

President's Message



Dear Colleagues,

New presidents of SDB have often used their initial contribution to this forum to say how wonderful the national meeting was (this year's was no exception) and to thank all of the organizers for the terrific job they did (which they amply deserve this year as well). They then encourage SDB members to attend the next national meeting (University of Washington, Seattle, WA July 17-21, 2014) and their local meetings, and are told of other benefits of SDB membership. Having now done most of that, I would like to write instead about other types of participation.

We are a terrific community of scientists doing important and exciting research. Too few of us, however, are involved in community outreach or in efforts to present our concerns to government officials. I feel we should not let ourselves and our science be secret. We should be more visible, sharing our excitement about the work we do and expressing our opinions on community, state, and national issues that affect science. Here are some ideas of what we can do.

SDB members should work at the local level helping their communities and making their science more visible. Several years ago people at Columbia arranged with a local restaurant to host a talk by a different member of the science and medical faculty on the first Monday of every month (between 5 and 6 pm, a time when the restaurant normally did not have many customers). Participants in what has been called Science Café were charged \$10 for the talk (and one drink), and the event was very popular. The restaurant got new customers, people learned about science from scientists, and the speakers had an opportunity to see how the lay community reacted to their work. In fact the only people who complained were professors in Humanities, Social Science, and the Arts at Columbia, who, seeing the enthusiastic community response, wanted their own Cafés to talk about their work.

Science issues are community issues, since they affect the local economy and education. We should make our voices heard—write letters to local newspapers, participate in decisions on education, and speak to local officials about science issues. With regard to education, SDB members should consider inviting a high school teacher into the lab for the summer, so he or she can get first hand bench experience, which they can convey to their students. Additionally, this year has seen the publication of the [Next Generation Science Standards](#) for K-12 education (see also the National Science Teacher Association [update](#)). These standards, developed by scientists and educators, are now being considered for adoption by 48 of the 50 states. See what your state is doing with regard to their adoption, and learn how you can have your say in the decision.

We should also encourage our students to be involved in outreach. Some departments establish programs run by graduate students and postdocs that are involved in community outreach, e.g., putting on public lectures, taking elementary and high school students through the labs, and tutoring precollege students. At Columbia students and postdocs (as well as faculty) teach in the Science Honors Program that now hosts over 700 of the most talented high school students in the New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey areas on Saturdays throughout the academic year. In addition, the New York Academy of Sciences has recruited graduate students from all over New York state to tutor elementary school students in the sciences.

On the national level, SDB members can write members of Congress, visit them in Washington, and invite them (in particular their specific representative and senators) for lab visits. FASEB, which includes SDB, has a wealth of information and suggestions on its [website](#) to help people reach out to members of Congress and their staffs. They also sponsor Capitol Hill Days as do other professional societies. In June some colleagues and I visited the office of an Indiana congressman and talked with his head staffer. During our discussions, we gave her an information sheet showing how many dollars were going to NIH-sponsored research in his district. Throughout our time with her, she kept referring to the information sheet and even asked us if she could keep it. We had made the impact of scientific research concrete and important to the Congressman's district.

You might think that these efforts, particularly letter writing, are minor and ineffective, but they are not. Members of Congress currently have a very poor idea of the strength of feeling in the scientific community, saying that they feel that scientists are not bothered by the stagnation of funding for NIH and NSF and especially the effects of the Sequester, because they do not hear from many scientists. If we want to retain and increase support for biomedical research, a topic that has been traditionally bipartisan, we need to communicate our feelings.

Finally, you can participate through SDB. Normally SDB works through FASEB in its lobbying efforts on public policy issues, but as you know, some issues are so important that we send requests for letters on specific topics to Congress directly to SDB members. I encourage you to participate in these efforts. When you do, remember that members of Congress and their staff are more impressed with letters (particularly hand-written letters) than with emails (which are important primarily because of their volume and less for their content, especially if they are readily identified as a copied form), so please take the additional time to personalize your letter. In addition, SDB has several [outreach opportunities](#). We welcome your involvement in them. I encourage discussions among SDB members at the regional meetings on what they can do together to inform government officials and the public about their science and science issues.

Because of our interest in developmental biology, the concerns of SDB and its members may not be addressed by other organizations. Thus, I am very happy to announce the establishment of a Public Policy Committee within SDB and even happier to announce that Carole LaBonne has agreed to be its first chair. If you have any suggestions for the new committee or have questions about public involvement by the Society and its members, please feel free to write to [me](#) or [her](#). We want to hear from you.

All the best,

Marty

Martin Chalfie, Ph.D.
President, Society for Developmental Biology, 2013-2014

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