

President's Column – Debra Meloy Elmegreen – Mar.-April 2011

Seattle was the scene for a grand, fast-paced and entertaining 217th meeting, filled with exciting new results presented by our wonderful AAS members. We set a record for the West Coast and achieved the second-largest AAS meeting ever, with over 2900 participants, including over 600 junior members. As usual, the hard work of AAS Executive Officer Kevin Marvel and his staff resulted in a smooth meeting experience for us. We were captivated by plenary sessions covering the gamut from exoplanets to the early universe. The inaugural Lancelot Berkeley prizewinners, Bill Borucki and David Koch, gave inspiring talks about the exciting Kepler results, and the first Kavli Prize lecturer, Dr. Carolyn Porco, described the Cassini mission. Our Warner prizewinner Scott Ransom expounded on exotic pulsars, while Pierce prizewinner Tommaso Treu discussed the growth of black holes and galaxy evolution, and Cannon prizewinner Anna Frebel explored the oldest known stars. Rossi prizewinners Felix Aharonian, Werner Hoffmann, and Heinz Voelk described the successful H.E.S.S collaboration, while Heineman awardees Michael Turner and Rocky Kolb entertained us with a lively cosmology and particle astrophysics lecture.

With these prizewinners and so many other exciting talks still fresh in mind, I exhort you to nominate your colleagues for the next round of AAS prizes. Although our personal reward for research is the sheer joy of discovery, it is nice to be acknowledged for a job well done. I want to emphasize that you do not need to be at the same institution as the colleague you nominate. It's easy too: just go to the prizes section of the AAS website <http://aas.org/grants/awards.php#nominate>. The prize deadlines have shifted in the past year to June 30, so now is the time to begin getting your letters together. Prize nominations carry over for 3 years, but we now require an update to resumes each year for the next committee's consideration.

Prizes can be particularly important for younger astronomers who are just getting established; the Warner and Pierce prizes are designed for them. At the Council meeting preceding the regular AAS meeting, Council voted to amend the application procedure for the Warner and Pierce prizes to encourage a broader representation among the nominees; with the new procedure, what's required is a CV, a publication list, and 3 letters of recommendation (as before), but there will not be an explicit nominator. That means self-nominations are acceptable, and will appear the same to the prize committee as nominations from others.

Consider your more senior colleagues for the Heineman and Russell prizes, even if they're not at your institution or part of your collaborations. Don't assume that someone else will think of them. Typically the Russell prize is viewed as the capstone of a long career, whereas the Heineman is for significant achievements partway through a career. We purposefully do not stipulate age limits for these awards.

The AAS Council meets the weekend before AAS meetings for planning purposes. At the Council meeting in Seattle, we ratified the Strategic Plan for the AAS (see it on the AAS website at http://aas.org/about/strategic_plan) and began to set up internal metrics for

evaluating the success of meeting our goals. As detailed in our Mission Statement (http://aas.org/about/mission_and_vision), the AAS focuses on 5 priorities: publications, meetings, public policy and advocacy, astronomy education, and other member services such as demographics, employment, and women and minority issues. Council also began to formulate plans of action in many areas, which we will roll out in the months ahead. Rick Fienberg, our Education Officer, is working on revising the Shapley program to help target under-represented minority schools. He will also begin to develop, with advice from the Astronomy Education Board, an “Astronomy Ambassadors” program aimed at educational outreach by undergraduate and graduate students in connection with local schools. Look for announcements about these programs in the coming year.

In Seattle, psychologist Abby Stewart gave a thoughtful and provocative plenary session on unconscious bias, and Sheryl Bruff and Bernice Durand held a special session on addressing harassment. I thank the Committee on the Status of Women and the Committee on the Status of Minorities for instigating these important sessions, and implore us all to carry their messages back to our departments. Website links to some material from these talks can be found on the CSWA website and at <http://www.portal.advance.vt.edu/index.php/categories/diversity/bias>.

The Decadal Town Hall in Seattle marked the conclusion of the official roll-out of the Astro2010 Decadal Survey “New Worlds, New Horizons” and the transition of the recommendations to ownership by the astronomical community. At that session, the AAS was pleased to acknowledge the outstanding work of the Decadal Committee and panels and study groups, and to honor Astro2010 Chair Roger Blandford, Astro2010 Executive Officer Lynne Hillenbrand, and Astro2010 Study Director Michael Moloney with special certificates of appreciation. The audience discussion there was lively and useful. If you didn’t get a paper copy of the NWNH report and would like one, you can request it from the National Academies website. Also listed there is a December report “Implementation Recommendations from New Worlds New Horizons Decadal Survey,” based on a panel formed from the National Academies’ Board of Physics and Astronomy and Space Studies Board to address the proposed WFIRST and NASA’s astrophysics program in the context of a changing budget and the ESA Euclid mission: http://sites.nationalacademies.org/BPA/BPA_059108.

Several other Town Halls in Seattle, following the welcome address on JWST by Dr. John Mather, 2006 Nobel Physics Laureate, were also meant to enable discussions on upcoming science planning by the agencies and by our community. I have no doubt that the minimal number of questions asked at some of these Town Halls was not a reflection of apathy on the part of the community, nor acceptance that plans are all securely in place, but, rather, stemmed from a feeling of overwhelming uncertainty about the immediate and longer-term directions for astronomy on a national level, which should become a bit more clear when the Federal budget is announced in mid-February.

Here’s where the AAS membership comes in: it is very important for us to show strength in numbers to promote the idea that basic astronomy research is good for the country, and to reinforce the importance of the Decadal survey. Our Committee on Astronomy and

Public Policy (CAPP), chaired by Jack Burns, met with agency leaders to discuss the state of astronomy and what AAS could do to further astronomy on a national level. Of course Roger Blandford has been busy all fall with Congressional and agency meetings to discuss the Decadal recommendations. Executive Officer Kevin Marvel, along with Bahcall Fellow Bethany Johns, will have numerous meetings this spring to discuss astronomy priorities and to reiterate the need for science education and research funding via the America COMPETES Act. Congressional Visits Day in April has a full complement of junior and senior astronomers slated to meet with Congressional staffers. At appropriate times, the AAS issues action alert emails imploring AAS members to write to their Congressmen requesting support for astronomy. Please stay tuned for these and send messages to your representatives to let them know your concerns. It is easy to do: email contact lists are available at <http://aas.org/policy/contact.php>. It should be an interesting spring, so stay informed and get involved. Our astronomical future is at stake.