

A New Design for the ASM General Meeting

“The opening meeting was very auspicious, there being over thirty in attendance. The persons joining in the organization of the society included bacteriologists whose lines of study covered a wide range of subjects. Among them were those devoted to the study of pathology; others studying hygiene. Others, again, are engaged in the investigation of agricultural topics, and yet others are interested in the industrial problems of bacteria. Some papers were also presented upon purely biological aspects of bacteria. The wide range of branches represented [illustrated] the need of some organization to centralize the work and bring to a common point information of mutual interest.”

—From the Inaugural Meeting of the Society of American Bacteriologists (now the American Society for Microbiology), December 1899 (*Journal of Applied Microscopy*, vol. III, no. 1, pp. 661–662, 1900)

As we assemble in New Orleans this May, attendees of the 111th General Meeting of the American Society for Microbiology will represent an enormously diverse group. This diversity is advantageous, as the field of microbiology is undergoing revolutionary change and many of the most important discoveries are occurring at intersections between disciplines. These not only include subdisciplines within microbiology, but seemingly disparate fields that range from engineering and nanomaterials to synthetic biology, ecology, and human development. As was recognized over a century ago by the founders of what is now the ASM, although we focus on different topics, the underlying principles are often the same and cross-pollination of ideas and approaches yields huge benefits. The General Meeting provides opportunities to delve deeply into the latest advances in specific areas of interest, and just as importantly, it allows attendees to explore fields that lie beyond their immediate areas of expertise. It is this ability to provide both breadth and depth that makes the meeting unique.

The longevity of the General Meeting testifies to its robust nature and its ability to adapt to the dynamic field it represents. It is in this spirit of continued evolution that a task force was commissioned to evaluate the organization of the meeting and to help chart its future course. Bonnie Bassler, Roberto Kolter, Stan Maloy, Lucia Rothman-Denes, and the three of us served as members, and the purpose of this editorial is to provide the background and rationale for a new design for the General Meeting that will debut this coming spring.

BACKGROUND

The General Meeting that we have come to know was the result of incremental modifications that had been made over a period of many years. In addition to poster sessions, workshops, and Sunrise Symposia, three types of scientific sessions constituted its core. The first, Symposia, were proposed by ASM members following solicitation by their Divisions. Ideas were collated and evaluated, and each of the four Divisional Groups selected sessions for inclusion in the final program, generating 80 Symposia. Colloquia were introduced in 1997 to provide a mechanism for offering multidisciplinary sessions of broad interest that transcend the divisional structure. These were programmed by a Colloquium Advisory Committee with members chosen by the Chair and Vice Chair of the meeting, and each year approximately 20 Colloquia were crafted. Finally, a variety of additional sessions were programmed which included Award Lectures, the President's forum, and 10 to 12 Special Interest Sessions put forward by the American Academy of Microbiology, the Archives Committee, the Public and Scientific Affairs Board, and other groups.

A notable feature of this process was that it provided significant

opportunities for input by ASM members and their elected representatives. This input from the grassroots constituency of the Society should be preserved and augmented in any new design. However, there were also limitations, some of which were repeatedly reflected in evaluations from meeting attendees. The first involved challenges with quality control and coordination. Scientific sessions emerged from multiple parallel pathways that operated in relative isolation. Not surprisingly, this led to redundancy, omissions in the program, variable quality, and a tendency to revert to the “same-old-same-old” in terms of topics and speakers. A second issue reflected the sheer volume of sessions and frustration with simultaneous programming of topics of high interest. With over 140 scientific sessions, 16 to 18 of which ran simultaneously in both morning and afternoon, it was nearly impossible to avoid overlap between concurrent sessions. Differences between Symposia and Colloquia had also become blurred to the point where few attendees seemed to know or care about the difference, and while many sessions were standing room only, others attracted exceedingly (and sometimes embarrassingly) small audiences. Third, there was a growing concern in the clinical microbiology community, which accounts for 1/4 to 1/3 of the meeting's attendance, that their needs were not being optimally met by the General Meeting program. Finally, from the vantage point of many of the organizers, the static process for crafting the meeting stood in contrast to the dynamic field it represented, and this inhibited innovation and creative programming. In light of these and other considerations, a set of priorities were identified to guide the development of future General Meetings.

PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES

A new mission statement has been adopted by the Society: “The ASM General Meeting showcases the central role of microbes in the biosphere by communicating today's cutting edge science in the diverse areas influenced by microbes. The breadth of this meeting provides participants with opportunities for immersion in fields of specialization as well as forays into different disciplines.”

And the new design for the meeting is intended to reflect the following priorities:

Published 23 November 2010

Citation Miller, J. F., M. McFall-Ngai, and A. Casadevall. 2010. A new design for the ASM General Meeting. *mBio* 1(5):e00240-10. doi:10.1128/mBio.00240-10.

Copyright © 2010 Miller et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License, which permits unrestricted noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Address correspondence to Jeff F. Miller, jfmiller@ucla.edu.

- The format for the General Meeting should be flexible and provide organizers with the ability to innovate, optimize, take advantage of unanticipated opportunities, and incorporate the most exciting advances in the field.
- The organizational process should be inclusive and effectively solicit the ASM membership for their most creative and timely ideas for scientific sessions and speakers.
- The organizational process should be integrated and allow coordination, oversight, and quality control at every stage.
- Scientific sessions should emerge from a competitive process that selects the very best and operates in the absence of entitlement or historical precedence.
- The General Meeting should showcase new data and new approaches. Choices for speakers should strike a balance between nascent talent and luminaries and reflect the diversity of our membership, both domestic and international.
- Scientific sessions should combine full-length presentations by established investigators with shorter talks by students, postdoctoral fellows, and new faculty. These are formative experiences for young scientists and there is wide recognition that the meeting should provide such a venue.
- The new format should focus on decreasing the number of sessions while increasing their quality.
- The ASM should make every effort to contain costs and make the General Meeting more affordable to its members.

THE NEW GENERAL MEETING

Perhaps the most important change in the programming process is simply the accommodation of change. The new format is intended to be dynamic and able to adapt, with variables to be optimized over time. The salient transformations involve the overall structure of the meeting and the manner in which it is assembled.

Structure. The 2011 meeting will begin with an opening program on Saturday evening followed by three full days of scientific sessions. This is in contrast to the prior format which involved a program extending from Sunday evening to Thursday afternoon. By starting on Saturday and eliminating a half-day, time spent away from work is decreased and lodging costs are lessened as well.

The most dramatic changes involve the number and nature of sessions. As described in the accompanying editorial by T. J. Walsh et al. (*mBio* 1(5):e00294-10, 2010), a parallel meeting, specifically tailored to the needs of the clinical microbiology community, will be programmed as a “Medical Microbiology Track.” These sessions will occur alongside all the others, allowing ample opportunities for integration. The rest of the meeting, the “General Microbiology Track,” will include basic molecular microbiology, host-microbe interactions, microbial ecology, microbial evolution, and environmental microbiology, and the format will be substantially different from the norm in years past. Each morning will feature four concurrent plenary sessions focused on interdisciplinary topics of broad interest. The goal is to showcase transcendent science, with topics selected for minimal overlap and maximum appeal. Afternoons will include 12 concurrent scientific sessions focused on more specialized topics. A particularly exciting feature of afternoon sessions is that they will include a mix of 30-minute presentations by established investigators and 15-minute talks by graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, assistant professors, and other young scientists. As in years past, poster

sessions, award lectures, and special interest sessions will be programmed throughout the day.

Advantages of the new format include (i) a combination of sessions specifically designed for breadth (morning) or depth (afternoon), (ii) the ability to highlight young microbiologists by integrating their talks into full-fledged scientific sessions, (iii) a more manageable quantity of sessions to meld with a new programming process focused on integration and quality control, and (iv) the ability to make year-by-year adjustments to optimize the program.

Programming. The bulk of the meeting will be organized by a single group, the General Meeting Planning Committee (GMPC), run by the Chair and Vice Chair of the General Meeting. The GMPC includes the four Divisional Group Representatives, the Chair of the ASM Meetings Board, and 25 to 30 individuals chosen to represent breadth, depth, and science of the highest quality. Similarly, the Medical Microbiology Track will be assembled by a panel from the ASM’s Clinical Microbiology Task force (CMT).

The establishment of working partnerships between planning committees and the ASM membership are key ingredients for successful programming. For both plenary and specialized sessions organized by the GMPC, suggestions for topics and speakers will be solicited through a general Call for Proposals issued to all ASM members. Submitted ideas will be collected and refined at the divisional level and presented to the GMPC by the Divisional Group Representatives. Provisions will be made for members that do not affiliate with Divisions to forward their ideas for consideration as well. The GMPC will select the very best proposals in a competitive process, modify them as needed, and guide their subsequent development. GMPC members are also free to propose sessions to fill gaps and to ensure that the latest advances are well represented. A similar process will be adopted by the CMT for programming the Medical Microbiology Track.

This modified format will ensure that any given session is developed not in isolation, but in the context of the total program. This will provide a level of coordination and integration that has not been achieved in recent history, and it will allow the organizing committees to ensure that the meeting’s objectives are being met. It also takes advantage of the well-oiled divisional structure of the Society without imposing a balkanized structure on the meeting. Divisions will continue to manage abstract reviews and poster sessions as in years past, and they will also have the opportunity to identify particularly outstanding abstracts for 15-minute oral presentations in afternoon sessions.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Although many challenges are associated with producing a high quality meeting of this magnitude, a few deserve mention. The first involves the divisional structure of the ASM, which has in many ways co-evolved to support the General Meeting. The challenge is to implement change in a way that increases involvement by members and avoids disenfranchising those vested in their Divisions. The revised format incorporates multiple opportunities for Divisions and Divisional Groups to play key roles in the programming process and also promotes involvement by ASM members that do not belong to Divisions. A second challenge is to better serve the clinical microbiology community. The organizational approach for the Medical Microbiology Track provides an exceptional opportunity to tailor to the needs of this important constituency. Finally, perhaps the greatest challenges are to pro-

duce a meeting that expands our thinking, reflects the most exciting advances from every corner of our field, and does so year after year to provide unparalleled experiences for all attendees. As has been true for the last 110 years, this is very much a work in progress. We hope you will join us in this most recent metamorphosis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Bonnie Bassler, Roberto Kolter, Stanley Maloy, and Lucia Rothman-Denes for serving with us on the General Meeting Task Force. We also thank Alison O'Brien and the ASM Council Policy

Committee for commissioning this effort, the ASM Divisional Group Representatives for their suggestions and enthusiasm, and Connie Herndon and Candace Spradley for administrative support.

Jeff F. Miller

Meeting Task Force

Margaret McFall-Ngai

Chair, ASM General Meeting

Arturo Casadevall

Vice Chair, ASM General Meeting