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PRESIDENT'S Column



The ASCB as an "Institution for Science"

It is with considerable trepidation that I write this, my first President's Column, for the *ASCB Newsletter*. The 11,000 members who receive this newsletter may be hoping for a continuation of Mary Beckerle's superb, detailed analyses of the current state of our science, with its many opportunities and challenges. Instead, I will more briefly highlight a series of central issues over the course of the coming year, in articles designed to help our members think more broadly about the future that faces cell biologists in general, and the American Society for Cell Biology, in particular. In this initial article, I focus on what might be required for the ASCB to become an even more effective "institution for science."



Bruce Alberts

Changing Institutions, Spreading Science

What does it take to make an effective institution? I still vividly remember being puzzled by the assigned readings in my college introductory world history course that emphasized the central role of institutions in human societies. Up to that point, I had only heard the word used in connection with "mental institution," even though I had spent more than 15 years in a series of schools that were prime examples of institutions.

The dictionary defines an institution as "an organization or establishment founded for a specific purpose." It is institutions that allow humans to work in an effective and coordinated way toward specific goals. Thus, the British statesman, Benjamin Disraeli, could claim that "individuals may form communities, but it is institutions alone that can create a nation."

If we are to spread science and its values throughout the world, we will need to generate and maintain a very large number of strong, creative, well-managed institutions for science.

I have been closely involved with three different types of institutions for science during my 45-year career as a scientist. The first of these were universities: Harvard, Princeton, and then University of California, San Francisco. Next came my association with scientific societies, in particular the ASCB and the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. And, last but not least, there has been my close association with academies of sciences, the honorary nongovernmental associations of scientists that have been formed in more than 80 nations to represent the very best science across all disciplines. (From 1993 to 2005, I served as the full-time president

of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC.)

Based on these experiences, I am convinced that essentially all of our institutions for science underperform. In part this is certainly due to a shortage of resources, but there may also be a more profound reason. There is a big difference between a loose association of individuals and a real institution. Scientists, and indeed most academics, are strong individualists. As such, we tend to resist being organized into cooperative units, and we are often opposed to the type of management that would be required to make our

institutions for science maximally effective. Hence, for example, our general disaffection for deans and other administrators.

Exploring Roles, Harnessing Member Vitality

As one of the world's leading scientific societies, the ASCB is a very important institution for science. What is its role today, and how might this role be enlarged in a world whose effectiveness will increasingly depend on science and on scientists? Mary Beckerle instigated this

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discussion when she asked how we might design mechanisms to harness the energy of many more of our members in activities of concern to the Society. This led to the idea of soliciting volunteers to serve as affiliates or associates to each of our official committees:

- Education
- Finance & Audit
- International Affairs
- Local Arrangements
- Membership
- Minorities Affairs
- Program
- Public Information
- Public Policy
- Women in Cell Biology

At its meeting in December 2006, the ASCB Council voted to establish up to 24 "Council Affiliates" (more on this next month) to connect the Council better to the ideas and energies of our members across the world. It is important to recognize that 25 percent of our members live outside of the United States, and that 22 percent of the 9,000 attendees at our San Diego meeting came from other nations. In addition, of course,

a substantial fraction of our U.S. members were born in a different country.

What would it take to harness even more of the vitality and creativity of our thousands of members? Might we consider establishing a substantial number of smaller, more focused committees? How could we do this without requiring more staff resources than we can afford?

As I shall outline in subsequent articles, there are many endeavors where the coherent volunteer activity of our members could make a real difference. As an organization of scientists, the ASCB should be constantly experimenting, pushing the envelope to explore the boundaries of what institutions like ours might

be able to accomplish, both for science and for the rest of society. ■

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

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