

## EDITORIAL

# The Society for Neuroscience and the Undergraduate

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Suppose you are in your first year as an assistant professor -- in your dream job in a small liberal arts college -- with an assignment to teach a course in neuroscience to a class of eager, bright, upper-level undergraduates. Amongst the resources that you might expect to tap would be, perhaps, the Web site of the Society for Neuroscience ([www.sfn.org](http://www.sfn.org)). Maybe you have had experience with the Web site of the American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB) where the home page has an encouraging link called "Educational Resources" that takes you to all sorts of wonderful materials and images under "Resources for Teachers." Or perhaps you are familiar with the Web site of the American Physiological Society (APS), where a link called "Education," again on the home page, takes you to "Undergraduate Education" and linked resources that are plentiful and inspiring. So, with great expectations of finding a cornucopia of helpful links and materials, you go to the SfN Web site.

On the SfN home page you find a link called "Information for Educators." That looks promising. But hold on -- you find that the materials on this site are targeted to K-12 education and the lay audience. Where are materials for the undergraduate teacher?

A little research into this situation reveals that, indeed, SfN Council has decided to focus the Society's limited resources on K-12 ("get 'em in their critical period) and lay (especially members of Congress) education. The Society's committee in charge of overseeing the materials and projects for these two groups is called the Public Education and Communication Committee (PECC), a committee recently formed from the merger of the former Public Information Committee and the Committee on Neuroscience Literacy. (There seems never to have been an Education Committee devoted to undergraduate resources.) The charge to the PECC is on the Web site; it is extraordinarily long and detailed, but clearly does not include undergraduate or graduate education *per se*. That is, the PECC is charged to advise Council on how the SfN can best tell our kids, our high school students, our Senators and our Representatives about the brain, and about ongoing research and new knowledge. And certainly it does its job, providing an assortment of educational materials such as the Brain Briefings newsletter, promoting Brain Awareness Week, and fostering a program to partner neuroscientists with K-12 teachers. But it seems odd that the Society has no Education Committee devoted to education at all levels; indeed, the very title of the PECC implies that this committee is specifically *not* concerned with education of the membership or the rising membership. The continuing education of the members is the purview of the Program Committee -- through the Short Courses, for example. But where are the resources for the teaching of undergraduates?

Most of the members of the Society are not only

researchers but also teachers, and it is probably not an overestimate to say that thousands of the members teach undergraduates. The teaching posters at the annual meeting are one way that faculty can discover materials that could be helpful in undergraduate teaching; years ago, Council created this category and, wisely, decided the posters should be displayed for the whole time of the meeting. While some of us can't help complaining about the annual position of these posters in the farthest reaches of the exhibit hall (last year separated from the research posters by a formidable barrier of two rows of empty poster boards), at least it is possible to say to your colleagues—"Hey, did you see the poster on teaching X?" and the next day the poster will still be there for the colleague to inspect. As well, two years ago the Society agreed to a Workshop on Teaching Neuroscience, and last year again sponsored a workshop on Resources for Teaching Neuroscience, both targeted to faculty teaching undergraduates; the success of these Workshops has led to a third one being planned for the coming meeting. But these activities of the Society are confined to the annual meeting. Could the SfN not be more helpful year round to its members who need teaching resources at a higher level than high school?

Some concerned faculty argue that, in the ideal, there should be a separate Education Committee with a higher education charge. Such a committee, separate from educating the public and K-12, would provide resources for faculty who are teaching undergraduate and graduate students, and for the teaching of the membership through the Short Courses. As a simpler and more immediate step, Council could expand the charge of the PECC to include undergraduates; it would seem a minimal tap of the SfN resources to provide faculty members with links to resources for higher neuroscience education. For example, links to the Faculty for Undergraduate Neuroscience (FUN) and to this Journal (JUNE) seem so obvious that one wonders why they are not on the site right now (March 15, 2007). The answer, one supposes, is that no committee has the jurisdiction to request that they be there! Further links to regional organized groups, conferences, and publications, like N.E.U.R.O.N. (the North East Undergraduate Research Organization for Neuroscience) ([www.albany.edu/neuron/conference/mission.html](http://www.albany.edu/neuron/conference/mission.html)) or SYNAPSE (Symposium for Young Neuroscientists and Professors of the Southeast) ([www.cofc.edu/synapse/docs/mission.html](http://www.cofc.edu/synapse/docs/mission.html)) would also be helpful and would no doubt be readily supplied by the members who had put the energy into forming these groups. Other useful links would be to summer courses in neuroscience education that take undergraduates, for example the variety of neuro-centered courses at the Marine Biological Laboratory, or Cold Spring Harbor or Friday Harbor Laboratories. And, importantly, the site could provide links to materials that could be useful in

preparing lectures and labs. A method for faculty to contribute links, and eventually one where they could provide their opinion to the membership on the linked materials, would certainly not take Society resources on the scale of the current publications and programs sponsored by the PECC.

Undergraduates form the Society's stem cells. This group of students is fertile ground for inspiration, for conversion from one path to another -- from, say, pre-med or even pre-molecular biology to pre-neuroscience research. One inspired faculty member, armed with the terrific teaching materials that are now "out there," can transform a searching undergraduate into a committed neuroscience PhD wannabe. The bottom line is this: Write our SfN President and/or Council members and urge them to either form an Education Committee charged with higher-level education or expand the charge of the PECC to undergraduates. Their names are at [www.sfn.org/index.cfm?pagename=officersAndCouncilorssection=about\\_SfN](http://www.sfn.org/index.cfm?pagename=officersAndCouncilorssection=about_SfN). Their email addresses are available through the SfN Member Directory at [www.sfn.org](http://www.sfn.org). Point out that even minimal Society resources can have a big impact by tapping into the Internet. It may be that Council will say, "Why, of course -- what an oversight! Let's fix this situation."

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