Young Investigator Perspectives. Networking and service through professional societies

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This editorial continues our Young Investigator Perspectives series with a commentary from Dr. Karen Edelblum, University of Chicago, who has contributed much to the APS GI & Liver Section on behalf of trainees. I hope this will encourage other trainees and young faculty to consider broad participation in our professional societies and help shape the future of annual meetings and our discipline. I thank Dr. Edelblum for her thoughtful perspective.

—P. Kay Lund

As a young scientist, becoming involved in a scientific society can be perceived as both exciting and intimidating. Often, students and postdocs will first seek society membership when they plan to attend a conference or at the urging of their mentors, who are already active society members. Only once you begin attending conferences or other society-sponsored symposia does the importance and value of scientific societies become most evident.

Societies act as a tangible gateway for a scientific community to interact with the general public and policy makers. These organizations serve to further the scientific research agenda through several avenues including communication with the public, influencing legislative policy and publicizing research discoveries. A majority of societies devote significant resources toward the recruitment, education, and career development of young investigators. In fact, a significant percentage of society membership is made up of and dedicated to its trainees.

Two examples of scientific societies with a strong scientific community focused on gastrointestinal research are the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA) and the American Physiological Society (APS). Trainees in both basic and clinical science comprise 11% of the AGA membership (9% in the United States and 2% international). In addition to the AGA’s prior educational programs geared more toward clinical trainees, the AGA is developing a Trainee & Young GI Track Committee to bring greater focus to mentorship and leadership development. In a basic science-focused society such as APS, trainee recruitment is even higher: 15% of APS membership is made up of undergraduate and graduate students alone. These numbers do not account for postdoctoral scholars (these are considered regular members) or young investigators transitioning from postdoc to junior faculty; therefore, the total trainee population is substantially larger. As a result of the high percentage of trainee membership in APS, trainees currently hold 17 positions on 10 different APS committees. In addition to these, the steering committee for each section within the society (including the GI & Liver Section) has a dedicated trainee representative.

The trainee perspective is critical for professional societies, because young scientists will eventually matriculate into the regular membership, and also because their perspective is often underrepresented in other venues. As scientists progress through their careers, they may become less familiar with the issues facing young investigators. Trainee participation in committees ensures that the society leadership is aware of trainees’ aspirations and current concerns, which provides important guidance on programming of sessions and symposia to fit trainee needs.

As a graduate student, I thought that my only contribution to a scientific society could be an abstract submission. This misrepresentation highlights that the highest barrier to entry into committee service for trainees is the knowledge that trainee representative positions exist. During my first year as a postdoc, my mentor encouraged me to apply for the APS GI & Liver Section trainee representative position. As a new APS trainee member, I had no idea what to expect, but I was offered and accepted the position with hopes that this might extend my own professional network and importantly, that I could work to ensure that other GI research trainees become more visible in the section and society. With no previous committee experience, I found myself a member of both the GI & Liver Section Steering Committee and the Trainee Advisory Committee (TAC). The GI & Liver Section Steering Committee handles all aspects of programming for our symposia; featured topic, oral, and poster sessions; and the section awards. The TAC influences programming and initiatives specifically geared to all trainees across all APS sections, including the APS Trainee Symposium at the Experimental Biology (EB) conference, the Dale Benos Early Career Service Award, and the APS Trainee Survey.

Attending my first TAC meeting at the APS headquarters in Bethesda, MD was initially a little daunting. However, I quickly found ways to tailor my committee service to my primary areas of interest. Since I plan to remain in academic research, I gravitated toward issues pertaining to trainee membership and undergraduate recruitment. In addition, I was able to increase the visibility of GI & Liver Section trainees’ research by promoting our section’s annual trainee symposium during the Experimental Biology meeting. This separate symposium hosts a poster presentation contest for additional travel awards and highlights selected GI & Liver trainees’ abstracts through oral presentations. Depending on how you choose to serve, you can help shape a society’s strategic plan, identify gaps in career development or trainee education programs, develop scientific outreach opportunities, or help organize scientific symposia.

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Committee service exposes how societies work behind the scenes and opens the door to learning about multiple aspects of science beyond the bench. These opportunities are particularly useful if you are a graduate student or postdoc undecided on your future career path. Involvement with a society increases your exposure to new areas of science and also allows you to network with senior investigators, society leadership, and other influential members of the scientific community. As a trainee, it is common to seek out mentorship within your home institution; however, it is invaluable to find mentors outside of your everyday scientific circle. These mentoring relationships may lead to future collaborations, facilitate guidance about potential career and job opportunities, and set the stage for long-term involvement or leadership positions within the society.

I should note that the relationships I developed with the other trainees serving on the same committees have become extremely valuable as my career has progressed. Whether you are selecting a postdoc, submitting your first grant, or generating a budget for your start-up package, fellow trainees from different institutions at the same career stage offer unique insight and support as you make transitions throughout your career. These connections form long-lasting peer networks and mentors within and outside your specific discipline.

On the other hand, many trainees and PIs may think that committee service could be a distraction from work at the bench or our primary research activities. To avoid this potential pitfall, I carefully chose two or three projects based on my interests and was careful not to overcommit and take away from the time I needed to move my research forward. Most of my committee work focused around an annual meeting and required little additional effort during the rest of the year.

Although I was initially hesitant to become involved in committee work as a trainee, my choice to participate in three years of committee service was one of the best career decisions I have made. The time and energy you invest into a society as a trainee is returned to you through the advantages of networking, mentorship, name recognition, and experience gained. Last but not least, it gives you as a trainee a way to contribute to the scientific community beyond authorship on a publication.