

# Mathematicians try to attract Blacks

By Lorinda M. Bullock  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

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 PhDs awarded last year to U.S. citizens, only 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... 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 doctorate in 1993, he was one of about five Blacks to be awarded a PhD 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 PhDs) 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.

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 salaries of \$60,000 with just a Bachelor's degree. For PhDs, 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 *See Equations, Page 13*)



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