Uniform Acceptance Date

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Individual REU sites currently set their own application deadlines, ranging from mid-February to mid-March. (Application deadlines of the REU programs represented by the participants in this session ranged from mid-February to early March. Most of these programs make offers to students within one week of the application deadline.) Some students may need to respond to an acceptance by one program before another program's application deadline, leaving the student in an uncomfortable position.

The majority of the participants in our discussion came into this session thinking that a uniform acceptance date was a good idea. But after a spirited and salutary conversation, we left the session unanimously *opposed* to a uniform acceptance date. In a nutshell, we agreed that the potential benefits of a such a deadline are relatively minor, while the potential drawbacks are less so, as outlined below.

Here were some of the arguments we discussed *in favor* of a uniform acceptance date:

(1) A uniform acceptance date would eliminate the initial problems faced by students who receive multiple offers. This would especially benefit the best students.
(2) More programs would see more of the applicant pool.
(3) Informal surveys indicate that students want a uniform acceptance date.
(4) It appears to have worked well for the NSF post-doc program, so why not here?

The following scenario exposes a potential problem with uniformity that the group could not satisfactorily resolve. If all offers are made a certain date, then any student *not* receiving an offer will know they were not in the first round of students selected. Having students come to a program with this kind of baggage seems to be counterproductive. Currently, it is possible to 'hide' some of the ordering of the applicants (since the applicants don't know precisely when offers are made).

In summary form, here are the arguments *against* a uniform acceptance date:

(1) It would only help the best students. As noted above, students would know exactly where they ranked in the selection process, viz, first choice, second choice, etc., based on when they receive their selection letters.
(2) The chaos it's designed to prevent will necessarily unfold anyway after those first students admitted to multiple programs select only one, and programs then must scramble to make subsequent offers.

(3) It would be difficult (some believe impossible) to enforce uniformity, and there are program directors who do not support the idea.

In spite of our reluctance to recommend a fixed uniform date, we do believe steps can be taken to alleviate some of the chaos we see now. We recommend that programs do not accept students prior to some fixed date. We list some possibilities below:

(1) As mentioned above, set an "earliest possible" date (i.e., programs should set no deadlines *before* this date).
(2) Set a uniform "decision date" (i.e., students must decide by this date which program's offer they intend to accept).
(3) Use "windows" or "bracket" dates. That is, instead of a one-date deadline, perhaps set a *range* of dates for programs to accept the first round of students.
(4) Have students sign a contract or a letter of intent (in response to concerns about students backing out of REU's whose invitation they've accepted).

Finally, we need more data to make any recommendation with confidence. In particular, we don't know how many students who *apply* to at least one REU are actually *selected* by at least one REU. Obviously, this would be pertinent information in deciding whether or not there should be a uniform acceptance date. Therefore, we agreed that it would be good to collect this information, if legal. Perhaps the AMS could arrange this.

Here is a list of the session participants:

(1) Scott Chapman, Trinity University
(2) Dennis Davenport, Miami University
(3) Joe Gallian, University of Minnesota, Duluth
(4) Gary Gordon, Lafayette College
(5) Charlie Johnson, College of William and Mary
(6) Ellen Maycock, American Mathematical Society
(7) J.D. Phillips, Wabash College
(8) Michelle Wagner, National Security Agency
(9) Stephen Wirkus, California State Polytechnic University

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