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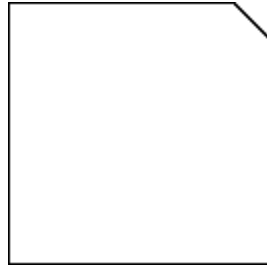


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## NATIONAL NEWS



### Mathematicians try to come up with new Equations to Attract Blacks

by Lorinda Bullock  
NNPA National Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Mathematicians are known for figuring out the world’s most difficult equations and finding ways to apply them to nearly every aspect of daily life. Black mathematicians find themselves not only working in their chosen field of study, but also working to solve one of their most complex equations yet—why so few of them exist.

Of the nearly 15, 000 math professors in the United States, there are only about 300 who are Black and about 500 who are Hispanic. Out of the 433 Math Ph.D.s awarded last year to U.S. citizens, 14 were awarded to Black Americans, said the American Mathematical Society.

Duane Cooper, a math professor at Morehouse College, said a general perception of math being "too difficult" contributes to the low numbers.

"I think when students say math doesn't make sense; it just kind of hurts me because nothing makes more sense than mathematics," Cooper said. "Everything fits together beautifully and logically and so in some sense if it doesn't make sense, somewhere we have failed to help you see why it makes sense."

So rather than keep their elite club of professors, statisticians, and analysts exclusive, Black mathematicians like Cooper are striving to widen their circle.

In just the last two weeks, two major events have taken place to encourage greater Black and minority participation in all levels of math—the Blackwell-Tapia Conference in Minnesota and the 16th annual MathFest that was held at Howard University.

"One of the major purposes of the conference is to showcase what's been achieved by this group of people and to give an opportunity for people to get together for the younger people in the field to meet the successful senior people," said Douglas Arnold, a professor of mathematics and director of the Institute for Math and Its Applications at the University of Minnesota.

During the Blackwell-Tapia conference, the nearly 150 minority mathematicians joined together to discuss trends in minorities in math, and put on a program called "Math Is Cool" for nearly 100 local minority high school students.

Cooper knows all too well the importance of all of these functions. When he earned his Ph.D in 1993, he was one of about five Blacks to be awarded a doctorate in mathematics that particular year. He said events like the Blackwell-Tapia Conference and Mathfest are encouraging a new generation of Black mathematicians.

"The numbers (of Black Ph.D.s) were in single digits fairly steadily until the late 90s. But we've stayed there. So it's still a small number... There are various programs and efforts to try to do a little better. But there's still plenty to be done," he said.

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At the MathFest, math undergraduate students from Howard, Morehouse, Spelman, Delaware State, Morgan State and others met their peers and mathematicians working in science, national security, and for large accounting firms.

Panelists at MathFest explained that math can help the U.S. government break foreign codes in our airwaves to figuring out why Monarch butterflies may no longer exist in the next 20 years.

During a question and answer period, students were delighted to find out their chosen career path can be lucrative and fulfilling. Certain jobs, the panelists said, may have starting of \$60,000 with just a Bachelor's degree. For Ph.D.s, the students were told, some tenured math professors could easily earn six figures.

Ashley Crump, junior math major from Howard, fell in love with math as a fourth grader in Ft. Worth, Texas. She said her fourth grade teacher and high school Advanced Placement Calculus teachers inspired her to pursue math in college. She found the entire conference helpful.

"When I first got here (to Howard), I had no idea what I was going to do with math. I had no idea about graduate school, no one ever told me about that. I was just doing it because I liked math. So programs like these, different conferences to go to, really teach you more about the opportunities, more about your field. You get to meet a lot of people and you see those same people at different conferences so you get to network," she said.

Crump plans on going to graduate school and pursuing her Ph.D. Crump said like her teachers, she would like to go her old school and encourage Black students to get into math.

"I want to at some point and go back to explain to students there's money to be made and people don't like it so if you can do it. Go do it and you will be a commodity," she said.

The idea of getting excited about math and spreading it to other young Black people is exactly why Scott Williams became one of the founders of the National Association of Mathematicians, the organization responsible for MathFest, and the creator of the Mathematicians of the African Diaspora website.

Williams, a world-renowned math professor currently at the State University of New York at Buffalo, remembers when he was one of about four Black Ph.D.s in 1969.

Sitting in the back row of the auditorium, Williams was beaming as he looked out over the crowd mixed with students, professors and math professionals discussing internship and job opportunities.

"When I started out I didn't know anybody (Black) in mathematics. It was a while before I got to learn a few people. So I think organizations like this are phenomenal," he said.

"I realized we needed to have some connections."

Numbers from the College Board show that while numbers are improving for Black students taking the Advanced Placement Calculus exams in the last decade, they still make up a small percentage of test takers.

Of the 248,000 students who took the AP Calculus AB and BC exams in 2006, only 9,680 were Black.

Crump said kids need to become "comfortable" with math early on, but more enthusiastic teachers and parents are needed to guide kids along the way.

"I think middle school is the most important time in your life. You learn the most and that's when you decide you're going to college. I think it's the most important time that we need to express to young, Black students that they need to be

comfortable with math. They may not love it, but they need to become comfortable," she said.

Eager students like Crump reassure Williams that the future of Black mathematicians is in good hands.

"There's just a wealth of possibilities. Kids think, you look at the math teachers in high school and this is what I can do with it. You can do so much more," he said.

"I know people with degrees in mathematics who have gone into law and medicine and all kinds of things. You are trained to think precisely about things. This is one advantage to have that training. So there are many, many things possible with mathematics."

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