

## One Day as Washington Lobbyists

By Jason L. Haun, Kelly A. Peck and Richard B. Thompson

This year the MAA sponsored the University of Arizona's *Mathematics for Business Decisions* project on a tour of congressional offices and at the CNSF Exhibition and Reception. On June 17, 2003 we spent a fascinating day as Washington lobbyists for the mathematical community for both research and education. Those of us participating found it to be a surprisingly rewarding day. More than lobbying, we were sharing very important information with members of Congress. And yes, seeing how government works was fascinating. Our preparation for promoting National Science Foundation funding and our observations from Washington may offer some insights into the mechanics of gaining support for mathematics.

The **Coalition for National Science Funding** (CNSF) is an alliance of universities and major professional societies from many areas of science, mathematics, and engineering. Its purpose is to encourage funding for the National Science Foundation. A major part of this endeavor is an annual exhibition and reception for members of Congress and their staff. Each coalition member may present a project that has received NSF support. Each year the MAA sponsors a project that highlights funding for undergraduate mathematics education and provides additional support for the reception.

This year the MAA chose us and the *Mathematics for Business Decisions* course to be their exhibitors. The course was developed by myself, Richard Thompson, of the University of Arizona Department of Math, along with my colleague Chris Lamoureux of the University of Arizona Department of Finance. Jason Haun and Kelly Peck are students who have been through the course. Each was very excited to be invited



Thompson, Kolbe, Haun, & Peck

to join me on this trip to Washington, D.C.

*Mathematics for Business Decisions* is a two-semester sequence of mathematics courses for undergraduate business majors that has been developed at the University of Arizona, with partial support from the NSF. It is now published and distributed by the MAA as self-contained electronic texts. The MAA chose this



Albers, Straley, Thompson, Haun, & Peck

project for its innovation in both content and delivery and its ready appeal to the public.

In Washington, we were escorted by Tina Straley, Executive Director of the MAA, on half-hour visits to the offices of five congressmen from the Arizona delegation. In the evening the MAA's Associate Executive Director, Don Albers, helped us set up a display booth at an exhibition and reception in the Rayburn Office Building. It was one of 30 pre-

sentations that were viewed by over 270 attendees from House, Senate, and White House offices. The MAA exhibit attracted one of the most important guests to the exhibit: Congressman Jim Kolbe (R, Tucson), who is a member of the House Appropriations Committee. Representative Kolbe came especially to meet with us, as he had promised he would.

As a mathematician and co-author of *Mathematics for Business Decisions*, I prepared materials for our exhibit and invited two of our students, Kelly Peck and Jason Haun, to join me on the

trip.

We wanted our exhibit to make a good impression. The MAA supported travel and the distribution of CD's and color brochures, and The University of Arizona supported the production of a 4' x 6' laminated color display poster. The MAA rented a 37" plasma video monitor as part of their exhibit space. In the intense competition for Washington dollars, a low quality presentation is perceived as reflecting the value of the cause that it promotes. People were notably impressed with the professional appearance of our materials.

Congressmen and their staffers really do care about young people and students. Comments by Jason and Kelly held people's attention during both the office visits and at the exhibition. A copy of a course project report by Kelly commanded more interest than did some of our descriptive material. In fact, our only copy of the report went home with Representative Kolbe since we did not really want to ask him to give it back. The follow-up e-mails that I have received all mention the outstanding quality of our students. It is, of course, possible that this favorable impression is related to the fact that I managed to invite two outstanding, articulate young people!

Our scheduled office visits all had the same format. Tina Straley would thank the congressman for past NSF support

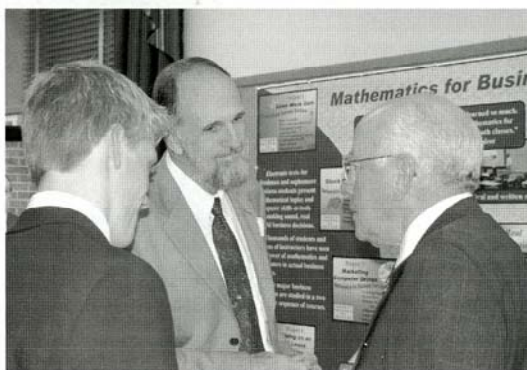


and ask for continued support, especially for the effort to double NSF's budget over a five-year period. She explained that The University of Arizona project that the MAA was presenting represented one type of work that had received funding. She suggested that Congress might not be as familiar with funding for undergraduate education as it is with research dollars. I would then give a brief explanation of the e-texts, and ask the students for their reactions to the program.

On most occasions when I discuss our project I am talking to other mathematicians who share my background in, and appreciation of, mathematics. In short, I am usually preaching to the choir. Public officials cannot be assumed to share our views of mathematics.

My approach to congressmen was based on the assumptions that they care about students in their home districts, that they want a work force which is competitive in the world market, and that they see technology as a key to the future. Reflecting these, I mentioned that *Mathematics for Business Decisions* is built around the topics, project structure, teamwork, and computer skills that are actually used in business. I was careful to work in the name of a local community college or university in the representative's home district and to note that students who can use mathematics effectively will be the ones who create jobs and expand the local tax base. These ideas resonated well with most of the congressmen, eliciting some very perceptive responses.

Several representatives mentioned the specific courses (ranging from Algebra II to Calculus) where mathematics had disconnected from the real world and stopped having meaning to them. Our program's continual contact with students' goals and interests was seen as highly desirable. In some cases, congressmen actually suggested ideas, such as extending our program to areas other than business and implementing our approach in high schools, for further exploration. They recognized that a major effort would be required and that much instructor preparation would be neces-



Haun, Thompson, & Ehlers

sary to implement the agenda. These ideas brought us back to the need for continued NSF support and funding.

Our display at the evening exhibition drew attention from quite a few people, leading to discussions of NSF funding and of our project. We had a nice visit with Congressman Vernon Ehlers (R, Grand Rapids). He is a member of the House Committee on Science who also holds a Ph.D. in physics. Representative Ehlers has been a strong supporter of the National Science Foundation.

**Jason Haun:** One needs to make contact with several congressional offices in order to be heard. I constantly encounter ideas and complaints from people around me. However, in most cases their words are never heard by Congress. Due to this incredible opportunity offered by Professor Thompson and the Mathematical Association of America I was able to be heard and show my support for something in which I truly believe, "the future of education." Education is constantly changing and it is our duty, as citizens, to make sure that these changes propel the system in the right direction. Laws go through the governmental structure. However, "officials" act as liaisons to voice the views of citizens within their communities. It is the citizens' ultimate duty to make sure that their words are heard. In the world today, this may mean building a team of people who share common beliefs and then going to Washington.

This is only the beginning. The next step lies in making a direct connection with the person to whom you are speaking. He or she must begin to feel and believe in the same way that you do. Once this

connection is made, change and innovation can take place. I want to thank everyone at the MAA as well as everyone who has worked with the *Mathematics for Business Decisions* program.

**Kelly Peck:** It is not every day that you get an invitation to go to Washington, D.C. with an agenda that includes meeting personally with Arizona Congressmen. Yet, here I am, a 20-year-old college student who is able to say that I have "been there, done that." The whole experience went by in a flash, but I walked away from it with some treasured memories.

Having virtually no knowledge of political procedures, I was quite surprised to see how things ran at the congressional offices. When speaking with congressmen, whose days are packed, you immediately learn how to get your point across as concisely as possible. I had to learn to condense two semester's worth of *Mathematics for Business Decisions* into a few minutes, and hope that I could maintain the representative's attention. It was definitely a learning experience, to say the least.

The beautiful Washington cityscape also left a lasting impression. I was awed by the grand historic buildings and their classical features. Perhaps even more impressive was the fact that the entire city is surrounded by, and engulfed in, lush greenery—something considered a luxury by Arizonans.

In addition to the experience and the scenery, I will forever remember the people. Tina Straley, Don Albers, and the other MAA members I met were extremely friendly and accommodating. They became familiar faces in an unfamiliar place. Unfortunately, the trip went by way too fast. Upon leaving Washington, there was one thing I knew for certain: I would be back. ■

*Photographs by Sharon L. Thompson. Information on the CNSF can be found at <http://www.cnsfweb.org>. Information on Mathematics for Business Decisions can be found at <http://www.maa.org> and <http://business.math.arizona.edu/MBD/mbd.html>.*