Letter from the Chair

Fall greetings to our visitors, friends, supporters, and members of the Committee on the Status of Women in Microbiology (CSWM)!

Let's review our activities at the recent ASM General Meeting in Toronto. This year, our booth was located on the exhibitor floor, convenient for all participants who were visiting exhibitors and posters. Our committee had identified that post-doctoral women microbiologists have special issues and considerations and, as a group, are somewhat neglected by ASM. Hence, we distributed a questionnaire to booth visitors who were post-docs. The results of this survey are presented in this newsletter.

Our Open Meeting was held on Wednesday, May 23, at the Fairmont Royal York Hotel. This was an open forum where participants voiced their issues and concerns about careers in Microbiology. We have summarized and examined the issues presented from the open meeting and from the post-doc survey; we plan to address some of these issues at the General Meeting to be held in Boston in 2008, with a symposium entitled “Climbing the Professional Ladder Without Falling Off.” The open meeting was followed by our reception, a social event that gave everyone an opportunity to meet and network with fellow microbiologists. Our open meeting and reception continue to be popular, well-attended events.

Our scientific session, held on Wednesday, May 23, was very well-received; some attendees could not gain access to the room due to overcrowding. Our topic was “Biodefense in the Home: Women as the First Responders.” Our speakers included Rita Colwell, the renowned former director of the NSF and current Distinguished University Professor of the University of Maryland. Other recognized speakers were Stuart Levy of the Tufts University School of Medicine, Kathryn Boor of Cornell University Food Science Department, Douglas Lowy of the NCI/NIH Center for Cancer Research, and Linda Stetzenbach of the University of Nevada Department of Environmental Health.

Alice Neeley, Director of Infection Control from the Shriners Hospital for Children, co-convened the session with me.

We hope to meet and greet you next year at the General Meeting in Boston, 2008. We are working hard in planning our events for that meeting.

Lorraine Findlay, Ph.D.
CSWM Chairperson

! NOMINATE!

Every year the American Society of Microbiology solicits nominations for its Scientific Achievement Awards. These awards range for research awards in basic and applied microbiology to teaching and service. Despite the 26 different award categories, year after year women make up the minority of recipients in all categories. The problem is not a lack of good female candidates, but a lack of nominations for these excellent scientists. So… if you know of a female microbiologist who is deserving of recognition for their valuable contributions to our field, nominate them!!

Details for each of the awards as well as nomination instructions can be obtained from the ASM website at:

http://www.asm.org/Academy/index.asp?bid=2099

The problem is not a lack of good female candidates, but a lack of nominations for these excellent scientists.
The Roche Diagnostics Alice C. Evans Award

Supported by Roche Diagnostics Corporation, the Alice C. Evans Award recognizes contributions toward the full participation and advancement of women in microbiology. This award was established by the American Society for Microbiology’s (ASM) Committee on the Status of Women in Microbiology, and is given in memory of Alice C. Evans, the first woman to be elected president (in 1928) of the ASM.

Recipients are a member of ASM who have made major contributions toward fostering the inclusion, development, and advancement of women in careers in microbiology. Awardees must have demonstrated a commitment to women in science through mentorship and advocacy and by setting an example through scientific and professional achievement.

Award recipients are asked to write a letter for the CSWM Communicator to share insight into topics relevant to women in microbiology. We are privileged this year to have a letter from Martha M. Howe, Ph.D., Van Vleet Professor of Virology, University of Tennessee Health Science Center (UTHSC), Memphis, Tennessee.

Dr. Howe has been a role model and mentor for many women in science through her functions as a professor, lecturer, graduate student trainer, seminar speaker, pre-submission grant reviewer, and former President of the ASM. She has advocated for women in science as a panel member for National Science Foundation Visiting Professorships for Women, as a long-time member of the American Women in Science and Graduate Women in Science organizations, and as a member of the American Association of University Women. Dr. Howe has ensured that women scientists are represented and recognized for contributions in scientific organizations, institutions, and universities, and has spoken to women’s groups at multiple colleges and universities. At UTHSC she helped establish a Committee on the Status of Women and continues to serve as Co-Chair of the Mentoring Subcommittee of that group. As the Chair for the ASM Task Force for Reorganization of National Institutes of Health (NIH) Study Sections, she promoted the inclusion of accomplished women scientists among those nominated by ASM to serve on the NIH panels that reorganized various microbiology-associated study sections.

A Few Words of Advice

Martha M. Howe, Ph.D.

It has been most humbling and rewarding to receive the 2007 Alice Evans Award. I am especially grateful to my former Ph.D. students Anna Karls and Kalai Mathee and postdoc Wilma Ross for preparing and sending forward my nomination. I also thank the members of the selection committee who found my activities worthy of this award. When Anna asked for my CV and said not to ask why, but to be sure I included my activities in support of women, I thought to myself “I can’t be qualified for recognition based on my contributions to women --- I haven’t done enough.” I have simply done my job as I perceived it should be done, with the belief that men and women are equally talented and therefore, without doubt, should be provided equal training, opportunities, and mentoring. That is just what I have done, and enthusiastically so, because helping colleagues and budding young scientists is so rewarding. I once told a colleague, “I do experiments, write papers, give lectures, and serve on committees to fulfill my responsibilities and advance my career; the mentoring I do for me.” It provides me great satisfaction to help someone by sharing the tips that were at some earlier time shared with me. Throughout my career I have been very fortunate to benefit from the consciousness raising and cultural changes won in difficult battles by our predecessors. Mentoring is my way of repaying that debt and doing my part to help the current and next generation of women scientists.

When Lorraine asked me to write this article for the CSWM newsletter, I had no idea what I should write about. My life trajectory has been similar to those of many academics and, fortunately, without the discrimination faced by many women scientists. So, I decided to share with you a few “nuggets” of wisdom I have gained over the years. Most will be relevant to the academic arena, since that is where my experience lies, but others may be able to apply them to their situations by substituting different tasks.
Committee Service

When you become a woman faculty member, you will be deluged with invitations to serve on departmental, college, and university committees. There still aren’t many of us, but having had their consciousness raised, most leaders want at least one woman on each committee. The same thing is true for minority faculty members. At first it is nice, because you meet many faculty, they appreciate you and what you do, and you get to learn how the department and university operate. You will soon find, however, that committees can take a great deal of time and are significant distractions from your research and teaching responsibilities. My suggestion is to decide up front how many committees you should serve on at any one time. Once you have said “yes” to that number, say “no” to the rest. One good way to say no is “I would really like to serve on your committee, but I am already on # committees and can’t take on any more right now while I am getting my lab set up (and/or preparing new lectures and/or writing a grant application).” How to decide how many? This number will depend on where you are and their expectations of you. This is something you might ask about during your job interviews or discuss with your department chair or other senior faculty member once you have accepted the position, but well in advance of the requests. My suggestion is none or one in the first year, one or two in the second and third years, and subsequently not more than three at any one time; in later years, if possible, one should be at the college or university level. Some of you will join departments that give new faculty the first semester or entire first year off from both teaching and committee service. If yours does, focus on your research program and apply the above when it becomes relevant.

Setting a balance

You have probably heard about the academic “three legged chair”, with research, teaching, and service as the legs. Although this image implies that the three legs are of equal importance and often are stated as such by administrators; in reality that is almost never the case. Teaching and service are both important and, if done poorly, can prevent you from getting tenure; but in most cases even outstanding teaching and service will not earn you tenure if your research record is weak. This is a particular problem for women faculty because we are genetically programmed to want to do a really good job on our teaching, service and committee activities. Since these latter tasks have defined and frequent deadlines, they constantly tug at us, pulling us away from our research.

So, set and strive for a realistic balance. Ascertain in discussions with other faculty and administrators what the research vs teaching value system at your institution is in practice. Then set a balance that doesn’t put you at risk. Keep reminding yourself what your balance should be and try to reach it.

“I do experiments, write papers, give lectures, and serve on committees to fulfill my responsibilities and advance my career; the mentoring I do for me.”

Time management

Prioritize the time you give to your tasks, assigning time first to those which are the most important (i.e., research), and dividing the remaining time between the others. For example, if you only have one afternoon you can devote to a task, e.g., grading and writing comments on exams, divide the time by the number of exams to decide how many minutes you can spend per exam. That may mean you have to stop writing comments part of the way through a poor exam, but that is the right thing to do. You must live your priorities, or your actions will make something else a higher priority by default.

Minimize interruptions

Organize your time and workplace policies so that you minimize interruptions when you are doing your most important tasks. Since it can take as much as fifteen minutes to get our thoughts back to where we were before the interruption, just a brief interruption once every fifteen minutes can prevent us from accomplishing anything! Figure out when you are the most clear-headed and productive and block off that time for yourself to accomplish the most important things you have to do. Note that it is not the length of the interruption that is the problem; it is the loss of focus and getting it back that takes the time. You will have to come up with strategies that give you that time. I find that spending the morning reading or writing papers and grants in the library lets me get much more done and with much less stress because it is uninterrupted time; I just put a sign on my office door saying “I am working in the library; I’ll be back between 1 and 2 pm. When I need to be working in my office, I put a “Please do not disturb until after 1 pm” sign on my office door, or a note that says “Please come back during office hours (# - #), leave me a note, or send me an e-mail”. One of my colleagues has another one, “Emergencies only! (and that means fire or blood!)”. When I am spending many mornings a week in the library, I leave a note saying where in the library
I can be found; it is amazing how much less time-sensitive an interruption becomes if it requires the interrupter to walk across the street to the library. Some (who don’t need 8 hours of sleep a night) use the time late at night or early in the morning at home; however, home too can be distracting. Figure out what works for you and do it.

The rocks and the jars

Finally, I will share with you the image that has made it possible for me to implement these “prioritize” and “manage your time” instructions. Imagine two large glass jars and two identical sets of bowls with sand and different sized rocks in them. In one jar the sand is put in first and followed by the rocks in order of increasing size. In the other the largest rocks are put in first and followed by the rocks in decreasing size and, finally, the sand. The second jar holds everything because the smaller rocks and sand fill the spaces left between the larger ones. In contrast, there is not enough room left in the first bottle to accommodate the larger rocks. Your research time should be the largest rock; set it aside in a block and do it. You will still get many of your other tasks done too, because you will fit them into the smaller chunks of time in the rest of your schedule.

In closing, I must warn you that living your priorities will be a constant battle; at least it is for me. The key is to keep trying, celebrate your successes, and recognize that someone has benefited from your failures. I hope that this article is an example of the latter.

Post-Doctoral Survey
Susan Bagley, Ph.D.

The Committee on the Status of Women (CSWM) conducted a survey on “Issues Related to Postdoctoral Women” at the 2007 Annual Meeting in Toronto (available at the CSWM booth in the Exhibit Hall). It was designed to obtain preliminary information to aid in directing CSWM efforts for a new initiative related to the issues and concerns of postdoctoral women. The survey was deliberately kept very short, asking these three questions:

1) How can the CSWM be of help to you?

2) Would you be interested in attending a get together or meeting with other postdoctoral women? If so, what kind of event do you think would be most helpful?

3) If the CSWM started a postdoctoral mentor program, would you be interested in participating?

The responses to this activity were overwhelmingly positive. In fact, many women sought out our booth after receiving an e-mail sent to the CSWM e-mail list (asmwomeninmicro@asmusa.org). Women in all career stages were not only interested in but provided good comments and discussions on how the CSWM could be of assistance. Although the survey was originally intended for women currently in postdoctoral positions, there were quite a few women who had just recently completed postdocs or who were anticipating being postdocs within the next year or so who also contributed to the survey results.

1) How can the CSWM be of help to you?

The individual responses from 37 surveys were grouped into several more general responses. The results are reported as percentages of surveys with these general responses. (The percentages to not add up to 100% as several surveys had more than one response for this question.) The responses generally fit into two areas: career planning; and gender issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career Planning</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Provide guidance in choosing a job or postdoctoral position.</td>
<td>49%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide opportunity/guidance in finding a mentor.</td>
<td>22%</td>
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<td>Provide opportunities for networking.</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide information about research funding opportunities.</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (retirement planning, information on teaching, lab management, etc.)</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Gender Issues</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Provide greater awareness of the jobs/positions for women in microbiology and unique issues that women face in their careers.</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide advice on balancing a career and family.</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide information on advocacy/ombudsman on gender discrimination</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
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2. Would you be interested in attending a get together or meeting with other postdoctoral women? If so, what kind of event do you think would be most helpful?

All respondents said “Yes” and 22 provided suggestions. As with the response to question 1, the individual responses were grouped into several more general responses. The results are reported as percentages of surveys with these general responses.
Social (meet and greet) event. 32%
Seminar with discussion. 23%
Interactive workshops. 23%
Activities held at branch or general meetings. 18%
Panel of women answering questions. 5%

3. If the CSWM started a postdoctoral mentor program, would you be interested in participating?

All the respondents stated “yes”, with the exception of one who felt she would need more details before making a decision either way.

Based in large part on this information, the CSWM-sponsored session at the 2008 Annual Meeting will focus on “Climbing the Professional Ladder without Falling Off.” This session’s speakers will address many of the issues raised in the survey, including selecting and evaluating a mentor and building a career and a family at the same time. These and other issues will be of interest to both women and men. In addition, the CSWM’s open meeting will focus on discussion of issues – and solutions – raised in this survey, moderated by Dr. Martha Howe, recipient of the 2007 Alice C. Evans award.

For more information on the committee, including other editions of the CSWM ‘Communicator’ Newsletter, please go to:

We look forward to your ideas, input and enthusiasm.

Kind regards,

Hazel A. Barton, Ph.D.
CSWM Fall Newsletter Editor