equity. While selection committees strive for fairness in selecting awards based on established criteria, studies have shown that unconscious, unintentional assumptions can sometimes influence judgment---this is the problem of *implicit bias*. For instance, data<sup>2</sup> gathered across many professional societies show that women do not receive recognition at a rate commensurate with their numbers in the profession. While the reasons are unclear and deserve further study, implicit bias may be one possible factor. The following guidelines may help awards committees avoid implicit bias.

## Composing committees

**Appoint diverse selection committees and committee chairs.** Diverse committees provide access to a wider set of networks from which to cultivate nominations. Committee members and chairs from underrepresented groups may cushion against unintentional stereotyping.

## Cultivating nominations

**Generate a large and diverse pool of nominees.** Awards are selected based on established criteria, so this step is crucial to ensuring that the pool of nominees contains as many eligible candidates as possible (especially those whose work is outstanding but less well-known). Where the list of possible nominees for awards is not constrained to a relatively small group (as in a set of articles appearing in a specified journal), Award Committees should invite nominations for awards with notification of their deliberations in *FOCUS* and on the MAA website.

---

(continued on p.2)

<sup>1</sup> Note: While these *Guidelines* were developed in the context of prizes and awards, they will be helpful to virtually every MAA committee, at the Section as well as the Association level. Committees are urged to keep these practices in mind as they choose invited speakers, make nominations for teaching awards, suggest new members for their committees, and undertake many other tasks.

<sup>2</sup> Data compiled by the Association for Women in Science show that for the years 1991-2009, approximately 18% of the recipients of MAA prizes and awards were women, compared to approximately 28% of doctoral faculty who are women (2008 Annual Survey of the Mathematical Sciences). Closer analysis shows that women are more likely to receive MAA awards for teaching (32%) or service (25%) than for writing (10%) or as a named lecturer (20%).

When appropriate, committees should also consider including a call for nominations in electronic newsletters for MAA liaisons, using existing listservs (e.g., SIGMAAs and Project NExT), and other ways to generate nominations.

Increasing awareness of the award among *all* MAA members has the side benefit of increasing interest in the award and making the selection process more transparent and inclusive.

**Publicize the award among underrepresented groups.** When appropriate, encourage such groups to make nominations (e.g., AWM, the Committee on the Participation of Women, NAM, SACNAS, as well as institutions that are exemplary in their support of women and minorities).

**Periodically review and discuss practices for building a pool of nominees.** Examine lists of nominees, short-lists of nominees, and award recipients for historical patterns with an eye towards gender or other under-represented groups.

**Periodically review the description and guidelines for the award.** Particular attention should be paid to the language used to describe the award---e.g., are the words used associated more often with males than females?---as well as restrictions that could disproportionately affect certain groups---e.g., do age limits affect women who take time off to raise a family? For suggested changes, make recommendations to the Council on Prizes and Awards.

## Selecting recipients

**Discuss the process and criteria that will be used to evaluate nominees *before reviewing nominations*.** Develop a rubric that matches published criteria for the award. Research has shown that implicit bias can enter via unintentional “criteria-shifting” after nominees are discussed.

**Make a personal list of top nominees *before hearing the recommendations of any other members*.** This avoids the undue influence of one member and ensures that the list of viable nominees is as large as possible before discussion begins.

**Create short lists via *inclusive rather than exclusive methods*.** For instance, select candidates that are outstanding, rather than finding reasons to eliminate candidates from consideration.

**Ensure that every committee member’s voice is heard.** Do not let any committee members remain silent.

**Take adequate time to make a decision.** Research has shown implicit bias is mitigated when committees have time for thoughtful reflection and discussion, instead of making snap judgments.

**Avoid potential conflicts of interest.** Often candidates for awards are so well-known that associations with selection committee members are unavoidable. In all discussions, members should make clear any connection they may have with a person under consideration for an award, and recuse themselves if appropriate.

Committee members are expected to abide by the MAA Conflict of Interest Policy as described on the MAA website.