COMMENT

Making ACS meetings welcoming portals to the society

KEVIN EDGAR, CHAIR, COMMITTEE ON MEETINGS & EXPOSITIONS

At its strategic planning session in New Orleans this spring, the ACS Committee on Meetings & Expositions (M&E) established new objectives for the committee. I wanted to discuss some of them with you because ACS meetings are for many of us the first and the most frequent contact we have with the organization. Meetings are also an important benefit for ACS members and contribute to the health of the society.

One major focus area for M&E will be making meetings more welcoming to early-career scientists. The large number of attendees at an ACS national meeting; the 33 division programs; the many other technical, governance, and social events; and the spread of events across a wide geographic area can be intimidating and confusing to people attending their first ACS meeting. Divisions are welcoming and one of the primary reasons a young scientist returns for future ACS meetings, but how does one find the right community among all the noise?

In recent years, we have been remarkably successful in attracting students to ACS meetings; it is one of ACS’s success stories. The key going forward is to improve the experience of those students at ACS meetings so they want to return, join, and become lifelong participants in all of the activities that make up the ACS enterprise.

As we look at ways to make ACS meetings more welcoming to these early-career scientists, one question we ask ourselves is whether the traditional poster sessions are the most effective and modern way for early-career scientists to present their work. Currently, presenters are cramming years of data onto a poster and creating a dense, nearly indecipherable nest of graphs, tables, and text. Then they have to carry that poster in a tube—which has to somehow fit into an aircraft overhead bin—and lug it across the world. Finally, the presenter pins the poster up on a board and hopes that the right person will wander by that evening, to whom they can tell their story.

We need to find a way to better integrate poster and oral sessions, thereby enhancing attendance by the leading lights of the division and encouraging more interaction of our young scientists with these influencers. Could short oral presentations on a portable device, flat screen display, or other method of image conveyance be a more practical, attractive, and informative way to get the story across? Could we do a better job of integrating more poster sessions with the exposition and increase traffic, as well as create more opportunities for members to see what cutting-edge products and services that businesses are offering chemists?

Another M&E initiative aims to enhance industrial member attendance at ACS meetings. The proportion of industrial ACS members has dropped in recent years, and it is critically important to all of our members that we maintain strong connections to industry. We understand that much of the loss of industrial members is a result of economic trends that ACS cannot control and has a limited ability to influence. We are looking at ways to create a more inclusive industrial community at meetings, to connect with the expo, and to enhance the overall industrial member experience.

As chemists, we understand the value of designing experiments that will give us insight into whether a given innovation will yield the desired results, and carrying out those experiments to provide a clear answer in a way that does no harm. M&E is committed to carrying out experiments with new meeting platform innovations using that same approach.

For the 2021 meeting in Atlanta, Thursday programming will be eliminated. This experiment is inspired by the historically lower attendance on Thursdays and intended to show the impact of canceling Thursday programming on scheduling, finances, and audience participation. The

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impacts cannot be determined until we actually try the experiment. We will continue to examine other potential program innovations designed to enhance program appeal, including concentrating the national meeting program in a smaller space (reducing meeting costs and travel time between sessions for attendees) and creating better opportunities for divisions and presenters.

Other M&E goals include making meetings more affordable and enhancing member attendance at meetings across the full spectrum of regional and national meetings. Subcommittees of M&E and task forces with other committees, including the Younger Chemists Committee and Divisional Activities Committee, will take the lead in developing actions and metrics to reach these goals. They welcome your input and ideas. Feel free to get in touch with me or with M&E staff liaison Robin Preston, and we’ll pass your ideas along to the appropriate working group.

Together we can make ACS meetings more welcoming, modern, and attractive places for learning, networking, building careers, and finding new products, with the ultimate goal of benefitting our members.

Views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of C&EN or ACS.