



Building Community

Why are you a member of ASCB? Why is your colleague down the hall, who has done cell biology research for years, not a member? How can we make the Society more useful or rewarding for you, and more likely to attract or retain her? Our Society is only as strong as its members, and we need to keep asking these questions, and evolving in response.

When we have surveyed our members, one answer we frequently heard to the first question was, “to be part of the international community of cell biologists.” That is also the most important of my own list of reasons for being a member of ASCB. I probably wouldn't be a long-term member if there were not an Annual Meeting to go to, and I see the work our Public Policy Committee does to educate the government as crucial in helping my science get funding. But at the end of the day, I'm an ASCB member because it's my community; it has been since I joined as a PhD student in 1983. I think the same is true for many of you. So in planning directions for our Society, strengthening and extending that sense of community is perhaps the overriding concern.



Tim Mitchison

ASCB Annual Meeting Strengthens Bonds

What are the bonds that hold us together as a community? We share a commitment to cell biology research. But so do lots of colleagues who don't join ASCB, or don't remain as members after joining to go to the meeting. When I ask colleagues at Harvard who work with cells why they aren't members, I most often hear, “because I'm not going to the meeting this year.” For them, and for many of our temporary members, ASCB is the Annual Meeting, and nothing more. Or at least it's not enough more to fork over dues every year. For our core membership, shared research interests must be only one of multiple bonds. I wonder if we are doing enough to identify and enhance these deeper reasons for membership, and to communicate their value to our temporary members, the ones who lapse in years when they don't attend the meeting.

Like any large community, ASCB consists of a complex, overlapping network of smaller communities that share scientific, social, or professional ties. One of the most important for me is with ex-members of my own laboratory. I may only see them once a year at the ASCB Annual Meeting. Most years we organize a dinner, which is a chance to catch up scientifically and socially. It's also a time for current—and ex—lab members to put faces to names they know from papers, protocols, or apocryphal stories. I often attend a similar function put on by Ted Salmon's group. He's an old friend and collaborator at University of North Carolina,

Chapel Hill. These mainly social events are a highlight of my Annual Meeting experience. A related but different network comprises colleagues whose research interests overlap with my own. I interact with this group mostly at poster sessions, and in hallways outside Minisymposia. These interactions are an important part of staying current with developments in my field. But over the years they have often led to initiating a collaboration or obtaining a key reagent.

Many community-building activities, like the ones I described, occur at the Annual Meeting. So it's important we design the schedule with these in mind. Perhaps most important is to maximize the opportunities for informal scientific interactions. I'm curious how the schedule change in 2009, when we moved the major Symposia to the afternoon, affected these opportunities. My impression is that the poster session experience was enhanced by the change, perhaps at the cost of Symposium attendance. We will repeat the new schedule in 2010, since we feel it takes at least two years to see if the experiment has worked. Please give us your feedback through the meeting survey. There is a tendency for surveys to select for negative feedback; if something worked better in your eyes, it's important to let us know. Are there other changes that would enhance your meeting experience in terms of building community, or gaining access to an existing community?

The American Society for Cell Biology

8120 Woodmont Avenue, Suite 750
Bethesda, MD 20814-2762, USA
Tel: 301-347-9300
Fax: 301-347-9310
ascbinfo@ascb.org, www.ascb.org

Joan R. Goldberg
Executive Director

Officers

Timothy J. Mitchison	<i>President</i>
Sandra L. Schmid	<i>President-Elect</i>
Brigid Hogan	<i>Past President</i>
Thoru Pederson	<i>Treasurer</i>
Jan E. Schwarzbauer	<i>Secretary</i>

Council

Raymond Deshaies
Joan R. Goldberg, *ex officio*
Holly V. Goodson
Kathleen J. Green
Inke Näthke
David Spector
Paul W. Sternberg
Elizabeth Sztul
JoAnn Treman
Clare M. Waterman
Fiona M. Watt
Susan M. Wick
Virginia A. Zakian

The ASCB Newsletter
is published 11 times per year
by The American Society
for Cell Biology.

Joan R. Goldberg	<i>Editor</i>
W. Mark Leader	<i>Editor</i>
Elizabeth M. Rich	<i>Production Manager</i>
Kevin Wilson	<i>Public Policy Director</i>
Ed Newman	<i>Advertising Manager</i>
John Fleischman	<i>Science Writer</i>
Thea Clarke	<i>Editorial Manager</i>

Deadlines for submission of
articles and advertising
materials:

Issue	Deadline
June	May 1
July	June 1
August	July 1

ASCB Newsletter
ISSN 1060-8982
Volume 33, Number 3
April 2010

© 2010
The American Society for Cell Biology

Postmaster: Send change of address to:
ASCB Newsletter
The American Society for Cell Biology
8120 Woodmont Avenue, Suite 750
Bethesda, MD 20814-2762, USA

... at the end of the day, I'm an ASCB member because it's my community; it has been since I joined as a PhD student in 1983.

I've often heard the comment that the ASCB meeting can be a lonely experience for first-time attendees and others who don't have long-standing communities for networking. Enhancing the meeting experience of this group was one of the goals of the International Affairs Committee (IAC). IAC members organized a meet-and-greet lunch for international attendee graduate students and postdocs on the first day of the meeting. That has been a great experience, and we hope longer-term community building continues on the related Facebook group. It now numbers nearly 1,000 members. (To join this or other groups, go to www.ascb.org and view the options under ASCB Networking Groups.) Are there other things we could do at the meeting to help newcomers find like-minded colleagues to interact with?

Year-Round, Grassroots Community Is Important

To be successful, most communities need to interact more than once a year. The Minorities Affairs Committee (MAC) and Women in Cell Biology (WICB) Committee are good examples of groups that sponsor year-round community-building activities. A powerful experience for me at the 2009 Annual Meeting was hearing career trajectory stories from young minority faculty who had benefitted from MAC support, often at multiple points in their careers. Their sense of community, and of its practical importance in career-building, was deeply moving. The WICB community has long been a vibrant part of the Society. And I think this community is an important part of why many female scientists have been long-term ASCB members. Are we doing enough to support year-round activities of all ASCB communities? The Internet provides new kinds of tools for building and maintaining community, and perhaps we could be using these more effectively. We have added Facebook groups, a Twitter feed, and a Facebook fan page to expand our outreach. We are also seeking ASCB Ambassadors (see March 2010 *ASCB Newsletter*).

One hallmark of strong organizations is a tendency to encourage, and be shaped by, bottom-up, member-initiated activities. This is how successful efforts like the MAC and WICB Committee started. Are we doing enough to encourage new communities to

emerge at the grass-roots level, and to help them grow? The 2009 Annual Meeting saw the first formal meeting of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender cell biologists group. I heard this was a very positive experience; it provides a good example of self-organization that other groups might follow. The member-initiated scientific sessions (Special Interest Subgroups) on Saturday afternoon of the meeting are another fine example of bottom-up organization. These are always a highlight of the meeting for me. We have discussed building more such sessions into the schedule, but there are significant logistical hurdles.

Something we don't currently do much of as a formal ASCB activity is to support community-building around specific technologies. Sharing of software, protocols, and reagents through the Internet has become increasingly important in the last few years. I could imagine ASCB sponsoring activities of this kind, for tools are important for cell biologists—image analysis and modeling software, for example. That said, organizing a website is labor-intensive, and staff time is expensive. In the current budget climate ASCB might be most effective as a forum for member-run web activities, connecting like-minded members.

Your Thoughts Are Needed

I sometimes find it difficult to explain in words why ASCB is such an important part of my own self-identity as a scientist. Every long-term member probably has his or her own reasons for loyalty, but community is surely one of the most important for all of us. I would very much like to extend this sense of community to more colleagues, and to increase its relevance to young scientists who are just forging their own scientific self-identities. We have to innovate to stay relevant, and I'm not sure we are using the Internet in a sufficiently innovative way to build and enhance community. I am sure that the most effective efforts will not come from your President and Council as top-down initiatives. The health and future of the Society depend on members self-organizing their own communities and initiatives under the ASCB umbrella. Our job is to help! Please send me your ideas. ■

Comments are welcome and should be sent to president@ascb.org.