

AAAS in Chicago: Dawn of a New Era?

The annual meeting had the usual panoply of scientific topics—but seeds of a new format were in evidence

Chicago—THIS YEAR'S ANNUAL MEETING OF the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) may signal the beginning of the end of a familiar breed. Faced with declining attendance, competition from other scientific meetings, and tight travel budgets that make scientists difficult to coax out of their labs, AAAS officials are revamping what has become an all too predictable yearly gathering of scientists, science administrators, science fans, and science journalists. Not that the AAAS is giving up on the notion of a big, interdisciplinary gathering. Instead, it is hoping to inject new life into future meetings by choosing symposia topics and meeting themes that will play more directly to the interests of the AAAS membership, that will more often present the unexpected, and that will meet higher standards of scientific quality.

The first inklings of the future that AAAS meetings coordinator Robin Woo has in mind was the effort to organize sessions into thematic tracks. There were several reasons behind this effort: On a practical level, it proved easier for attendees to figure out what might be up their alley. And there was something of a synergistic effect in ganging disparate but related sessions under a broader topical banner.

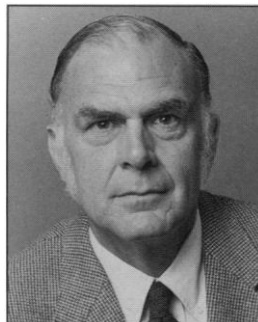
The more far-reaching changes Woo is contemplating won't make their debut until next year's gathering in Boston. In the past, the 22 AAAS membership sections (organized by scientific disciplines) wielded powerful influence over what topics would appear on the meeting agenda. In future, the sections will have to clear their proposals with a planning committee made up of a dozen scientists drawn from a variety of disciplines in both universities and industry. The idea is not to cut off input from section officers but, as incoming AAAS president F. Sherwood Rowland told a meeting of section officers last week, to fill gaps that ap-

peared in the program year after year.

These changes are coming none too soon. Past meetings have brought forth grumbling from all quarters: Speakers didn't like paying their own travel costs and finding nearly empty rooms when they gave their talks; many of those attending were either overwhelmed by the myriad, often seemingly unstructured session topics or disappointed that there weren't more sessions in their particular area of interest; and journalists—who accounted for 10% of 5000 total registrants at the Chicago meeting—have complained that scientists weren't presenting their newest results at the meeting, giving them little to write about.

AAAS board members are very aware of these difficulties. Every year, says former AAAS president Walter Massey, now director of the National Science Foundation, the board debates what to do about the annual meeting. Massey says that one of the meeting's most valuable services is its outreach to students—10,000 Chicago-area students participated in science activities on the first day of this year's meeting—and the opportunity it provides journalists to learn what's new in a variety of research disciplines. But Massey also admits that with his agency's restricted travel funds, travel to meetings had to be prioritized, and in most cases the AAAS meeting didn't make the cut.

Rowland, an atmospheric chemist from the University of California at Irvine, says one of his primary goals is to bring better quality control to the meeting. "The striking thing to me is the difference in the rigor that goes into selecting the reports and articles for *Science*, and the sometimes absence of anything approaching that [rigor] for the annual meeting." Rowland hopes that the new program committee can provide the necessary oversight so that AAAS can avoid criticism for sometimes presenting "flaky science" at the meeting.



Better science. AAAS President Rowland wants more rigor in selecting speakers.

Ultimately, though, it won't be the new program committee so much as its master—meetings director Woo—who will be in charge of implementing the meeting overhaul. To upgrade the quality of speakers, she hopes to increase the travel budget for speakers at the meeting. One obstacle to that, she acknowledges, is the losses that the annual meetings have been incurring. Woo has begun several other meetings ventures for AAAS—ones intended to make money as does the annual Human Genome meeting sponsored by *Science* each year. One of these new starts is Science Innovations—a multidisciplinary mega-show that will this year concentrate on techniques and instruments in biomedical research. Others include small technical meetings on narrow research topics. Together, these ventures are expected to bring enough revenue to offset annual meeting losses.

Which would leave the judgments about the success or failure of the meeting to the scientists instead of the bean counters. Kenneth Goldman, a philosopher at the University of Miami School of Medicine, is one of those who are taken by the promise of the meeting's unique audience and charter. He organized a session on computers and ethics in medicine where computer scientists, philosophers, and physicians presented papers on how expert systems and computer controlled devices were going to change the shape of medicine in the future. Goldman says those involved in health care are just beginning to realize the kind of problems that the use of computers will pose for the clinic of the future. "There are not a lot of venues to do a session like this," he says.

But if the AAAS meeting offers a unique opportunity for such a session, it still doesn't present scientists with an irresistible opportunity to strut their ideas. John W. Snapper, a philosopher at the Illinois Institute of Technology and one of the presenters at Goldman's session, admits that his decision to come to the annual meeting was easy since it was in his home town. Would he have come if he had to travel? "Maybe, and maybe not," he says, although he certainly thinks the topic is important. It will be Woo's job to make sure that in the future Snapper won't think twice about coming when invited.

AAAS president Rowland acknowledges that it is "difficult to imagine that AAAS will be the meeting of choice for all scientists." But he believes that the changes being contemplated will improve attendance, and it may be the meeting of choice for scientists interested in the intersection of science, policy, and ethics. ■ JOSEPH PALCA