

The Big ASM Tent: How to Represent the Microbial Sciences?

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The microbial sciences represent far more than what many consider covered by traditional microbiology. Our new strategic vision recognizes that we are more expansive as a field and as a Society than we were when we began over 100 years ago.

We have seen more and more scientific disciplines engaged in understanding why and how all life depends on microbes. It is amazing and wonderful to see the expansion of interest in microbes to people who do not think of themselves as microbiologists.

It is clear to me that as the microbial sciences continue to prosper, more ways must be found to include new disciplines and groups under the ASM tent. This proposition is obvious, but there are some concerns.

Despite our best intentions, we have not been as inclusive as we should be. For example, we have seen real and perceived exclusion from ASM of several groups with major interests in the microbial sciences.

There are some lessons to be learned from these experiences. In the late 1970s, virologists left ASM and formed their own society basically to have welcoming common ground in an annual meeting completely devoted to virology (1). Despite having at least two divisions focused on virology, virology sessions at the ASM General Meeting for years were poorly attended, which reinforced the negative feelings. The virologists argued that a smaller meeting run by them had several positive features that would enhance their science.

A few years ago, the clinical microbiologists expressed concern that ASM was not meeting the needs of its membership. In 2010, they met with ASM leadership and discussed ways to ensure that ASM could be responsive to the needs of its community (2). A task force was created to address these needs, and the group has remained within the ASM tent and has seats on the Council and on the Council Policy Committee (CPC). They also have a clinical track in the larger ASM meeting.

Is there a problem with these two different outcomes? No! As biologists, we know that form follows function. What is happening is the evolution of group behavior: if one venue does not support or foster your group's perceived well-being, another venue evolves and begins to prosper. Often these evolutionary paths to improvement are one-way streets. For example, I do not think that we can expect virologists to abandon their society meeting completely and come back to the ASM Microbe meeting, but I hope going forward that there can be more collaboration and synergies among sister societies. I was president of the American Society for Virology (ASV) and know how vibrant and exciting that organization is for its members. On the other hand, many virologists continue to be members of ASM and continue to support our *Journal of Virology*, making it a premier international journal.

There is a message here: ASM has a range of products and services that can work for groups that also require some autonomy. ASM must continue to facilitate scientific integration while recognizing the need for group autonomy. One change meant to

promote cross-disciplinary science is the integration of the General Meeting and ICAAC into the new ASM Microbe 2016. This meeting is designed to provide a more welcoming environment for all microbial sciences. We are expanding and evolving the bandwidth of the meeting by organizing content into broad scientific and professional "tracks" covering the breadth of the microbial sciences rather than focusing on particular microbes or disciplines. Participation of special interest groups is absolutely essential for coverage in many of those tracks. ASM has always encouraged member-initiated topics and sessions at its general meeting. However, now more than ever, it is clear that the integration of disciplines and technology is essential for discovery and translation of research findings. Such integration is difficult to achieve when autonomous groups isolate themselves.

Our Society is much more than a single meeting. Our job is to make our members better off because of our Society. There is no magic wand to achieve this goal, just the conviction that we will constantly evolve. We must understand what various groups need and act promptly on this information. The key phrase is "constantly evolve"; the only constant in today's world of scientific societies is change.

What does ASM provide its members now? Beyond providing a connection to 40,000 scientists, ASM is a leader in scientific publishing with many scholarly journals and magazines, as well as textbooks and other publications. The world of publishing is a dynamic adventure, and we are working to be at the forefront with technology and innovation. We offer members and special interest groups political power and recognition through the Public and Scientific Affairs Board, whose members are regularly sought after to speak for microbiology in Washington and around the world. We also offer highly effective staff to organize and run meetings, both large and small. We have strong international connections with the Committee on Global Engagement and the Committee on Sustainable Development. We have the American Academy of Microbiology, which provides a structure to recognize exceptional achievement by members of our profession and a "think tank" to deal with key issues in the microbial sciences. We provide strong member services that include historical archives, geographic branch activities, career development, and support for students and underrepresented members. We have a significant effort in education that focuses on undergraduate teaching and postgraduate education programs. We have efforts in international education and lab capacity building, minority education, technology-enhanced education, and outreach activities. In addition, we have

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efforts that focus on professional practice, communications, and marketing, as well as strategic alliances that benefit our members. Clearly, our society provides a rich menu of services for all members.

However, to evolve as an organization focusing on member needs, we must regularly revisit our offerings and anticipate what members may need tomorrow. We must be true to our new strategic vision.

It is imperative that we continue to refine/improve our efforts as a society to be welcoming and supportive of every group working in the microbial sciences by providing them an inclusive annual meeting as well as access to our powerful services and technology in return for membership. We should encourage all microbial sciences groups and members of various societies to join ASM, not because our general meeting will be “their” meeting, but because there is a larger mission; we are stronger as a federation of like-minded scientists and educators than we are as small outposts of independent contractors.

What can ASM do to make our tent more inclusive? Here are a couple of examples: the clinical microbiologists have a “meeting within a meeting” at the general meeting following a clinical track that concentrates talks, posters, and workshops in their area of interest. ASM has a unique relationship with clinical virology members and convenes a symposium annually. We organize several specialized meetings outside the general meeting for more

focused attention to special topics involving small numbers of participants. These events often occur through the action of the ASM Conferences program (use <http://conferences.asm.org/> to see how that process works). We could and should do more, of course. I am sure that there are many other ideas, but to find and implement them, we all need to communicate and work together.

It is essential for ASM to be even more welcoming to all groups working in the microbial sciences. It will not happen overnight, but we can start right away by having conversations centered on questions like how we can work together, how we can advance your mission together, and what ASM can do to help your organization.

The future of the microbial sciences is very bright, and we all have a common mission and a deeply shared history. Society depends on our work as researchers, educators, and practitioners. In times of diminishing resources, working together accomplishes so much more than working separately.

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