



## Ask Professor Sarah Bellum

*Professor Sarah Bellum answers your questions on navigating the often-uncharted waters of early career development. Professor Bellum is communicated by Patricia L. Clark, founder of the Early Careers Committee and a member of Council. Do you have a question for Professor Bellum? Send it to [sarahbellum@biophysics.org](mailto:sarahbellum@biophysics.org). Your privacy is assured!*

### Getting Ready to Lead

**Q:** I'm a postdoc, but I received an email from the Biophysical Society asking if I would co-chair the platform session I am speaking in at the Annual Meeting! I recall the box to check on the abstract submission form about chairing a session, but I didn't check it; I assumed chairing is only for professors. I'm flattered, but I have no idea what co-chairing entails. Should I wait until I meet my co-chair at the session to figure out what we are going to do?

**A:** First, congratulations! It is an honor to be asked to co-chair a platform session. Co-chairing a session as a postdoc is a great opportunity to get your name and face out there at a time when you should be planning ahead to secure your next position.

However, co-chairing a session is a big responsibility. Platform sessions consist of eight 15-minute talks—12 minutes for talking, three minutes for questions and answers (Q&A)—with no breaks. It is crucial that the talks stay on time. Many attendees will move between concurrent platform sessions to hear talks on various subjects, which will be impossible if the timing of any of these sessions gets off track. A/V staff will time each talk, control lighting, supply laser pointers, and troubleshoot computer/projector problems. The timer includes colored lights to show how much time remains. You must introduce each speaker on time, ask them to wrap it up if they fail to observe the red

light on the timer, and moderate each Q&A. Succeeding at these tasks will help your platform session run smoothly and will strongly illustrate your leadership potential to your co-chair, fellow speakers, and everyone in the audience—including future employers!

### Before the meeting

A month before the meeting, you and your co-chair will receive the names of the speakers in your session, their talk titles, and contact information. Do not assume that your co-chair has more session-chairing experience than you do. Even if he or she is more senior, this might be his or her first experience chairing a session, too. Email your co-chair, introduce yourself, and suggest that you meet in your assigned auditorium 20-30 minutes before your platform session begins to get organized.

Email the speakers to introduce yourself and your co-chair and ask that they arrive 15 minutes before the session begins to give everyone a chance to test their presentations and hear how the talk timing will work. If you are unsure about the pronunciation of their names, ask how their names are pronounced. Copy your co-chair on these emails. Forward any questions from the speakers that you can't answer to Society staff.

### Meeting day

When you arrive at your platform session room, and meet your co-chair, decide who will introduce which talks. Ask your co-chair to introduce you and the other speakers in the session in which you are speaking. Introducing yourself is awkward, and it means that you'll be responsible for policing your own talk and Q&A timing. Even if you think you can do this, once you start talking about your exciting results or get lots of thought-provoking ques-

tions from the audience, it's easy to lose track of time—which won't win you any leadership points!

Introduce yourself to the A/V staff and ask them to go over how the timing lights will work. Make sure your own talk loads and displays correctly, and test out the laser pointer. Ask the A/V staff if they will handle the switchover from one speaker's computer to another, or if this is your responsibility.

When your speakers arrive, introduce yourself and confirm the pronunciation of their names. Introduce them to the A/V staff, who will help them hook up their computers. Make sure to confirm with each speaker when he or she should stop talking, when the timing lights will change color, and that you will moderate the Q&A. Go through this process with each speaker, regardless of his or her seniority.

### Staying on schedule

During the session, you and your co-chair should sit on the elevated stage at the table designated for this purpose. You will more easily be able to cut off a long-talking speaker. If he or she ignores your polite hand signals to finish up, stand up. This will signal to the speaker that you are about to interrupt him or her because time is up. If the speaker ignores this action, too, you have a microphone with which to ask him or her, loudly, to please stop talking in the interest of fairness to the other speakers. A speaker whose talk extends beyond 15 minutes sacrifices their Q&A period, but some audience members won't realize this. If a question starts, use your microphone and say, "I'm sorry, but in order to make sure that all speakers receive their allotted time, we must move on now." You'll be in position to moderate the Q&A and introduce the next speaker. Finally—one of the highlights of co-chairing a session—you'll be visible, helping your name and face become more broadly known.

If a speaker's talk is short, let the speaker keep answering questions to fill up the allotted time.

But what if a speaker gets few questions—or worse, no questions at all? Plan to have a question of your own ready to ask. Sometimes it takes the audience a few moments to formulate questions, especially if the speaker's talk ends

abruptly. Jump-start this process by tossing out the first question, potentially sparking several more from the audience. This means that you and your co-chair will need to be active lis-

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teners for each talk, and ready with some reserve questions for each speaker. Remind the audience to use the floor microphones. If someone sitting up front forgets, ask the speaker to repeat the question before answering so that everyone can hear it.

If a speaker doesn't show up, it's not the end of the world. A speaker scheduled late in the session might arrive before his or her talk. Late speakers won't know what the timer lights signify, so they may need more encouragement to finish promptly. If a speaker is truly absent, you unfortunately have only one option: Announce that the session will break for 15 minutes to keep the session's timing on track. This may be uncomfortable, but the audience (and anyone moving between concurrent sessions) will silently applaud your decision to wait out those 15 minutes.

### Wrapping it up

Your last responsibility is to manage the applause. When each talk concludes, start off a firm round of applause. Wrap up each Q&A by inviting the audience to join you in thanking Speaker X again. That second round of applause cues the next speaker to take the stage. At the very end, thank your co-chair and speakers for a great session, and wrap up with one last round of applause. If you managed time carefully and ensured that each speaker got at least one question, that final applause will be as much for you as it is for the other speakers.