

Commentary

Women at the Podium: ACNP Strives to Reach Speaker Gender Equality at the Annual Meeting

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In the 2015 annual meeting of the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology (ACNP), 70% of plenary speakers and nearly 40% of speakers for the competitively chosen Panels and Study Groups will be women. At the same time, attendees' ratings of the scientific quality of the meeting has increased and ACNP remains a vibrant meeting where invitations to attend are highly sought after. Here we describe the steps that were taken to increase speaker gender equality at the meeting and provide suggestions for further improving participation in the future.

WHY HAVING WOMEN SPEAKERS MATTERS

Speaking roles for women scientists at major meetings often under-represent their contributions to the field. Even in disciplines that enjoy numerical majority by women, speaking roles at meetings are substantially higher for men (Carr *et al*, 2015; Isbell *et al*, 2012). Psychiatry, psychology, behavioral pharmacology, and related neuroscience fields relevant to the scientific mission of ACNP include a substantial proportion of women who increasingly contribute to the field's productivity. This contribution should match the speaking roles at ACNP annual meetings. The considerable number of male-only panels and small percentage of total women speakers as recent as 2010 (Figure 1) indicated that it did not.

Speaking at major meetings matters greatly for professional advancement because it raises exposure and visibility to peers of one's work. Such exposure can increase the likelihood for publishing in higher-tier journals, increase citation of the work, promote collaborations, and help with job recruitment. That is why speaking invitations are highly prized and are considered by university promotion committees.

Although exclusion of women from speaking roles may seem to be a 'woman's issue,' it is not. First, ACNP membership includes Medical School Deans and Chairs of major Psychiatry and Neuroscience/Neurobiology Departments. It is in the interest of these leaders that the investment they have made in hiring women faculty pay off. The prestige and exposure that an ACNP speaking role presents for these women can be a critical component of their promotion, and thus retention, in academia. Second, the quality of the science presented and the scientific dialogue can benefit. A diverse group of speakers can lead to a more vibrant meeting, exchange of novel ideas, and forging of new collaborations. Finally, ~50% of neuroscience graduate students and psychiatry residents are currently women (American Psychiatric Association, 2014; Society for Neuroscience, 2013). These young women are far more vocal in social media and conscious of sexism in science. They are turned off by meetings that have the appearance of being run by the #oldboysnetwork. If we want to attract the younger talent to the College, we need to have a speaker lineup that proportionally looks like their graduating class.

HOW DID THE WOMEN SPEAKER PARTICIPATION AT ACNP IMPROVE IN A SHORT TIME?

The College intensified the efforts to increase women membership and participation in 2011 through the initiatives by then President Eric Nestler. A Women's Task Force was formed and was charged to collect data, among other tasks, on gender disparity in speaker roles at the annual meeting.

The Plenary speakers are invited by the leadership including the College President and editors of *Neuropsychopharmacology Reviews*. The recent programmatic effort by the leadership to include women for these lecture spots has made a tremendous difference (Figure 1).

To improve representation of women for the competitive portion of the program, the number of women appointed to the Program Committee was increased (Figure 1) and a simple addition was made to the call for proposals: 'While scientific quality is paramount, the committee will

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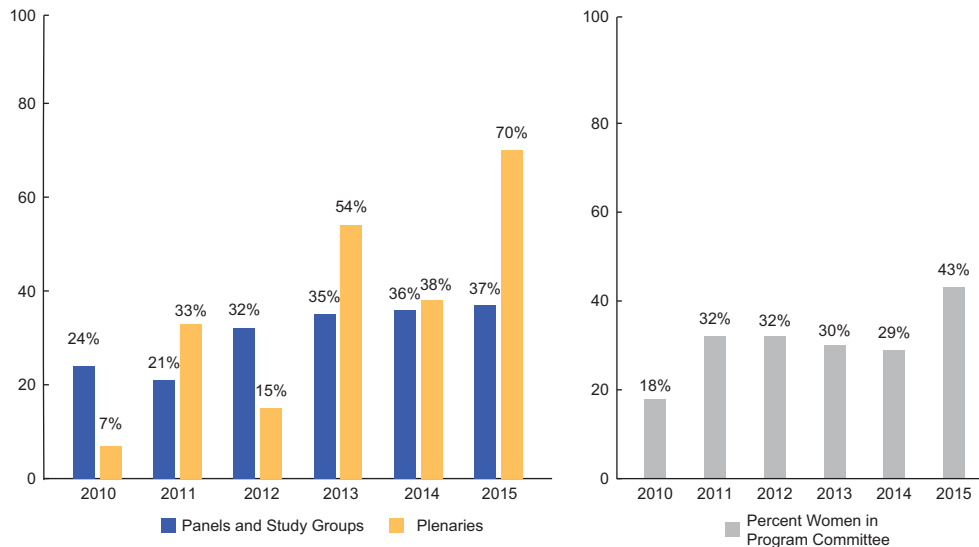


Figure 1 Percentage of women (left) presenters at the annual ACNP meetings and (right) on the program committee in the last 6 years.

strongly consider the composition of the panels that include women, under-represented minorities and early career scientists and clinicians.’ In the last 2 years this step alone was sufficient to lead to >90% of submitted and accepted proposals for Panels or Study Groups to include at least one woman. This increase is not surprising because in these contexts exclusion of women is rarely the result of explicit bias. Thus, for a highly competitive process where chairs of the proposals would want to maximize their chances of getting their Panel or Study Group accepted, this simple addition was sufficient to improve the deliberate inclusion of women in the proposal in a very short time.

HOW CAN WE DO BETTER?

Although nearly all of the accepted (and rejected) Panels and Study Groups in 2014 and 2015 include at least one woman presenter, the total number of speakers has hovered around 35%. We believe that this can improve. The key is, of course, for the membership to include more than just one woman in a proposal.

There are four factors that need to be overcome to accomplish this.

First is a common complaint we hear from the membership, especially the more senior members, that “we don’t know any women” in X and Y fields to include in the proposal. This complaint is not specific to ACNP. Women in computational neuroscience were so tired of this excuse that they started a list (<http://anneslist.net/> led by Anne Churchland) with the names of >140 women neuroscientists in various fields related to systems, computational, and cognitive neuroscience. Although this site is managed privately by a woman scientist, scientific societies and groups such as Women in Cell Biology provide comprehensive women speaker lists for meeting organizers. An effort by the College to provide a similar list can be instrumental in

increasing the representation of women speakers in the annual program.

Second is the complaint that well-known women scientists often decline invitations to speak because they receive more invitations than they can accept. If you are one of these women and have to turn down an invitation, have a list of young women in the field whose names you can provide to meeting organizers.

Third is the concern of not knowing the person and ‘have never heard her give a talk; what if she does a poor job?’ How many of you have heard famous men scientists give dull talks? Are you taking a greater risk by inviting women to give talks even though you have never heard them give a talk before? Chances are that a thoughtful scientist can give a good talk.

Finally, we have heard the complaint, this time from younger women, who refrain from accepting an invitation because they feel that they are chosen not based on merit but because they are women. Has anyone heard a male scientist complain that he is being chosen because he is a man? So go ahead and accept the invitation and use the opportunity to promote your work.

We look forward to increased participation of women in speaking roles in the coming years and to an even more vibrant and scientifically outstanding annual meeting.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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