

# MAA FOCUS

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Talitha Washington

## You won't believe these 20+ mentoring tips really work!

*By a self-proclaimed group of Math Mamas, edited by Jacqueline Jensen-Vallin and Jane Long*

**C**arrie Diaz Eaton posed the following question to a group of Mathematical Mamas: “What was the best mentoring advice you’ve gotten?” What followed was an abundance of great advice. The members of that group thought the members of the MAA might also appreciate this shared knowledge.

Carrie Diaz Eaton began the list of advice, relating that, “I started to say something about, ‘My college doesn’t require research, so...’, to a senior woman in my field, Elsa Schaefer, and she said, “Always do enough to make yourself marketable.” Really bad advice for my particular position, really great advice for my career.”

Eaton also wrote, “a speaker I heard at the Institute for Teaching and Mentoring (she was invited to particularly inspire PhD minorities) said she kept her hair short—don’t lose that time each day.” (I can see though not all people would like this advice either.) “And always choose your health before your job. Otherwise you might have a scholarly productive, but short life.”

Sharon Crook shared that she was told, “One of the best things I did was attend a few professional development seminars on asking for what you want and the science of persuasion. So helpful! Also, make yourself indispensable—find a niche.”

“I have seen this before,” says one of Diana Thomas’ mentors every time she deals with something tough. She finds this comforting and since her mentor is strong and standing tall, she finds resilience in this message.

Kuei-Nuan Lin was told, “You lose nothing by asking. The worst case is people say no.”

Christina Sormani shared advice from Mary Rudin and Cathleen Morawetz: “Have as many kids as you want, but be sure to keep up your research while you are at it. Try not to get caught in a teaching job.”

“Take time to chill before you react. Take 1–2 days to answer a difficult e-mail,” says a mentor of Marianne Korten.

Kate Kearney was told, “Don’t eat lunch in your office.” For some this ensures a break from work. For others, it is a chance to meet people outside of their department. For others, it gives a chance to connect with others in the department by eating together.

Jessica O’Shaughnessy was told, “The drinks/meals after the talks are often more important than the talks themselves.”

Talitha Washington was stressed out in class and was told, “Go take a step aerobics class.”

Jane Long received the following advice from her husband’s aunt, Sally Lloyd, a family studies professor who was also dean at Miami University: “Don’t beat yourself up for following your gut and passing on an opportunity that might be great but has bad timing. If you prove your worth, your name will come into consideration again and you can say yes when opportunity comes at the right time.”

“Working out counts as time toward my job since I’m better at it when I take care of myself,” is advice that Marianne Korten has taken to heart.

Sara Del Valle was told, “Learn to say ‘no.’” Xuen Hien Nguyen added, “and your mentor can say ‘no’ for you if you can’t.”

Margaret Schroeder, regarding publications and grants, was told, “Finished is better than perfect.” And “Expect everything to be a rejection, but treat it as a rejection with feedback for resubmission (elsewhere).”

Marianne Korten offers, “When you get a paper rejected, send it to a more ambitious journal.”

Susanne Pumpluen



Emek Kose offers the following advice from Ricardo Cortez and Gloria Mari Beffa: “If you have 7 minutes to think about your research, then think about research.” She claimed this was incredible advice, since her daughter always only napped for 20–30 minutes.

Zsuzsanna Dancso offers, “You are good enough for \_\_\_\_.” This advice came from many people, but primarily her PhD advisor Dror Bar-Natan, who kept telling her that she was good enough for a research post-doc, and also from her post-doc mentor Anthony Licata, who kept telling her that she was good enough for the job he had hired her for, and for the next job, too.

Also along these lines, Dancso says, “I gave a talk at a conference about a result that I didn’t intend to publish because I didn’t think it was novel enough. Sergey Chmutov sat down to talk with me afterwards and told me to write it up. It was accepted at a very good journal.”

Dancso was also offered the following advice about life planning, given during graduate school by her wonderful ex-husband, Balazs Szegedy, and she claims it changed her life: “As long as you enjoy what you’re doing now, it’s a fine choice to keep doing it and to make the most of it. Even if you end up switching directions a decade down the line.”

Brandy Doleshal offers, “Always be nice to the administrative associates.”

Elsa Schaefer, when she was pregnant, was told, “This child WILL throw up all night the night before you have a big presentation to give. Never wait until the last minute to finish.”

F. Patricia Medina says, “Don’t paint yourself into a corner.” Martha Byrne encourages us to “Celebrate submissions, not acceptances.”

Kim Roth said, “Update your CV regularly. That way when you are writing grants or promotion or tenure materials, you won’t miss anything.”

Jen Bowen was asked, “What is your joy?” by Vicki Baker, management professor at Albion College.

Susanne Pumpluen was told, “Don’t take it personal.” When the group asked for clarification, she suggested using this “if someone is a jerk to you—by realizing that people are deeply flawed and so they approach things in ways that are unprofessional or inappropriate or uneducated, you feel sorry for them and have a strong (but professional) response. If you really did screw up—that just means that you need more experience and practice or a different approach, which is ok!”

Pamela E Harris offered the following story: “When I asked if she had ever dealt with the impostor syndrome and what she did to overcome it, Dr. Ana Mari Cauce (President of UW) said, ‘The impostor syndrome has never stopped, but it also has never stopped me.’”

Suzanne Dorée shared, “I started my job as non-tenure track. My aunt who was also a professor told me, ‘find something that the department believes is important but nobody



Carrie Diaz Eaton and family



Jane Long

else wants to do and do it well.' Thirty years later I am still here as a tenured full prof and chair (again). And of all the work I've done as a PhD mathematician, probably teaching developmental math and coordinating our most academically challenged students has been my proudest moment."

Manda Riehl shares the following advice from Sherrie Serros: "Leadership is a lot of listening, empathizing with the circumstances that led to a decision, and framing a discussion in terms of progress. Don't think of it as stepping on toes, sometimes you need to lift someone up to get the whole group to the next level."

Gizem Karaali offers the following advice from every older woman in her family: "This too shall pass."

Silvia Jiménez says, "Don't be scared to approach your math 'super heroes,' remember they are also people."

Last, and most definitely not least, from Beth Rushing (now President of the Appalachian College Association) to Jenny Quinn: Five things I wish I had known when I was a beginning faculty member...

1. There is a hierarchy among faculty members. Respect it.
2. You can be friendly with students, but they are not your friends.
3. Sometimes you have to say no, close the office door, and/or work at home.
4. Everyone's job is important. Be nice to the staff in your program.
5. Your job is not your life.

What's the best advice you ever got from a mentor? Send your thoughts and mentoring advice to [maafocus@maa.org](mailto:maafocus@maa.org). Maybe your advice will be shared in a future issue of MAA FOCUS. ■

Learn more at [maa.org/programs](http://maa.org/programs)

# MATHEMATICIANS NOT TO BE MISSED AT



## MAA MATHFEST

August 1-4, 2018



### Talitha Washington

Howard University  
and National Science Foundation

#### MAA James R.C. Leitzel Lecture

The Relationship between Culture and  
the Learning of Mathematics



### Pamela Gorkin

Bucknell University

#### AWM-MAA Etta Zuber Falconer Lecture

Finding Ellipses



### Eugenia Cheng

Art Institute of Chicago

#### MAA Invited Address

Inclusion-exclusion in Mathematics: Who  
Stays in, Who Falls out, Why It Happens, and  
What We Should Do about It



### Gigliola Staffilani

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

#### Earle Raymond Hedrick Lecture Series

Nonlinear Dispersive Equations  
and the Beautiful Mathematics  
That Comes with Them



### Laura Taalman

James Madison University

#### MAA Chan Stanek Lecture for Students

FAIL: A Mathematician's Apology



### Lisette de Pillis

Harvey Mudd College

#### MAA Invited Address

Mathematical Medicine: Modeling  
Disease and Treatment

Go to [maa.org/mathfest](http://maa.org/mathfest) to find more women-led talks.