

## President's Column – Debra Meloy Elmegreen – July-August 2011

We hit a homerun in Boston with one of our biggest summer meetings ever, including over 1300 registrants; still, it had the more intimate feel that characterizes our summer gatherings. It was a privilege to share our 218<sup>th</sup> meeting with the American Association of Variable Star Observers on the occasion of their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and to present them a certificate to commemorate the long-time professional-amateur collaboration we've all enjoyed. Margaret Geller gave a stirring Henry Norris Russell Lecture on her discovery of large-scale structure in the Universe. Malcolm Longair challenged us with his Kavli Lecture on decadal surveys of the future; we also had the privilege of awarding him an honorary AAS membership. The meetings-in-meetings that are an AAS summer trademark were highly enjoyable, along with the workshops, Town Halls, plenary talks, and special sessions, including a memorable session paying tribute to John Huchra. The elegant opening reception, complete with ice cream-filled Red Sox hats, and the first-time-ever closing reception, with moose stuffed animals and door prizes to whet our appetite for next summer's meeting in Anchorage, were rousing successes. The vibrant conference reflected the careful scientific program planning led by our Vice Presidents Christine Jones and Lee Anne Willson. It was also a very well-executed meeting, thanks to the skillful planning of the AAS Staff, led by Director of Meeting Services Kim Earle and Executive Officer Kevin Marvel.

In talking with many colleagues in the weeks leading up to the meeting, I realized that most of the AAS membership does not have a clear view of the operations of the AAS Council, since the work happens behind the scenes. Much effort goes on year-round, and it's not just about preparing for the winter and summer meetings or about publications, though those are two of the top priorities of the AAS; we have many other goals too. So I wanted to give you a glimpse of Council efforts while reporting on some exciting new initiatives that we just approved in Boston. Prior to each winter and summer meeting, Council spends the weekend in strategic planning and business meetings. In the fall, the Executive Committee – the senior officers - also meets to plan and to discuss interim issues, which can be acted on throughout the year.

Incoming councilors receive material and briefings on the AAS and on non-profit organizations in general. We continue to receive training and advice while on Council to help improve the effectiveness of our AAS leadership. In late March, Kevin Marvel, Secretary Fritz Benedict, and I attended the Assembly of Society Officers meeting with about three dozen officers from AIP-affiliated societies to discuss scientific literacy, public engagement in policy issues, communication of science, and the value of professional societies. Some of these issues are at the heart of the AAS Mission and Vision Statement ([http://aas.org/about/mission\\_and\\_vision](http://aas.org/about/mission_and_vision)), our Strategic Plan, and our goals for the next 5 years ([http://aas.org/about/strategic\\_plan](http://aas.org/about/strategic_plan)). Our AAS visions are reflected in our priorities: publications, meetings, public policy and advocacy, astronomy education, and other member services involving our committees and prizes. At the AAS strategic session in Boston, Council discussed specific short-term as well as long-range tactical efforts directed towards our strategic goals. We also worked to hone metrics that we began developing at the strategic session in Seattle last January, to help us assess how

well we are meeting our broad AAS objectives. In addition, we discussed a presentation by Phoebe Leboy and Alice Popejoy from the Association for Women in Science about how to be aware of and work around potential biases in awards given by professional societies; these guidelines were passed along to the Prize Committee chairs as well.

The AAS is in better fiscal shape than it has been in many years, thanks to the careful planning and extensive efforts by Kevin Marvel, Treasurer Peter Stockman, and the Budget Committee, and to changes associated with publishing the Astrophysical Journal and Astronomical Journal through the IOP. Council approved a Strategic Initiatives Fund that will enable us to start new activities that will further our AAS goals. Three new initiatives this year will be: (1) an intensive lobbying effort by many of our members, which Kevin and Bahcall Fellow Bethany Johns will be reporting in detail, (2) an Astronomy Ambassadors program that will engage upper level undergraduates and early graduate students in local K-12 outreach following some training on best practices, and (3) a revamped AAS website to enhance communications with our membership and the public. These new initiatives directly relate to some of our key priorities of policy advocacy, mentoring and training future generations of astronomers, and communicating science to the public. The Astronomy Ambassadors program is under development by Education Coordinator Rick Fienberg, with input from Education Officer Tim Slater and the Astronomy Education Board.

The subject of public outreach has become a renewed hot topic for science in general, following a report issued recently by the National Academies, in which the US is found to be near the bottom of wealthy countries in the proportion of college students with degrees in science or engineering. Scientists nationwide are urged to become engaged in efforts to help foster an interest in STEM fields for our young people and to contribute to the improvement of scientific literacy of the public (which is at the 25% level). The “Change the Equation” initiative by Scientific American and Nature Publishing Group has led to the “1000 scientists in 1000 days” project, in which scientists sign up for local outreach with teachers; check out their web pages to see how you can get involved:

[http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v473/n7346/full/473123a.html?WT.ec\\_id=NATURE-20110512](http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v473/n7346/full/473123a.html?WT.ec_id=NATURE-20110512) and

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/page.cfm?section=calling-all-scientists>.

Also at the Council meeting, Rick Fienberg announced a revamping of the AAS Shapley Lecture Program, including a proactive approach (with the help of the Committee on the Status of Minorities) to reach out to schools with large populations of under-represented minorities and also perhaps to deliver some lectures in Spanish where appropriate. We’ll announce new procedures for applying to be or to host a Shapley Lecturer in the near future.

In another action, Council responded to a request from the Working Group on Laboratory Astrophysics, which has existed since May 2007, by establishing an Organizing Committee for Laboratory Astrophysics. Their charge is to draft by-laws as they move towards becoming a new Division of Laboratory Astrophysics, which will be considered at the January Council meeting in Austin.

Council is always receptive to input from the AAS membership on what we might do to improve meetings and to facilitate other goals, so in Boston we carefully considered suggestions we had received. One discussion led to the formation of a Working Group on the LGBT community, including a webpage on the AAS website. Their purpose will be to help focus on LGBT issues in which the AAS might play a role. Along those lines, Council voted to amend By-Laws Article X, Non-Discrimination in Professional Activities, to have more inclusive language. This practice has been followed by many universities and state governments, on the grounds that categories not explicitly called out might not be protected in some interpretations. The new language reads, in part, “As a professional society, the AAS must provide an environment that encourages the free expression and exchange of scientific ideas. In pursuit of that environment, the AAS is committed to the philosophy of equality of opportunity and treatment for all members, regardless of gender, gender identity or expression, race, color, national or ethnic origin, religion or religious belief, age, marital status, sexual orientation, disabilities, veteran status, or any other reason not related to scientific merit...”

In Boston I particularly enjoyed meeting with several graduate students who have taken the time to share their views on the AAS with me. For example, the wonderful graduate students behind Astrobites, written for undergraduates about hot astro-ph articles and career guidance, said they’d really enjoy a way to meet the undergrads at our meetings. So we’re exploring ways to enable such interaction. Sometimes even small changes can make a big difference, so let us hear your voice.

I close by thanking our hard-working outgoing Councilors and Officers: Past President Craig Wheeler, who graciously stepped in for a return engagement in that role, Vice President Christine Jones, and Councilors Nancy Morrison, Meg Urry, and Chick Woodward, whose sage advice and camaraderie were much appreciated by all of us on Council. And for those of you who are still confused about the succession of officers, David Helfand is now President-elect, an office he will hold till next May as he goes through the training process. You’ve got another year with me at the helm. Lee Anne Willson is now the senior Vice President, with primary responsibility for scientific content for the upcoming meetings, Nick Suntzeff moves up as middle VP, and Ed Churchwell is the new VP. I also welcome incoming Councilors Bruce Balick, Eileen Friel, and Angela Speck in what should be an exciting year as we move forward with our new initiatives.