EDITORIAL

Terry Goodman

In my Spring 1997 editorial I summarized some of the results from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study. The performance of the U.S. students in the study was at or below the international average in all eight mathematics areas (1). Conclusions and implications based on the TIMSS data are at this time, at best, tentative. One concern expressed by many is the lack of interest in mathematics shown by the majority of students.

From 1985 to 1991, in the United States, the percent of undergraduate degrees awarded in all the sciences (including mathematics and computer science) decreased from 21.7% to 15.9%. In mathematics and computer science, the percent decreased from 5.5% to 3.6% (2). If the eighth grade mathematics curriculum is, as suggested by the TIMSS study, unfocused and rather shallow, then it may well be that students began to lose interest in mathematics during these crucial developmental years. By the time these students reach high school, many of them have decided to "take as little math as possible." As a result, their lack of mathematics preparation will "screen" them from virtually all of the sciences, including mathematics.

All colleges and universities invest a great deal of time and resources in recruiting efforts. These efforts are generally aimed at students in general and typically focus on students in the junior and senior years of high school. In the light of studies such as TIMSS and recent mathematics enrollment trends, it would seem that our efforts to encourage students to continue their study of mathematics need to begin before they reach high school. Certainly our professional organizations (MAA, NCTM, etc.) provide us with resources (print materials, contests, etc.) that can be used to encourage students to see the relevance and beauty of mathematics.

Those of us in the mathematics community should seek to build upon these resources and develop other avenues for helping students at an early age to begin to develop an interest in and appreciation for mathematics. With this solid early foundation, more of these students will continue a serious study of mathematics at the undergraduate level.

References

1. U.S. National Research Center, Report No. 7, December 1996.

2. The Digest of Education Statistics, 1996.

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