



How Should We Move Forward?

Like previous outgoing ASCB presidents, I will use my last column to reflect on the future of the Society, and of the science we represent. I also will ask: How can we build on our strengths going forward?

ASCB as a Public Forum

Compared with other scientific societies, ASCB has a history of “punching above our weight” in science advocacy and community leadership. For example, we played a major role in convincing successive administrations to double the National Institutes of Health (NIH) budget in the late 1990s. We also scored a victory in convincing the current administration to remove constraints on stem cell research in 2009.

We can never rest on our laurels—subsequent NIH budgets failed to keep up with inflation. And a legal interpretation recently caused a major setback in federal funding of stem cell research. We will continue to stay on the front lines on these issues; and we always need new volunteers to bring their energy to the fray. (To sign up for our U.S. grassroots efforts—Project 50 and/or the Congressional Liaison Committee, visit www.ascb.org/project50 or www.coalitionforlifesciences.org. But I feel we could do more in the public sphere.

A scientific society provides a forum for debate and advocacy that is independent from our individual institutions, where immediate administrative needs often seem to drive the discourse. Are we using the ASCB forum to its full potential? Are we debating the questions that will determine the course of science in the next decade? Are we adequately voicing our informed opinion in the halls of government?

With tight national budgets in the U.S. and many other countries, we more than ever need to articulate the case for continued, and increased, support of basic science. The opportunities are tremendous! But to make our case most forcefully, we may need to grapple with some hard questions: How big does the scientific enterprise need to be, and why? How should

we best divide our resources among purely basic research to uncover nature's mysteries, application of our knowledge to cure specific diseases, and harnessing biology to build devices and processes that impact nonhealth areas like food and energy?

It's easy to answer, “bigger and bigger,” and “all of the above.” But when resources are limited, we may be better served by more thought-out messages. Few institutions can take on such questions. However, ASCB members have joined the Society in part to try to effect change, and people in power listen to us. Going forward, I think we need to use our Society more to debate the big issues that face our community; we need to articulate well-thought-out, shared opinions, and to deliver them forcefully to the decision makers.



Tim Mitchison

More Diverse Members

A society is only as strong as its membership, and in recent years ours has plateaued in number and aged. This reflects a maturation of “core” cell biology, and a shift of growth to more specialist and applied areas—stem cells, cancer, tissue engineering, and the like. I feel passionately that we need more members in these areas, to stay strong as a society, and to ensure that our public voice is informed by their opinions. Basic and applied cell biology both have a lot to learn from each other. And I suspect more and more cell biologists will want to bridge this divide.

The ASCB Annual Meeting is unique in its breadth, and thus provides a major opportunity for cross-education and networking. But our current culture leans very much to the basic; I wonder how well our meeting works for those with applied interests. Making our Society more attractive to applied cell biologists, and finding the right balance in our Annual Meeting, are important challenges.

Younger Members and Younger Leaders

Even more important, we need more young members—in our ranks, and among our leaders. I have heard it said that today's young people are

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not “joiners,” but I watched them join together in the U.S. to elect a young, black President in 2008. That’s something my generation thought could never be done. Perhaps you are a young researcher who has clicked on our website and thought, “how old-fashioned.”

More likely you are an established scientist reading this article on paper. I do not believe ASCB is increasingly irrelevant to young scientists—their need for networking opportunities, career advice, and advocacy in science funding is greater than for the more established among us. Rather, I think we are not reaching enough of them, and that some we do reach feel our leadership does not listen to their interests or needs. We need to expand and modernize our presence on the Web, and to get younger minds on our Council and committees. This will require more young members to step up and volunteer. Perhaps an intern or two in our ASCB office would help.

We will make a strenuous effort to provide you with a younger slate of candidates for election to Council in 2011. When you vote, think less “is this person a good scientist I have heard of?” and more “what could this person bring to ASCB leadership to represent my interests?” Or even “what would it take for me to be on that slate in a couple of years?”

Much Remains to Be Discovered

I joined ASCB in 1983, at a time when we knew little about how cells worked beyond DNA-to-RNA-to-protein. Now we know a lot, or at least we think we do. Sometimes I’m not so sure. I recently researched a list of nuclear proteins, assuming they would be much better studied than my old friends in the cytoskeleton. Remarkably, most were completely unannotated, reflecting a dearth of knowledge of nuclear cell biology. Even in the cytoskeleton, we may have been spending most of our time searching under the streetlight. If you research small GTPase, kinesins, or similar families, you will find the vast majority of publications focus on a handful of members; the rest of the family is almost untouched. I take from this that there is still a lot of undiscovered biology inside cells. Yet more undiscovered cell biology lies outside cells.

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To understand how tissues work, and what goes wrong with them in diseases, we need to know how cells talk to each other, chemically and physically. I suspect our current knowledge in this area is just the tip of the iceberg. Even

when we know some of the communication molecules, we almost invariably lack the kind of spatio-temporal information needed to understand their biology or role in pathology. Live cell microscopy will be an important tool for deciphering cell-to-cell communication in tissues and diseases; I see this as an important growth area. Another is cellular pharmacology. The biology of drug action at the cell and tissue levels is poorly understood in general. And I see this as an important growth area where we will

be forced to solve basic problems on the route to practical impacts. My own group is increasingly applying cell biology—think to cancer chemotherapy. It’s a tough problem, and I’m not certain we can make a significant contribution. But in conversations with clinicians and drug-discovery professionals I find we are at least asking new questions. Whether your interests lean to the basic, the applied, or the interface between them, it’s an exciting time to be a cell biologist.

Thanks Where Thanks Are Due

Finally, I want to conclude with a brief thank you to those who have made my year as your president not only possible, but actually enjoyable. To our Executive Director, Joan Goldberg, who keeps the ship on course, and to all the other dedicated staff in our Society office. To our hard-working committee chairs and members, journal editors, and grant PIs. To our Council members, for their thoughtful guidance (let’s step it up a notch next year!). To Sandy Schmid, for taking over the reins as ASCB President—I know she will do a great job. But most of all, thanks to all of you—for joining, and staying a member of, the best scientific society. ASCB rocks! ■

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