

NEWS

Keystone takes minority views on board

US-based Keystone symposia are famous for being geared towards the scientist's scientist — serious meetings about the latest research, much of it unpublished. But recently, organizers have started giving promising young scientists a chance to do more than just present their results: a select few actually have a hand in assembling the slate of prestigious presenters.

As part of a new kind of diversity programme, Keystone allows five postdocs or assistant professors from under-represented minorities to participate in its intense peer-review process. They will help to set the research agenda for one of the largest schedules of biomedical research conferences in the world. The Keystone Symposia on Molecular and Cellular Biology hold between 55 and 70 meetings per year, predominantly in North America but occasionally in Asia, Europe and Africa.

Most science-conference organizations offer scholarships to increase attendance by scientists from under-represented minorities. But this is the only one that brings them into the inner circle of the planning process.

"This is the behind-the-scenes stuff that makes the scientific enterprise work and, usually, early-career scientists don't see

this," says Laina King, director of Keystone's Diversity in the Life Sciences Programs in Silverthorne, Colorado. The fellows participate in meetings of the scientific advisory board to set the topics, organizers and speakers for all Keystone symposia to be held in two year's time. Keystone, says King, includes these young scientists in the conference-planning process in hopes of increasing the number of scientists from under-represented minorities who participate as speakers and organizers at future meetings.

Cherié Butts, a Keystone fellow in 2009 and a staff researcher at the US Food and Drug Administration in Bethesda, Maryland, says that the programme taught her the importance of name recognition. "This showed me how people select others to give talks and the real importance of people actually knowing who you are," she says.

Fellows attend two scientific advisory board meetings, each lasting two days, and sit in via teleconference on several subtopic planning sessions during the year. They are encouraged

to take an active part. David Wilson, a 2010 fellow, proposed an immunology meeting topic that immediately ran a gauntlet of tough questions. "I was able to defend it and it made it through the initial cuts. That was

really fantastic," says Wilson, a senior research scientist at the National Institute on Aging in Baltimore, Maryland.

Other fellows say that the programme has taught them to be more forward-thinking in their goals. "I'm thinking slowly compared with these established researchers who are thinking two R01 grants ahead," says Dana-Lynn Kóomoa, a postdoc at the Cancer Research Center of Hawaii in Honolulu.

The Keystone advisory board members say that they also benefit. "It's transforming us," says Andy Robertson, chief scientific officer for Keystone. "Our board is a high-powered bunch and I've seen how much more comfortable they are talking about race and diversity with these successful postdocs and young faculty."

Kendall Powell



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PROSPECTS

The method and madness of publishing

Publishing papers involves bureaucratic and clerical challenges. Marwan Azar suggests ways to cope.

The process of publishing a scientific paper is twofold. Most important, it involves the attainment, integration, assessment and correction of knowledge, a process more commonly known as the 'scientific method'. But it also requires navigating a minefield of administrative and bureaucratic issues.

Scientists pride themselves on a systematic approach to discovering the natural world. "The scientific method is a potentiation of common sense, exercised with a specially firm determination not to persist in error," wrote Peter Medawar, the 1960 Nobel laureate in medicine. My experience as a postdoc in infectious diseases for the past nine months has shown me this method at work. It has been a privilege. But although conducting the science that goes into writing a paper is rewarding, publishing has, unfortunately, as much to do with exasperating administrative issues.

At times, a bustling top-tier academic lab can be likened to a war zone. Research projects, grant applications and papers under

preparation are often elbowing each other for position at the front line. Postdocs are scrambling to collect, enter and manage data while simultaneously analysing completed studies and writing manuscripts. Principal investigators are charged with immense responsibilities, including funding and staff issues, as well as collaborations that take them far beyond the borders of the home lab.

For principal investigators and postdocs alike, it can all start to seem a bit like madness. Yet, despite the piles of unentered data, half-written abstracts and unanswered e-mails, researchers can and must make sense of the chaos — so that their findings can be distilled into a cogent, cohesive and engaging scientific article.

This conundrum does have solutions. The key to getting things done in a lab, it seems, is quality communication. A ten-minute face-to-face conversation can get things moving more effectively than an hour-long exchange of e-mails, which are painfully susceptible to misunderstandings. Regular

and on-demand research meetings are also essential tools for receiving comments and guidance from mentors and other scientists. When physical attendance is impossible, videoconferencing is a valuable option. However, when the workload overwhelms all lines of communication, my experience has taught me to be patient. No amount of rushing or panicking will help. Eventually, the tide will recede, leaving the paper ready to be picked up.

Every researcher hopes to navigate the road to publication. It is a validation of years of training and a recognition of contributions to a field. As a budding scientist, I realize that the industry of publishing, while paying homage to the scientific method, is riddled with bureaucratic madness. The method is a privilege and the madness is a challenge — but one that we must embrace.

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