

## JMM 2026 Conference Report

### 07 January 2026

#### Conference Overview

The Joint Mathematics Meetings (JMM) is an annual academic conference in the U.S. that brings together individuals and organizations united by the pursuit of mathematical knowledge. It boasts the title of the largest annual meeting of mathematicians in the world, and rightly so: spanning four days, two hotels, and a multi-building convention center, the 2026 conference welcomed over 5,400 participants. From 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM each day, sessions on topics as varied as p-adic numbers and the philosophy of math were hosted in the heart of D.C., fostering intense Q&A debates as well as new friendships. In the evenings, participants had their choice of social opportunities, from theater performances to networking dinners to knitting circles. The following report offers insights on a sample of these experiences, emphasizing key takeaways and sharing advice for prospective attendees.

#### Highlighted Sessions

##### *Mathopoly: A Play on Academic Dystopia*

This session set a decidedly spirited tone for the conference: held on the evening of the first day, “Mathopoly: A Play on Academic Dystopia” spotlit a motley crew of JMM attendees as they read through a mathematician-authored and -directed play about the trials and tribulations of a career in math research. Sporting sunhats decorated to clarify their role(s), the actors told the tale of three characters: Polly Nomial, Connie Jecture, and another one whose name I forgot (see Point 4 in “Advice for Prospective Attendees”). The three meet each other as undergraduates at JMM, and stay in contact as they navigate graduate school, apply for post-docs, and, ultimately, decide whether they want to stay in academia or not. The cast is completed by a group of out-of-touch senior professors, hiring committees, and a wonderfully sardonic narrator. For addressing feelings of disillusionment with the current state of math scholarship sensitively and humorously, “Mathopoly” gained nods of recognition from older audience members and looks of determination from early-career viewers. Although I didn’t understand all of the jokes (why do people not like homological algebra?), I felt moved to smile along with my fellow audience members. There we were, sitting in a room at a conference that served as a focal point of the piece, the one place where Polly et al. could do math for math’s sake and not worry about the job market or whether their research would impress the big wigs. It was both somber and motivating: academia sucks, and it will continue to suck, so enjoy the moments of playfulness and exploration; they are few and far between.

##### *Bridging Math to Congress: Advocating for Change in 2026*

This session came recommended to me by Dr. Ranthony Clark, the lead advisor for the 2025 Data+ Project I participated in. Yay for having a mentor who gets that you’re a political science major and

don't want to stare at graphs all day! In all honesty, I was not the target audience for this talk, but I still enjoyed it. Members of the American Mathematical Society's (AMS) Committee on Science Policy discussed their experiences advocating for math program funding, organizing hill visits, and participating in the Catalyzing Advocacy in Science and Engineering fellowship. I was really happy that the event was so well-attended, and am hopeful that more mathematicians will be moved to call their legislators. One perspective that stuck with me is that personal anecdotes are often the key to changing politicians' minds: as someone who has worked with politicians before, I was under the impression that these kinds of stories are sweet, but ultimately not that impactful. I suppose it depends on the scale (federal vs. state vs. local) and substance (math program funding vs. the areas I had worked in, historic preservation and AI education) of the actions being taken. Fun fact: this was the third session I participated in that featured Kevin Beanland, and I would see him again at the "How the Federal Government Funds Science Research" panel. He's a great speaker!

### ***AMS Special Session on Mathematical Applications in Medical Product and Food Research, Development, and Regulation for the Advancement of Public Health***

This session was probably my favorite because it centered on applications familiar to me. Going into JMM, I was under the false impression that engagement with a presentation was unidirectional: you needed to understand the math concepts in order to appreciate their impact. Not so! My background knowledge of biotechnology was my access point for the backward forward sweep methods and Hamiltonian mechanics expounded by presenters. The session on digital twins was so enthralling that I was late for a lunch meeting! Plus, one of the co-organizers knew a former professor of mine and, when a registered presenter didn't show, allowed me to give an informal presentation of my own research on the regulatory nuances of AI-assisted medical devices. Legend has it that I'm still riding that adrenaline high.

### **The Poster Session**

This was the primary reason we came to the conference, and our chief avenue for communicating the work we did with Data+. I loved the poster session for the same reason that the presentations flustered me: I have little mathematical knowledge. With presentations, the sheer weight of other audience members' expertise discouraged me from asking questions I worried would be primitive at best and distracting at worst. The poster session, however, was an invitation to be curious with no strings attached. Ben Greene, the leader of the Data+ project I participated in, was beaming as he introduced passersby to his brilliant community detection algorithm, so I wandered off to explore posters on knot theory, TBI prevalence in Cambodia, and Banach spaces. "Hi, I know nothing, so tell me everything" became my go-to conversation starter. It was endearing to see my peers get progressively more excited about their research, to not care that they had to explain it at a very basic level because it was fascinating no matter how technical they were allowed to be. I can't say I understood the nuances of every project I encountered, but I connected with people and challenged them to simplify their explanations, and that's a win in my book.

Our own poster presentation went smoothly. At any given moment, we had at least one person engaging with our poster. Ben handled most of the explanations, while I roped unsuspecting attendees into coming over. Our interlocutors represented a variety of disciplines and professional backgrounds, from senior network theory professors to high school students studying fluid mechanics. We even had a local D.C. resident, non-affiliated with JMM, stop by (I don't know how he got past the security staff, but he was very interested in our demographic weighting process, so it must have been meant to be). Reflecting on the differences and similarities between this session and the Data+ poster fair, I reassert my belief that the best way to start a spiel is to relate it to your audience. Someone might not be familiar with communities of interest or even redistricting, and you could just point to the poster and reiterate definitions, but that someone might also be wearing a football jersey that prompts you to say "imagine if the Steelers were in charge of the Eagles' lineup...just because two teams are in the same area doesn't mean they have the same plans or concerns".

## Two Key Takeaways

### *Yes, I Still Decline to Call Myself a Mathematician*

Over the course of Data+, I was told that by virtue of the work I was doing, I was a mathematician. That any assertion to the contrary was self-deprecating. Having now attended JMM, I stand by my statement. If anything, my exploration of various JMM sessions has cemented my position that just doing math doesn't make someone a mathematician. A mathematician, as was clarified multiple times in the AMS Committee on Science Policy sessions, is someone with not just knowledge of, but stakes in, the advancement of at least one mathematical science. For a mathematician, math is not just one way to engage with a topic they're interested in, it is the *ideal* way.

This just isn't true for me. If I hadn't had guidance during Data+, my first strategy to identify communities of interest would've been to analyze archival maps, not test out clustering algorithms. The important conclusion here, and one corroborated by my JMM experience, is that math isn't everything; everything is math. It's much more accurate—and in my opinion, freeing—to treat math as a complement to, rather than absorber of, the various fields with which it interacts. I am not a mathematician, but I used math to construct and explore a sociological problem, and my understanding of that problem is all the richer for it. Being more confident in using computational tools to address a phenomenon I'm interested in is more validation than any label could provide.

### *Greg Is Right: Education is Best When Communal*

At a lunch meeting prior to the undergraduate poster session, Data+ organizer and mentor Dr. Gregory Herschlag said that the best education was "communal, rather than relative". While he was speaking about philosophies of primary schooling, his logic applies to the JMM experience, as well. Thousands of people from across the globe attended this conference because they enjoy learning *with* others, not just *from* them. This is not to say that the power dynamics inherent in academic

scholarship melted away upon entering the doors to the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, only that they grew softer, more flexible: points for collaboration instead of taunts of inadequacy. Patent examiners laughing with FDA researchers; graduate advisors playing cards with students they rejected; perhaps the most shocking of all, Ben complimenting research done by high schoolers: these moments are what happens when you celebrate mathematics instead of mathematicians, education instead of accolades. As someone who had only been to competition conferences prior to JMM and loathed the culture of insincerity and conceit it cultivated, these past four days were a breath of fresh air.

Still, warnings from the AMS Committee on Science Policy linger: 2025 was a devastating year for research, in the mathematical sciences and otherwise. With thousands of grants canceled and hundreds of foreign nationals deported in the middle of their research projects, the U.S. is dismantling the very infrastructure on which it relies to prosper. Tighter NSF budgets and increasingly narrow research agendas tempt fatalism, anathema to the environment of curiosity and enthusiasm fostered by programs like JMM and Data+. Even more than all of the equations and figures I've read over the past few days, that's what confuses me the most: how this got to be so bad. Maybe some mathematician will create an agent-based model to explain the series of decisions that led to this crisis in American academia, maybe even with a collaborator they met at JMM. In the meantime, I'll take Tyler Kloefkorn's advice: get out in my community and organize.

### Advice for Prospective Attendees

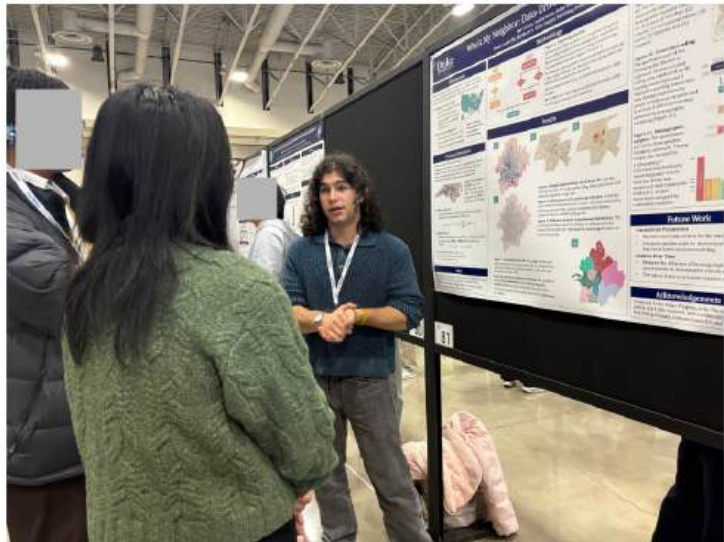
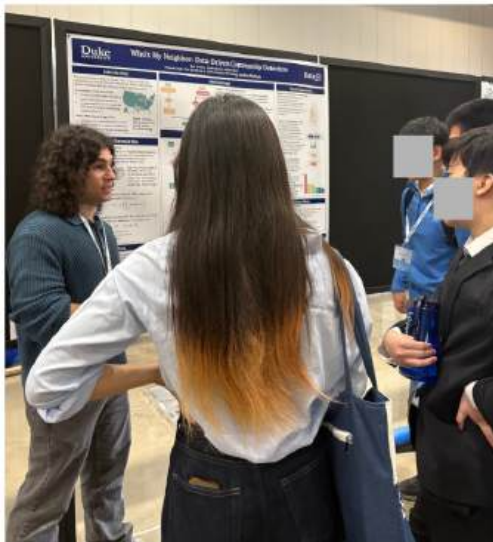
1. **There's no "right" way to choose sessions.** If this is your first conference, you might want to dip in and out of a variety of sessions to familiarize yourself with the possibilities at hand. If you're like me and are primarily interested in just a few topics, you could consider attending fewer sessions but for their entire duration. Whatever strategy you end up employing, make sure to write down the room numbers of your sessions ahead of time (but double-check them the morning of) because scrolling through the JMM app's atrocious UI is not fun.
2. **Work hard, play hard, sleep hard.** Go to sessions, ask questions, make connections with new people, go to lunch with them, invite them to your poster talk, go to theirs, but make sure to get enough sleep. I don't know if it's just me, but conferences are like caffeine: I can't stop buzzing with the promise of new friends and reminders of events I want to go to and the new concepts and ideas flooding my mind. It's exciting but also overwhelming. Since you might be out late spending time with your new contacts, it might be difficult to find time to sleep, let alone be physically able to. But you need to!
3. **Ditch the swag.** Especially if it's your first conference, it can be tempting to explore every exhibition booth and collect every sticker, button, pamphlet, t-shirt, or tote bag in sight. Two reasons this isn't the best idea: one, that time spent accumulating merch is time lost attending interesting sessions; and two, it will likely all end up in the back of your closet never to be touched again. The exhibition hall can still be a fun place, especially for connecting with potential employers, but it shouldn't be a frequent destination.

4. **Bring paper and pens.** I did not do this and it made writing this conference report a lot harder because I had no notes to prompt my memory. Taking notes is a really good practice during sessions, yet it's impolite to be on your phone during a session; even if you're taking notes, the speaker just sees your face paying attention to a screen instead of them. Paper and pens/pencils is the way to go, and make sure to bring a hardcover book/something sturdy to write on if your paper is looseleaf.

## Photo Reel



Poster session starting! Left to right: Dr. Gregory Herschlag; Dr. Ranthony Clark; Ben Greene, Linden James, Dr. Jonathan Mattingly.



Ben discusses his work with other JMM participants.

