



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. Your privacy is assured!

How can I improve the chance of my abstract being selected for a platform presentation?

Q: As an active member of the Biophysical Society, I have enjoyed presenting posters at the Annual Meeting over the years. This year, however, I was very keen to contribute to a platform session and requested that my abstract be considered for a talk. Indeed, I also volunteered my services for the arduous task of chairing a platform session. But yet again, my abstract was programmed as a poster rather than a platform talk. Is my research not of sufficient interest to the biophysical community? I regularly see some of the same faces providing talks at the Annual Meeting. Why are they selected and others not considered?

A: Competition for platform session talks at the Biophysical Society Annual Meeting is steep: for the 2012 Meeting, over 3,700 abstracts were submitted. Roughly a third of these submissions requested a platform presentation, which amounted to three times the total number of speaking slots available (~400). But there are several things that you can do to improve your chances of having your abstract selected for an oral platform presentation. Here, I have focused specifically on the Biophysical Society and its Annual Meeting, but I suggest you also consult other sources for more general advice for packaging and promoting your research—a quick search of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* web site using the key words “research networking publicize” returned 196 articles in their “Advice” section alone!

First, make sure that you select an abstract category that is a good fit for your research. Will the members of this community find your results interesting? The answer can help decide between two categories that might initially appear to be equally good fits for your research. For example, if you characterized the unique folding properties of a novel protein structure using fairly standard fluorescence techniques, your results will likely be of more interest to the protein folding community than the community of biophysicists who develop novel fluorescence techniques. And of course, write your abstract in a way that clearly demonstrates and objectively supports a significant contribution to the body of knowledge in your chosen category.

Second, pick a popular abstract category. The Society is committed to sponsoring an Annual Meeting that reflects the diverse interests of its membership, but given that there are many more requests for platform talks than slots available, platform sessions are typically programmed for abstract categories that receive at least 40 submissions. You can use the past Meeting programs^[1] to figure out which categories tend to be popular each year. However, 40+ submissions is a guideline, not a rule: it varies depending on the number of total abstracts submitted, and abstracts from “small” categories are often combined to create additional platform sessions in areas that do not receive enough submissions to be considered independently. But do not despair if your research does not fall within a pre-existing popular abstract category: see below for alternative suggestions for how to land a speaking slot.

Third, make sure you and your research are on the radar of those selecting platform speakers. After the abstract submission deadline, each member of the Program Committee and the Council of the Biophysical Society will be assigned to one or more specific abstract categories. These members of the Society are responsible for deciding which abstracts are selected for platform talks versus poster sessions. The most popular categories receive hundreds of submissions each year, so it is important

to make sure that your abstract stands out from the crowd. Over the long term, the best way to do this is to publish high-quality articles in high-quality journals. But if you do not yet have a publication record in your abstract area, or if your publications have not yet produced a platform invitation, you can further increase the visibility of your abstract by getting the members of Council and the Program Committee in your area and related ones to know you and your research, as these are the people most likely to select speakers for platform sessions in your area.

A great way to get to know the members of Council and the Program Committee is to be an active participant in the leadership of the Society, either by becoming a member of a Society committee or participating in subgroups. Many current and past members of committees and Council first got involved with the governance of the Society because they were interested in participating in the subgroup governance or annual meeting programs developed by the Society committees. In addition to putting you in closer contact with the people who decide which abstracts are selected for platform sessions, joining a committee or subgroup is a great way to give back to the broader biophysical community, and support the efforts of the Society.

Networking matters because we are all very busy, and abstract programming is yet one more task added to an already too-long to-do list. Council and the Program Committee want to put together the strongest possible Annual Meeting program, but they do not have the time to decipher impenetrable abstracts or do the background reading required to understand the significance of a specific argument outside their own research sub-field. Some also worry whether people who they do not know will give a strong oral presentation. One unfortunate consequence of these concerns is that it becomes all too easy to select speakers who have spoken before. So, make it easy for those in charge to select your abstract: write clearly, and become known as a good speaker. Even if you are currently struggling to secure speaking slots, you can use other mechanisms to increase your visibility in your research area: Ask thoughtful questions after other talks, and introduce yourself to session organizers, members of Council, and Program Committee members. Briefly mention what you work on and

why it is fascinating. It would not hurt to point out that you are a dedicated Meeting attendee and would be thrilled to give a talk at a future Meeting.

Fourth, consider other ways to secure a speaking slot at the meeting. Abstract categories – like research areas – are not static, and the Annual Meeting has mechanisms in place to help members organize around new and emerging areas. One of these is the annual New & Notable Symposium, where members can nominate themselves or others for consideration for a late-breaking talk at the Meeting. As a member, you should receive an email from the Society asking for New & Notable nominations in November. Another option is to submit a proposal to chair a member-organized platform session. This requires arranging in advance (typically by September) with seven other abstract submitters to participate in your proposed platform session, and describing how your session topic is not addressed by existing platform sessions. Proposing a member-organized session requires more work from you than submitting an abstract to an existing category, but it can be a great way to help a community focus around an emerging technique or finding. Complete details for developing your proposal are available on the Annual Meeting web site ^[2].

Finally, please do consider the possibility that, particularly if your research focus has shifted over time, you might now have moved into a field that, while fascinating in its own right, is not well-represented within the Biophysical Society. The Society has an obligation to host an Annual Meeting that is representative of its membership, and if your area represents <1% of the membership, it is not likely that your area will be featured at the Meeting. In this scenario, you can either try to attract more members of your field to participate in the Biophysical Society and its Annual Meeting—perhaps assembling a member-organized session, described above—or start a subgroup that will attract more researchers in your field to the Meeting, thus increasing membership and posters in the field.

References

^[1] <http://www.biophysics.org/Meetings/AnnualMeeting/Past/tabid/2255/Default.aspx>

^[2] <http://www.biophysics.org/2013meeting/Abstracts/SessionTypes/tabid/3557/Default.aspx>