

MASS Program at Penn State

Anatole Katok, Svetlana Katok, and Serge Tabachnikov

This column is a forum for discussion of mathematical communities throughout the world, and through all time. Our definition of "mathematical community" is the broadest. We include "schools" of mathematics, circles of correspondence, mathematical societies, student organizations, and informal communities of cardinality greater than one. What we say about the communities is just as unrestricted. We welcome contributions from mathematicians of all kinds and in all places, and also from scientists, historians, anthropologists, and others.

Please send all submissions to the Mathematical Communities Editor, **Marjorie Senechal**, Department of Mathematics, Smith College, Northampton, MA 01063 USA
e-mail: senechal@minkowski.smith.edu

The MASS program—Mathematics Advanced Study Semesters—is an intensive program for undergraduate students recruited every year from around the USA and brought to the Penn State campus for one semester. MASS belongs to a rare breed; we know of two somewhat similar mathematics programs for American undergraduates, both based abroad: Budapest Semesters in Mathematics, and Mathematics in Moscow; the former is in its "teens" (started in 1985) while the latter is just 1 year old. MASS at Penn State has turned 6, and this seems to be a good time to reflect on the MASS community.

How It Started

All three founders of the MASS program (the first two authors of this article and the first MASS director, A. Kouchnirenko) are steeped in the Russian tradition where interested students are exposed to a variety of mathematical endeavors, often of nonstandard kind, at an early age. By their senior undergraduate years such students are already budding professionals. We briefly describe this tradition in the Appendix. The US educational system is built on completely different principles, and interested young students are routinely encouraged to progress quickly through the required curriculum. Here a typical mathematically gifted high school student takes courses in a local university and often is considered a nerd by his peers. The founders felt that there was a way to combine some of the best features of both traditions within the US academic environment, namely, to gather a group of mathematics majors and to expose them to a substantial amount of interesting and challenging mathematics from the core fields of algebra, geometry, and analysis, going way beyond the usual curriculum.

The second author's first exposure to an intensive program for US undergraduates was at the Mills College

Summer Mathematics Institute for mathematically gifted undergraduate women. But why not a co-educational program along the same lines, whose participants would contribute a variety of experiences and backgrounds? The number of undergraduate students in the USA, interested in mathematics and advanced enough for such a program, is rather limited, and we decided not to restrict the pool of potential participants. The result was the SURI (Summer Undergraduate Research Initiative) program at Penn State in the summer of 1993, where all three future founders of the MASS program came together. During this program it became clear that a semester-long format would be even more productive for an intensive program organized mostly around advanced learning with elements of research initiation.

And so we envisioned a semester-long program for undergraduate students from across the country. We thought it crucial for the success of the program that the cost for the participants should not exceed that at their home universities. It took 3 years to get the original financial commitment from the Penn State administration at various levels and to solve numerous logistic problems before the MASS program could begin.

Program Description

The main idea of the MASS Program, and its principal difference from various honors programs, math clubs, and summer educational or research programs, is its comprehensive character. MASS participants are immersed in mathematical studies: since the program is intensive, its full-time participants are not supposed to take other classes. All academic activities for a semester are specially designed and coordinated to enhance learning and introduce the students to research in mathematics. This produces a quantum leap effect: the achievement and enthusiasm of MASS students increases

much more sharply than if they had been exposed to a similar amount of material over a longer time in a more conventional environment.

A key feature of the MASS experience is an intense and productive interaction among the students. The environment is designed to encourage such interaction: a classroom is in full possession of MASS (quite non-trivial to arrange in a large school such as Penn State!) and furnished to serve as a lounge and a computer lab outside of class times. Each student has a key and can enter the room 24 hours a day. The students live together in a contiguous block of dormitory rooms and they pursue various social activities together. The effect is dramatic: the students find themselves members of a cohesive group of like-minded people sharing a special formative experience. They quickly bond, and often remain friends after the program is over. They study together, attack problems together, debug programs together, collaborate on research projects, and,

most importantly, talk mathematics most of the time. Of course, this is exactly how “mature” mathematicians operate in their professional life! A necessary condition for this environment is the gathering of a critical mass of dedicated and talented students, which is one of the chief accomplishments of MASS.

Let us describe the main components of MASS:

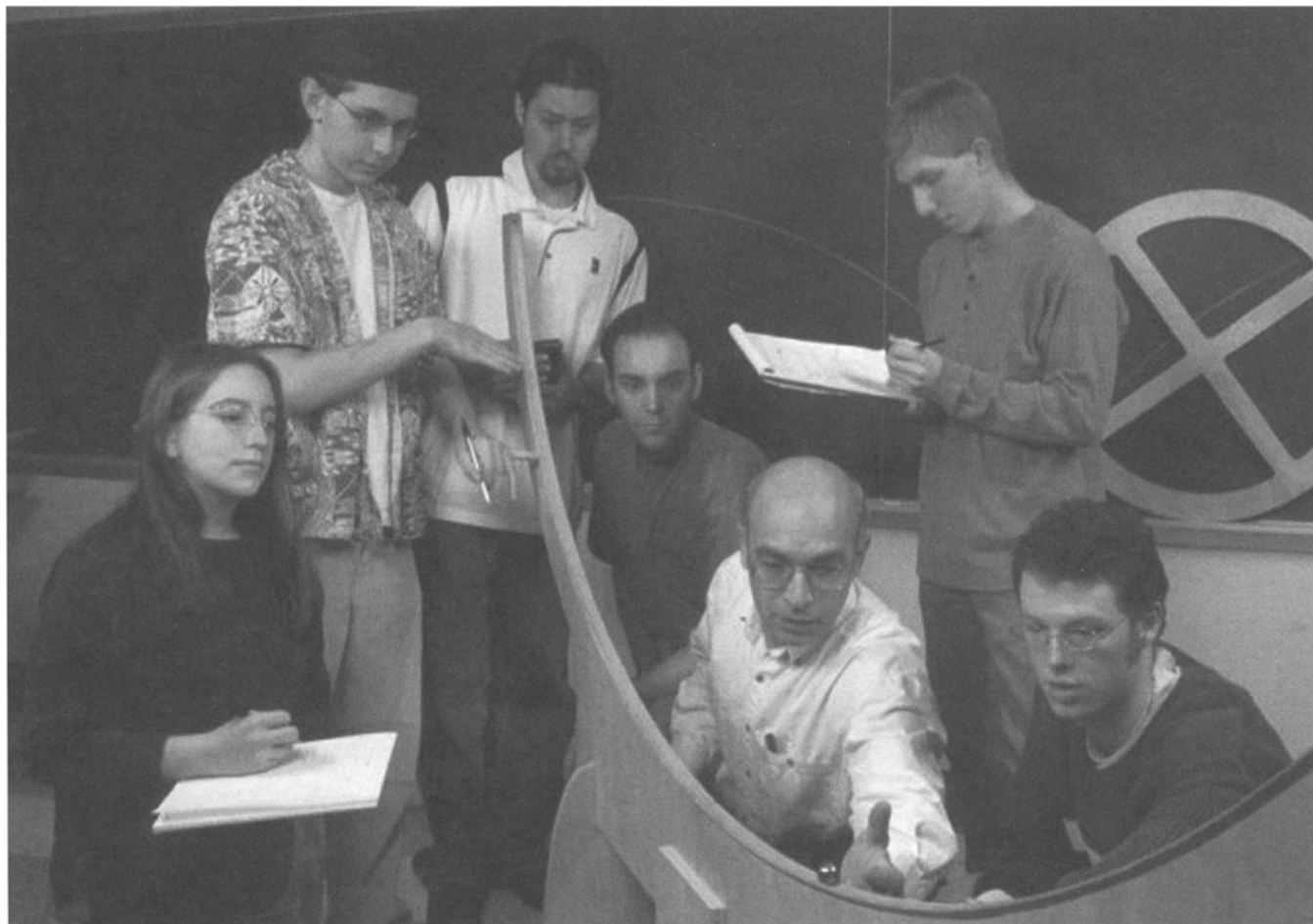
- Three **core courses** on topics chosen from the areas of Analysis, Algebra/Number Theory, and Geometry/Topology. Each course features three 1-hour lectures per week, a weekly meeting conducted by a MASS Teaching Assistant, weekly homework assignments, a written midterm exam, and an oral final examination/presentation.
- Individual student **research projects** ranging from theoretical mathematics to computer implementation. Most of the projects are related to the core courses; some are devel-

oped independently according to the interests and abilities of the student.

- A weekly 2-hour **interdisciplinary seminar** run by the director of the MASS program (the third author of this article), which helps to unify all other activities.
- The **MASS colloquium**, a weekly lecture series by distinguished mathematicians, visitors, or Penn State research faculty.

All elements of MASS (3 courses, the seminar, and the colloquium) total 16 credit hours, all listed as Honors classes that are transferable to MASS participants' home universities. Additional recognition is provided through prizes for best projects and merit fellowships. Each student is issued a Supplement to the MASS Certificate, which includes the list of MASS courses with credits, grades, final presentations, and special achievements. It also includes the descriptions of MASS courses, the list of MASS colloquia, and the description of MASS program exams.

photo © S. Katok



These supplements are useful for the student's home institution equivalencies and enhance the student's applications to graduate schools.

The core courses are custom designed for the program and are available only to its participants. Each course addresses a fundamental topic which is not likely to be covered in the usual undergraduate (and, in many cases, even graduate) curriculum. For example, the core courses offered at MASS 2001 were

Mathematical Analysis of Fluid Flow by A. Belmonte, *Theory of Partitions* by G. Andrews, and *Geometry and Relativity: An Introduction* by N. Higson.

Designing and teaching such a course, an instructor is challenged to reach a delicate balance between covering the basics, with which the students might be unfamiliar, and introducing advanced material typically taught in topics courses.

Consider, for example, a MASS 2000 course *Finite Groups, Symmetry, and Elements of Group Representations* by A. Ocneanu. This class started with

fundamental facts about finite groups and their representations and proceeded to what is often referred to as "quantum topology": invariants of knots and 3-dimensional manifolds associated with statistical physics and

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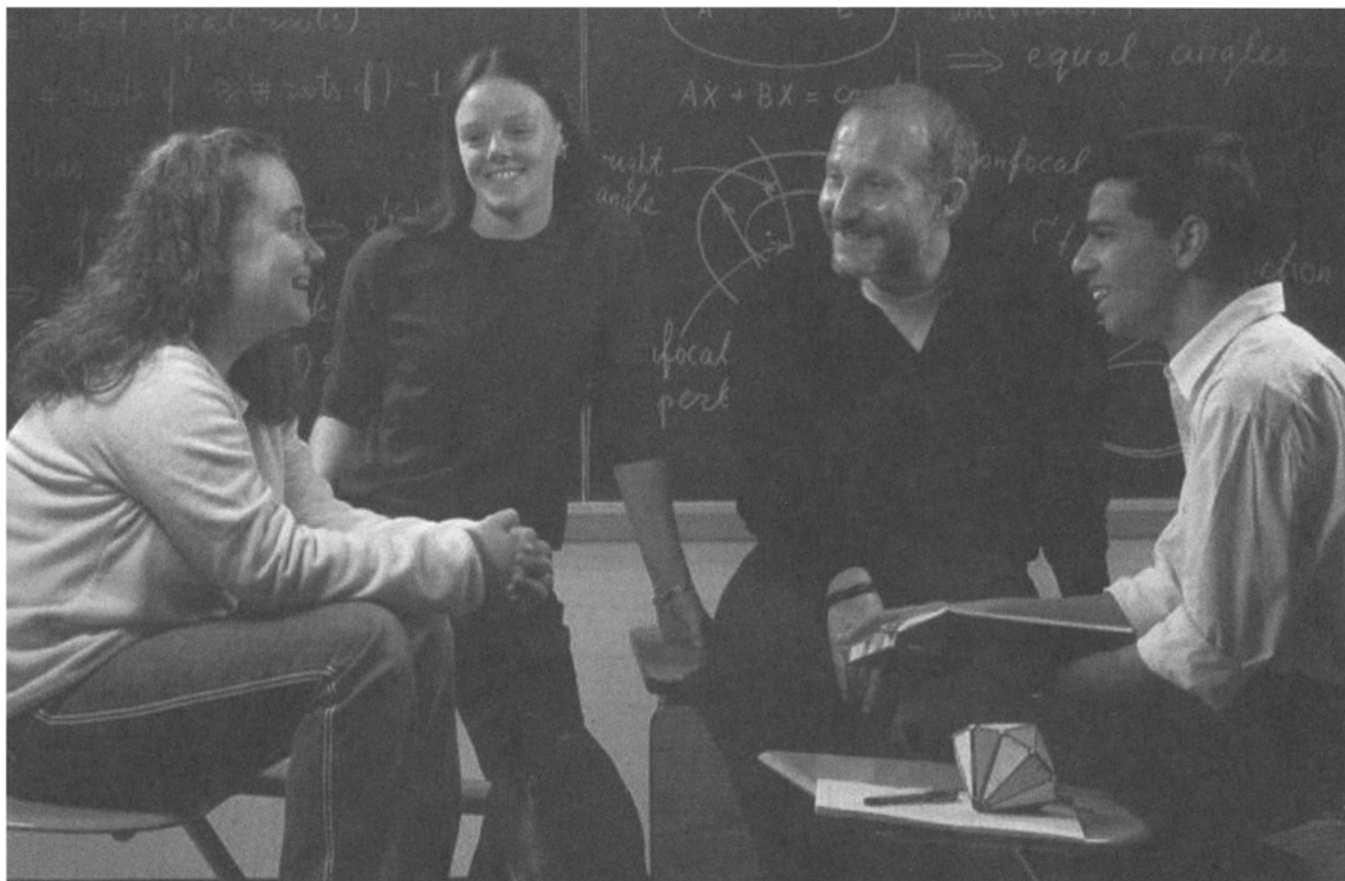
the Yang-Baxter equation. The course was received by the students with great enthusiasm and is likely to direct some of them toward this active area of research.

The final exams (three, in total) have a unique format. It is quite unusual for a US university and represents a creative development of a European tradition where examinations are often oral. A student draws a random "ticket" which typically contains a theoretical

question from the course and a problem. Then the student has an hour to prepare the answers, with no access to literature or lecture notes during this hour. The answers to the ticket questions constitute only about a third of the oral examination. Another third is a presentation of the research project associated with the course; this presentation is prepared in advance and may involve slides, computer, etc. The last third of the exam is a discussion with the committee of three (the course instructor, the teaching assistant, and another Penn State faculty).

A MASS colloquium is similar to a usual colloquium at a department of mathematics, with an important difference: a speaker cannot assume much background material. Although this makes the speaker's task harder, we find that the quality of the talks usually benefits from this restriction. To quote the opening sentences of an inspiring article by J. McCarthy "How to give a good colloquium" (see at www.math.psu.edu/colloquium/goodcoll.pdf): "Most colloquia are bad. They are too technical and aimed at too specialized

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an audience.” This is precisely a sin that MASS colloquium is free of. As a result, along with MASS students, it is well attended by graduate students and faculty at the Department.

To preserve the intellectual effort that goes into MASS colloquium talks, a group of 2 or 3 MASS students is assigned to take notes and prepare a readable exposition of the talk. We also experiment with videotaping the talks.

Choosing the speakers, we always invite mathematicians known for their expository skills. We also try to represent as broad a spectrum of mathematical research as possible. We find it beneficial to combine very well-known mathematicians with those in the early stage of their careers. A complete list of MASS colloquium talks can be found on the web site www.math.psu.edu/mass.

The MASS seminar plays many roles in the program. One of them is to introduce the students to the topics that, otherwise, are likely to “fall between cracks in the floor.” For example, one of the seminar topics in 2001 was the classical configuration theorems of projective geometry: Pappus, Desargues, Pascal, Brianchon, and Poncelet. Once projective geometry was a core subject in the university curriculum, but nowadays it is perfectly possible to obtain a doctoral degree in mathematics without a single encounter with these facts. Another example: the theory of evolutes and involutes was a crowning achievement of Calculus to be included into textbooks. Alas, a contemporary student is not likely to see these things any more. The MASS seminar is a natural place to learn such a topic.

Another purpose of the seminar is to prepare the students for the upcoming MASS colloquium talks. A colloquium speaker is asked whether certain material should be covered in advance so that the students get the most from the talk. For example, as preparation for A. Kirillov’s talk on Family Algebras in 2001, a 2-hour seminar was devoted to the basics of Lie groups and Lie algebras. Still another function of the seminar is to rehearse the students’ presentations of the research projects on the final exam. This usually occupies the last quarter of the semester. Probably an even more im-

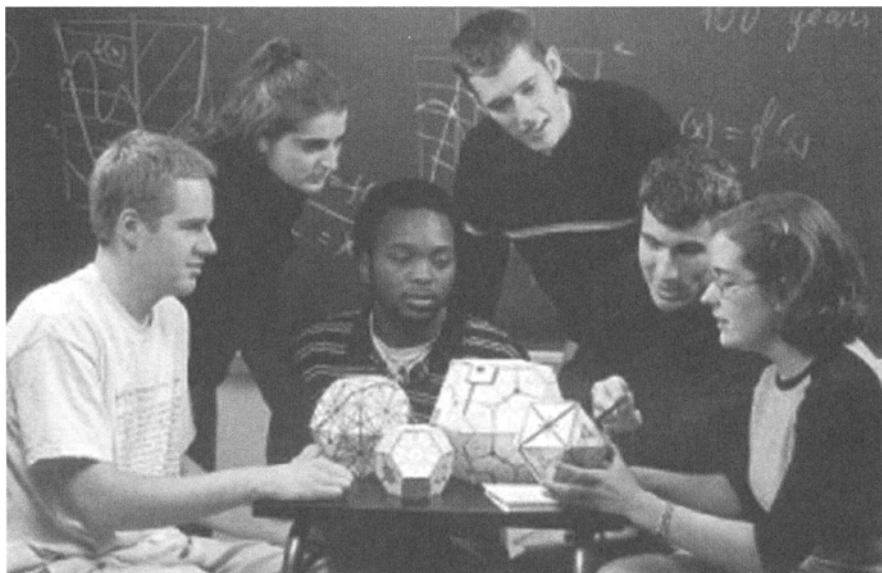


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portant function of the seminar is to bring out elements of unity of modern mathematics. Often identical or similar notions appear in different courses in various guises, and the seminar is the place to explore, develop, and clarify these connections.

The Summer Program: REU and MASS Fest

The Penn State Summer REU (Research Experiences for Undergraduates) program started in 1999 as an extension of MASS. Unlike MASS, this program is not unique: currently, there are about 50 REU programs in mathematics available to undergraduate students in the USA. The Penn State REU is closely related to MASS: about half of its participants stay for the MASS semester in the fall. This makes it possible to offer research projects that require more than 7 weeks (the length of REU program) for completion.

Mathematical research usually includes three components: study of the subject, solving of a problem, and presentation of the result. These three components are present in the REU program: in addition to the traditional individual/small group research projects supervised by faculty members, the program includes two short courses, a weekly seminar, and the MASS Fest.

MASS Fest is a 3-day conference at the end of the REU period at which the participants present their research. This is also a MASS alumni reunion. Along with the REU students, a num-

ber of guest speakers, mostly Penn State faculty, give expository talks at the conference.

Here are two examples of REU students’ research projects.

“Simplexes with only one integer point” (2 students; faculty mentor A. Borisov). The students found an effective procedure that allows them to describe all classes of simplexes with vertices that have only integer coordinates and only one point with integer coordinates inside. Using computers they found all classes in dimensions 3 and 4.

“New congruences for the partition function” (1 student; faculty mentor K. Ono). This project started before the REU program began. Using the theory of Hecke operators for modular forms of half-integral weight, the student found an algorithm for primes $13 \leq m \leq 31$ which reveals 70,266 new congruences of the form $p(An + B) \equiv 0 \pmod{m}$, where $p(n)$ denotes the number of unrestricted partitions of a non-negative integer n . As an example, she proved that $p(3828498973n + 1217716) \equiv 0 \pmod{13}$ for every integer n . The first three congruences were found in 1919 by Ramanujan, and after that finding new ones was considered a very difficult problem. The paper written by this student has been accepted for publication.

We would like to emphasize a unique role played by the REU coordinator, M. Guysinsky, who has been coming to Penn State for the summer since 1999

as a visiting Assistant Professor supported by VIGRE funds.¹ He organizes all the REU activities, including MASS Fest, runs the seminar, and supervises research projects, some suggested by other faculty not present during the REU period, and some by him. This requires an unusual combination of mathematical and pedagogical talents, and we are very fortunate to have found this combination in Guysinsky.

Participants

MASS participants are selected from applicants currently enrolled in US colleges or universities who are juniors, seniors, or sometimes sophomores. They are expected to have demonstrated a sustained interest in mathematics and a high level of mathematical ability. The required background includes a full calculus sequence, basic linear algebra, and advanced calculus or basic real analysis. The search for participants is nationwide. Participants are selected based on academic record, recommendation letters from faculty, and an essay.

The number of MASS participants varies from year to year, with an average of 15 per semester. Some are Penn State students, but most are outsiders. It is interesting to analyze where they come from. For this purpose we divide American universities into four categories: (1) small, mostly liberal arts, schools; (2) state universities (mostly large); (3) elite private universities; (4) Penn State. The breakdown over the last 6 years is as follows: about 20% of the participants belong to the first category, about 40% to the second, only 3% to the third, and 37% to the fourth. One should take into account that some Penn State students are part-time participants (they take one or two courses), but a few of them participate in MASS more than once.

These numbers are probably not very surprising (although we strongly feel even students from elite schools benefit significantly from the program). Another statistic: women represented about 30% of the enrollment (with considerable deviations: in 2000, the ratio was 50/50).

About 70% of MASS graduates have gone on to graduate programs in mathematics (one should keep in mind that some recent participants are still continuing their undergraduate studies). The distribution of the graduate schools is very wide. Without providing a comprehensive listing, we mention some: Harvard, Cornell, Stanford, Princeton, Yale, University of Chicago, University of Michigan, University of California at Berkeley, University of Wisconsin, Indiana University, University of Utah, University of Georgia. About 15% of MASS graduates chose Penn State for graduate school.

Here is what Suzanne Lynch, a MASS 96 participant who is about to receive her Ph.D. from Cornell, wrote in an unsolicited letter:

The MASS program has been the best semester of my life. I was immersed in an environment of bright motivated students and professors and challenged as never before. I was pushed by instructors, fellow-students, and something deep inside myself to work and learn about mathematics, and my place in the mathematical world. I loved my time there, and never wanted to leave. I believe the MASS program helped to prepare me for the rigors of graduate school, academically and emotionally. . . . The MASS program has been very instrumental in opening grad school doors to me, and in giving me the courage to walk through them.

Talking of MASS participants, one must mention the teaching assistants involved. TAs are chosen from among the most accomplished Ph.D. students of the Penn State Department of Mathematics. Their work is demanding but also rewarding. TAs are required to sit in the respective class and take notes; once a week they have a 1-hour meeting with the students that is devoted to problem-solving, project discussion and, sometimes, individual tutoring. In some cases the material of a MASS course may be new for the TA as well as the students. This gives the assistant a welcome opportunity to learn a new

topic but makes the work even more challenging. Some MASS TAs are themselves MASS graduates.

Student Research

During the semester, each MASS participant works on three individual projects. Usually a project consists in learning a certain topic in depth, working on problems (ranging from routine exercises to research problems, usually related to the subject of the respective course), and making a presentation during the final examination. For many MASS participants who also attend the REU program, a project is a continuation of one started in summer.

In some cases, a research project produced a significant piece of mathematical research. Here are two examples:

An Nguyen, a MASS 96 student and now a graduate student in Computer Science at Stanford, rediscovered the famous value of $\lambda = 1 + \sqrt{8}$ for the appearance of period-three orbits in the logistic family $f(x, \lambda) = \lambda x(1 - x)$, and then went on to discover a previously unknown bifurcation point where the second period-four orbit appears:

$$\lambda = 1 + \sqrt{4 + {}^3\sqrt{108}}.$$

James Kelley, a MASS 98 participant, now a graduate student at UC Berkeley, studied the representation of integers by quadratic forms, a classical problem in number theory. In particular, he studied a well-known problem posed by Irving Kaplansky: What integers are of the form $x^2 + y^2 + 7z^2$ where x , y , and z are integers? Obviously, if N is of this form, then so is Nk^2 . However, the converse is not necessarily true. James proved, using the theory of elliptic curves and modular forms, that every “eligible” integer N which is not a multiple of 7 and not of this form, is square-free! This result has appeared in print: J. Kelley, “Kaplansky’s ternary quadratic form,” *Int. J. Math. Sci.* 25 (2001), 289–292.

The research project topics may be related to the student’s major, different from mathematics. For example, a biology major in the 2001 course “Mathe-

¹VIGRE: Grants for Vertical Integration of Research and Education, a program designed to promote educational experiences of undergraduate and graduate students in the context of ongoing mathematical research within the university.

mathematical analysis of fluid flow” has a research project “A mathematical analysis of fluid flow through the urinary system.”

MASS students present their research projects at the Undergraduate Student Poster Sessions at the January AMS/MAA joint meetings. For example, N. Salvaterra and B. Wickman (REU and MASS 1999) were among the winners in Washington, DC, January 2000, with the poster “The Growth of Generalized Diagonals in a Polygonal Billiard” (advisors: A. Katok and M. Guysinsky). Another example: B. Chan (REU and MASS 2000) was a winner in New Orleans, January 2001, with the poster “Estimation of the Period of a Simple Continued Fraction” (advisors: R. Vaughan and M. Guysinsky).

Funding

MASS is jointly funded by Penn State and the National Science Foundation. Penn State provides fellowships for out-of-state students that reduce their tuition to the in-state level. Further support comes through the NSF VIGRE grant. In particular, MASS participants whose tuition in their home institution is lower than Penn State in-state tuition receive grants for the difference. The balance of the VIGRE funds are used to further decrease out-of-pocket expenses of the participants, and is distributed individually based on merit and need. In particular, several merit fellowships are awarded at the end of the MASS semester. The VIGRE grant also supports the MASS colloquium series by covering the speakers’ travel expenses.

Perspectives

We are confident that MASS will continue to grow. Here are some ideas for the program’s future.

- One of the key issues is funding. We hope to attract private money to complement the current NSF support of the program. There is a considerable interest in mathematics among private and corporate donors, and the contribution of the MASS program to undergraduate mathematics education is substantial. Ideally, we would like to see the whole program endowed.
- We envision a larger, 2-level MASS

program that runs two consecutive semesters: one oriented toward freshmen and sophomores, the other, more advanced, for juniors and seniors.

- With a broader financial base, MASS could include a certain number of foreign students. The available NSF funds can support only US citizens and permanent residents. However, there is an interest in the program among foreign students attending American universities, and a few such students have attended MASS paying from their own funds. As a first step, we would like to extend the program to undergraduates in Canada.
- An important issue is preservation of MASS materials. Each MASS core course developed for the program can be used elsewhere. We envision an ongoing series of small books containing course material in a lecture notes style, detailed enough to serve as guidelines for a qualified instructor to design a similar course. As a first step, we are preparing a MASS presentation volume that will be published by the American Mathematical Society. This book will present all components of the program (core courses, REU courses, MASS colloquia, students’ research), and it will appear late in 2002 or early in 2003. We also hope to record MASS colloquium talks and make them available to the public, possibly online, in the MSRI style.

Our optimism about the future of MASS is based on the enthusiasm of the students, instructors, and TAs, and on the general public interest in improving the mathematical education in the USA.

Appendix: On the Russian Tradition of Mathematical Education

Russian mathematics constitutes one of the most vital and brilliant mathematical traditions of the 20th century. Mathematicians trained in Russia are very well represented in the top echelon of the world mathematical community. Behind this flourishing stands a powerful tradition of spotting and training mathematical talent, which is

not without its downside. The subject is certainly too complex for a detailed discussion, but we will try to present a brief outline.

A typical path of a mathematically talented student would start rather early. It would include participation in mathematical olympiads of various levels, from school district to the all-Union one (the first Mathematical Olympiad in the Soviet Union was held in Leningrad in 1934, and Moscow followed suit the next year; the first all-Union Olympiad took place in 1961). Another activity for an interested school student was a *kruzhok* (literally, “circle”; a closer English equivalent is probably “workshop”); *kruzhki* also appeared in the mid-1930s. They usually met at the university once a week in the evening and were run by dedicated undergraduate or graduate students with a tremendous enthusiasm for mathematics, very often themselves alumni of a *kruzhok*—a good example of “vertical integration”! The material discussed usually went well beyond the secondary school curriculum and included challenging problems and nonstandard topics from elementary to higher mathematics.

Beginning in the early 1960s, special high schools for mathematics and physics were organized in major cities. Many benefited from the help of the local university faculty; for example, E. B. Dynkin and I. M. Gelfand played a prominent role in running the legendary Moscow School No. 2, whose many alumni are now professors of mathematics in universities across the globe. Another well-known high school, the Boarding School for Mathematics No. 18 at Moscow State University, was established by A. N. Kolmogorov. Unlike other mathematical schools in Moscow which essentially sprang from private initiative and had no special funding, this school was a special institution affiliated with the university and specially funded by the state. Still other celebrated Moscow schools for mathematics were No. 7, No. 57 and No. 444 (the second and third authors are alumni of these schools, No. 7 and 2, respectively, and the first and the third authors taught in School No. 2). The mathematics curriculum of a special school was more in-

tensive and systematic than that of the *kruzhki*, and this influenced our thinking about the structure of the MASS program.

An essential part of the tradition was the participation of prominent mathematicians of various ages in teaching and popularizing mathematics. A typical example is the magazine *Kvant* (meaning “Quantum”) on physics and mathematics for school students published since 1970. *Kvant* had 12 issues a year and, at the peak of its popularity in the mid-1970s, boasted more than 300,000 subscribers. Among the authors were well-known mathematicians A. D. Alexandrov, V. I. Arnold, D. B. Fuchs, I. M. Gelfand, S. G. Gindikin, A. A. Kirillov, A. N. Kolmogorov, M. G. Krein, Yu. V. Matiyasevich, S. P. Novikov, and L. S. Pontryagin, among many others. For many generations of students, *Kvant* opened new horizons and determined their choice of mathematics as a pro-

fession. Along with *Kvant*, there was a rich popular literature; numerous collections of problems for all ages, and books on various topics in “serious” mathematics. We would like to mention some people who made a very substantial contribution to popularization of mathematics: N. B. Vasiliev, N. Ya. Vilenkin, I. M. Yaglom. The third author of this article was for a number of years the Head of *Kvant’s* Mathematics Department.

At the university level, the emphasis on creative thinking continued, sometimes to the detriment of systematic learning. For example, the standard mandatory courses often did not fully reflect the most current thinking in their subjects, and were looked down on by the top students. A very important role was played by topics courses, offered in a wide variety of subjects and attended by a mixture of undergraduate and graduate students. Similarly, specialized

seminars were usually attended by a mix of undergraduates, graduates, and established mathematicians. Starting from the third year of the university, every student had an advisor and was considered a member of a research community in his or her field. It was not unusual for the best undergraduate students at major universities to have papers published in first-rate research journals by the end of their 5 years of undergraduate studies.

This system had multiple effects. On the one hand, it stimulated early development of research interests and mathematical precocity. On the other hand, it often led to inflated standards and expectations, and eventually to a great waste of talent. A student with considerable talent but not very high self-esteem might be crushed by the system. Still, it succeeded spectacularly in producing creative and technically powerful mathematicians.

AUTHORS



ANATOLE KATOK

Department of Mathematics
 Pennsylvania State University
 University Park, PA 16802
 USA

e-mail: katok_a@math.psu.edu



SVETLANA KATOK

Department of Mathematics
 Pennsylvania State University
 University Park, PA 16802
 USA

e-mail: katok_s@math.psu.edu



SERGE TABACHNIKOV

Department of Mathematics
 Pennsylvania State University
 University Park, PA 16802
 USA

e-mail: tabachni@math.psu.edu

Anatole Katok was educated in the “Moscow mathematical school,” as were his co-authors; A.N. Kolmogorov was referee of his doctoral thesis. After immigrating in 1978 to the United States (the country of his birth), he taught at Maryland and Caltech before coming in 1990 to Penn State. Among his numerous publications are two books with his former student Boris Hasselblatt: *Introduction to the Modern Theory of Dynamical Systems* and the forthcoming *The First Course in Dynamics with a Panorama of Recent Developments*.

Svetlana Katok (daughter of B.A. Rosenfeld, a “grand old man” of Moscow geometry) immigrated to the United States in 1978 with her husband and children, and got her Ph.D. in 1983 at the University of Maryland. Her research is on automorphic forms, dynamical systems, and hyperbolic geometry. She is author of *Fuchsian Groups* and (jointly with A. Katok) of the article “Women in Soviet Mathematics,” *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* 40 (1993), 108–116.

Serge Tabachnikov wrote his thesis (1987) at Moscow State University on differential topology and homological algebra. Later his interests shifted to symplectic geometry and Hamiltonian dynamics, as reflected in his book *Billiards*. Before coming to Penn State he taught at the University of Arkansas.