Achieving Speaker Gender Equity at the American Society for Microbiology General Meeting

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ABSTRACT In 2015, the American Society for Microbiology (ASM) General Meeting essentially achieved gender equity, with 48.5% of the oral presentations being given by women. The mechanisms associated with increased female participation were (i) making the Program Committee aware of gender statistics, (ii) increasing female representation among session convener teams, and (iii) direct instruction to try to avoid all-male sessions. The experience with the ASM General Meeting shows that it is possible to increase the participation of female speakers in a relatively short time and suggests concrete steps that may be taken to achieve this at other meetings.

IMPORTANCE Public speaking is very important for academic advancement in science. Historically women have been underrepresented as speakers in many scientific meetings. This article describes concrete steps that were associated with achieving gender equity at a major meeting.
Two other outcomes were striking. First, the percentage of all-male speaker sessions was reduced tremendously, and second, the gender difference among conveners disappeared, such that all-male conveners teams were equally as likely to invite female speakers as those that included a female convenuer (Fig. 1). A positive correlation between the presence of at least one woman on the convenuer team and the percentage of women speakers was observed when the data from the five meetings were combined (Fig. 1).

These results establish that it is possible to achieve gender equity among speakers in a major scientific meeting in a reasonably short time frame. Although increases in female speaker participation followed two interventions with the Program Committee involving first the presentation of gender statistics and second a verbal plea to do better with gender balance, I caution that this report merely establishes an association between these interventions and increased female participation and remind the reader that association is not causation. Although it is conceivable that the increase in female participation was a result of the inclusion of more topics where female scientists were better represented, I do not think this explains the data since the overall mix of scientific topics at the ASM GM is fairly constant year after year. Another possibility is that women have more women in their scientific networks and that their presence in convenuer teams resulted in more suggestions for women speakers. In this regard, the establishment of networks can contribute to success for women in science (9).

It is likely that making the committee aware of the gender statistics influenced their decisions, increasing the number of female conveners and potentially encouraging shepherds to be more pro-
active in enhancing female participation in their assigned sessions. Particularly noteworthy was the observation that the difference in female speakers associated with convener teams that included at least one female convener disappeared in 2015. One explanation for this effect may be that all-male convener teams responded to the data presented to the committee and published previously (7) and decided to actively recruit more female speakers. Alternatively, it is possible that all-male teams felt that they were under increased scrutiny and increased their selection of women speakers. Whatever the explanation, the outcome resulted in significantly increased numbers of women speakers.

Among ASM members, women now constitute the majority of the students and postdocs (7) and therefore represent the future of the society. Thus, it is important to convey the message to the next generation that in this field there is no “glass ceiling” with regard to gender. Since selection as a speaker is an important form of recognition that can carry tangible benefits with regard to career development, the achievement of gender equity at the ASM GM will, I hope, convey the message that both genders are welcomed into the accomplished ranks of the Society. In this regard, all-male sessions are potentially problematic, as they could be interpreted as indicative of areas with poor gender balance that are perhaps not as welcoming to women. The near eradication of all-male sessions at the 2015 ASM GM shows that it is possible to effect change in this type of session format and thus avoid any subtle negative messages to female scientists in training and younger faculty members.

Our results suggest three strategies that may be used to increase the participation of women in meetings where better gender balance is needed and desired. First, obtaining gender data from prior meetings and presenting them to the Program Committee can increase awareness of inequities in gender balance. Second, the increased representation of women among those who select speakers was associated with increased female speaker participation. Third, direct instruction to the committee can help focus the group on reducing inequities in gender balance.

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I served as Chair of the ASM GM Program Committee for the years 2014 and 2015.

REFERENCES