

Dodging a Bullet



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This article is an expanded version of a letter to the Editor of the *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* (AMS). In it, I give an inside look at a cancelled meeting of the AMS. Someday, when one looks back at mathematics in this unusual period in history, it may be useful to have a few contemporaneous first-hand accounts.

I was the local organizer of the Sectional Meeting of the AMS at Tufts University scheduled for March 21–22, 2020. The impetus for this meeting, at least for my department, was to showcase the university and the Department of Mathematics, for although we have made great strides in the last thirty years, Tufts is still not widely known. Even with the help of my colleagues and the competent staff at Tufts Conference and Event Services, I must have put in at least one hundred hours over the past two years into organizing this meeting, from personally inspecting every room and its audiovisual equipment to raising funds, to lining up presenters for invited addresses and moderators for contributed paper sessions, to finding alumni speakers for a non-academic career panel, to inviting the provost to give welcoming remarks, to arranging for food and coffee, and to planning a reception for 250, as well as acting as the liaison to the AMS, and a host of other responsibilities.

Meanwhile, in early 2020, the coronavirus was raging in China and Italy, but there were only a few cases in the United States, mostly concentrated in Washington and California. In late February and early March, the federal authorities were assuring the country that the situation was under control. No one was wearing masks. In fact, it was recommended that other than medical personnel, people should not wear masks because they would not offer protection if improperly worn.

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On March 2, there were only two confirmed cases in Massachusetts, both infected from traveling abroad, and no deaths. Later it emerged that a number of people who had attended a Biogen leadership conference in Boston on February 27 had tested positive, but the extent of the infection was still not known. Back then, officials and scientists in Massachusetts were also minimizing the danger, reiterating for several days that the risk posed by the virus was low and claiming that there was no evidence of community spread in the state. All indications were that the AMS meeting would go on as scheduled.

A total of 415 participants had preregistered. Counting those who would register on site, we expected five hundred participants. It would be the biggest event the Tufts Mathematics Department had ever hosted. On March 6, I placed an order for the reception on the Saturday of the meeting. In the experience of the AMS, around half of the participants—250 people—would attend it. Of course I hoped the participants would remember Tufts for the mathematics learned and professional connections made, but I was also aiming for what makes any conference truly memorable: an unforgettable reception! To this end, I had raised enough money from deans, the mathematics department, and other faculty to make it lavish. Instead of pizzas, cheese and crackers, and chips and dips, there would be various kinds of fresh sushi, shrimp, and other hot and cold hors-d'oeuvres served on platters by roving waiters.

Around that time, the AMS was about to mail seventy boxes of books to Tufts for its book display during the meeting and we at Tufts made arrangements to receive and store them. By Monday, March 9, all preparations for the meeting were in place and my biggest worry then was whether the totes of coffee we ordered would cool off too fast and whether there was a way to have continuous service of hot coffee at the meeting. We were ready for the conference. However, since the coronavirus situation was fast developing, there was always a hint of uncertainty.

On March 10, when everyday life still felt normal, the Tufts administration, ever cautious, cancelled the meeting. This was even before the AMS had cancelled anything, including the Virginia meeting scheduled for the coming weekend, and way before the lockdown ordered by the state. Initially, I felt a rush of disappointment—two years of work down the drain. The participants, most of whom had by then bought plane tickets and booked hotels, would have to scramble. The cancellation caused massive inconvenience for hundreds of participants. Later that day, because the number of cases in Massachusetts had spiked from forty-one a day before to ninety-two, Gov. Baker declared a state of emergency. Of the ninety-two, a whopping seventy-seven were from the Biogen conference. On March 13, President Trump declared a national emergency.

As time went on, the number of cases in Massachusetts exploded, from 2 on March 2 to 10,000 a month later and 100,000 two months later with 6,700 deaths. It was then I realized that Tufts had dodged a bullet. If the meeting had been scheduled for two weeks earlier, on March 7–8, it would certainly have taken place. With five hundred people from the four corners of the earth converging at Tufts (except participants from China and Italy, whom Tufts had already barred based on CDC travel warnings), the meeting would certainly have become a superspreader event,

worse than the Biogen meeting, which had only 175 participants. Many people would have become ill, and instead of being showcased, Tufts would live in infamy. We were lucky that the meeting was scheduled for when it was, with just enough warning of a disaster to come for it to get cancelled.



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