

President's Column – Debra Meloy Elmegreen – May-June 2012

This is my last column as your president; what a quick two years this has been for me! At the members' meeting in Anchorage, it will be time for me to pass the gavel to David Helfand as our new president, and I will serve an additional year on Council as past president. I know that we will be in good hands with David's energy and enthusiasm and new ideas to help move the AAS forward. I have been profoundly humbled and honored to have had the privilege of serving the AAS membership, and thank all of you for that opportunity.

This has been another busy spring. I am delighted to report the start of the AAS Astronomy Ambassadors program. The program will train undergraduate and early graduate astronomy students to be effective in engaging in a wide range of outreach efforts in their local communities. This new initiative is in keeping with our Mission and Vision Statement (http://aas.org/about/mission_and_vision), as I mentioned in the November-December newsletter, and addresses several parts of our Strategic Plan and goals (http://aas.org/about/strategic_plan). In March, I chaired a brainstorming meeting with Education and Outreach Coordinator Rick Fienberg, who is overseeing the details of the initiative, Executive Officer Kevin Marvel, Astronomy Education Board members Ed Prather, Suzy Gurton, and Carol Christian, ASP's Andy Fraknoi, AIP Society for Physics Students director Gary White, NASA HQ's Rita Sambruna, and Afterschool Alliance Director of STEM policy (and former Bahcall Fellow) Anita Krishnamurthi to develop an implementation plan. We will offer free 2-day workshops and lodging to junior members immediately preceding our AAS meetings, to provide training on addressing and engaging diverse audiences, as well as information on tools and resources, and on finding and designing outreach opportunities. Astronomy Ambassadors may decide to carry their outreach to schools, afterschool programs, clubs, scout troops, museums, etc., depending on their situation. We will begin with a pilot workshop at the winter 2013 meeting in Long Beach with about 30 students, and eventually develop an online training program for students who cannot make it to an AAS training workshop. An upcoming revamped AAS website will serve as a networking hub for Astronomy Ambassadors to share ideas and experiences and tap existing resources. Stay tuned for the details and registration opportunities.

I can't escape mention yet again of the ongoing AAS role in advocacy for astronomy in the federal budget. In response to the proposed Presidential budget for FY2013, the Division for Planetary Sciences issued a call for action, and the AAS Executive Committee, with input from Bahcall Fellow Bethany Johns and the Committee on Astronomy and Public Policy, posted a statement, <http://aas.org/governance/resolutions.php#nasafy2013>. In March I testified on Capitol Hill on behalf of the AAS to the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies regarding astronomy in the FY2013 budget, <http://aas.org/node/4786>, as I did last year, and the AAS provided Congress with written testimony as well: <http://appropriations.house.gov/Calendar/EventSingle.aspx?EventID=282261>. My term in office included the roll-out of the astronomy and astrophysics decadal survey in 2010

and the planetary sciences survey in 2011, and will end with the heliophysics survey in 2012; the AAS will continue to advocate for the recommendations of the surveys. Besides CAPP and Council actions and the ongoing policy efforts by Kevin Marvel and Bethany Johns, the new AAS Communicating with Washington initiative (http://aas.org/policy/cww_sign_up_form) as well as AAS involvement in Congressional Visits Day each April is bringing many new astronomy voices to the Hill.

My term as president ranks as one of the best experiences of my life. I have immensely enjoyed working with the dedicated, caring, hard-working councilors and AAS staff, all striving to make the AAS the best organization it can be. I am proud of what we have been able to accomplish during my term through our collective efforts. I will highlight the Council activities that stand out to me these past two years in addition to the ongoing AAS successes with journals and meetings and the excellent work of our many committees and divisions.

Regarding committees and divisions, I am very excited that we approved a new Laboratory Astrophysics Division (LAD), the first new division in over 30 years. LAD will be formally welcomed at the Anchorage meeting. We also formed a Sustainability Committee to encourage our membership and the Society to go green, and added a longitudinal study group to an expanded Demographics Committee, to keep tabs on our members' diversity and careers.

On equality, we revised AAS By-Laws Article X on Nondiscrimination in Professional Activities to include a broader statement of our philosophy of equality of opportunity and treatment for all members. We also welcomed the formation of a Working Group on Gay and Lesbian Equality (WGLE), and presented a special certificate of appreciation posthumously to former astronomer Frank Kameny, who spent a career working for equality for homosexuals.

On federal policy issues, we submitted testimony to Congress and have had ongoing op-eds and Congressional and agency visits about Decadal priorities for astronomy and astrophysics, planetary sciences, and heliophysics. We started a Communicating with Washington initiative of weekly visits by AAS members to Capitol Hill, which Bethany Johns helps facilitate. We also submitted an Amicus Curiae brief to the Supreme Court regarding the right to privacy in JPL background checks; Lee Anne Willson and Kevin Marvel, who wrote the brief, were present for the Supreme Court hearing.

At meetings, we now have a large closing reception instead of a more restricted banquet. We have started a Media Intern opportunity at meetings, in which astronomy graduate students interested in science media participate in press activities with Press Officer Rick Fienberg and write blogs and tweets about the meetings. Starting in Anchorage, we will host a student-Officer breakfast at our summer meetings, to foster more interactions with our junior members. We will also host a focus group at meetings to discuss how to improve the AAS and the meeting experience.

Several new prizes were started: the Kavli Foundation Plenary Lectureship prize, in connection with the opening lecture, the Lancelot M. Berkeley – New York Community Trust prize for meritorious work in astronomy, as the closing lecture, and the Rodger Doxsey Graduate Student Travel prizes. We named two new honorary (international) AAS members, Malcolm Longair and Yasuo Tanaka. We also welcomed a new Patron of the Society, Ilene Osterbrock. We presented special certificates of appreciation to Roger Blandford, Lynne Hillenbrand, and Michael Moloney for their efforts leading the Astro2010 decadal survey. We also presented certificates and AAS junior memberships to student prizewinners at the National Society of Black and Hispanic Physicists convention.

Regarding outreach, we are about to begin the AAS Astronomy Ambassadors Program mentioned above, which will train and engage undergraduate and early graduate student researchers in outreach to their local communities to foster interest in astronomy and in STEM careers. We are remodeling the Harlow Shapley Visiting Lectureships Program, including being proactive with under-represented minority schools.

In terms of governance, we have produced manuals for the Executive Officer Succession Plan, the AAS Presidency, and the AAS Vice-Presidency, and are working on one for the AAS Council. We have also produced a set of metrics by which to measure the success of the Society and its meetings in terms of our mission and vision statement and strategic goals, and have started compiling statistics to help us evaluate trends and improvements.

In closing, I give my heartfelt thanks to all the wonderful, dedicated officers, councilors, AAS staff, and division and committee leaders who overlapped with my term, for their wisdom, initiatives, cheerful service, and camaraderie. Kudos to outgoing Vice President Lee Anne Willson, Councilors Dick French, James Lowenthal, and Jennifer Wiseman, Publications Board Chair Richard Green, and Astronomy Education Board Chair Tim Slater. Thanks too to Bethany Johns, Rick Fienberg, CAPP chair Jack Burns, and CFO Kelly Clark, who have all helped me enormously. I especially thank Kevin Marvel for his patience, advice, encouragement, cooperation, and good humor in working with me tirelessly to help further the goals of our mutually beloved AAS. And from the bottom of my heart, I thank the AAS members. I look forward to seeing you all in Alaska and in my carefree days at future meetings!