

COMMENTARY

Work through SfN — but Keep Higher Education and K-12 Separate

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In her editorial, Ann Stuart writes with her characteristic liveliness about the dismaying “benign neglect” with which the Society for Neuroscience (SfN) treats undergraduate education. I wholeheartedly agree with her views except for one point: I believe that if SfN does undertake new initiatives in support of higher education, it is essential to keep them separate from SfN’s K-12 and public outreach programs.

It does seem that the time is right for progress. When I proposed the Society’s first-ever professional development workshop on teaching neuroscience for the 2005 annual meeting, I was doubtful that a proposal about teaching would be welcomed at all. Luckily, it was welcomed, and a second proposal for 2006 was also accepted, followed by an invitation to plan a third workshop for 2007. The evaluations for the workshops have been good, attendance has been high, and at least one corner of SfN seems to recognize that support for teaching ought to be a regular part of the annual meeting.

As Ann Stuart’s editorial points out, there are many more ways that the Society could support higher education in neuroscience. She suggests links on the SfN Web site to resources for undergraduate education, and mentions an idea she and I have discussed for an even grander Web venture where members of SfN could list, classify, rank and comment on resources appropriate for teaching at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels. I’m especially enthusiastic about this latter concept. Over time, the listing would develop into a communal commentary on books, software, Web sites, and other materials. It would allow anyone to find well-regarded items appropriate for teaching at the level needed, with confidence that the people contributing comments (SfN members) are well-informed. Rather than a single list generated by a committee, it would be a dynamic list reflecting the composite views of many interested neuroscientists. The concept is derived from the ratings and readers’ commentaries on sites like Amazon.com, where it seems to function well. Collaborative annotation software packages are available that could be adapted to this purpose.

Creating and maintaining a substantial Web site is not a small project, however, and in my view, only SfN has the resources to fund it; but how should the Society organize its planning and support of this and other new projects for higher education? The editorial suggests either creating a new Education Committee, or expanding the role of the Public Education and Communication Committee (PECC), which currently deals with outreach to the public and K-12 teachers. Although I recognize the appeal of using an existing committee (PECC), I think it would be much wiser to keep a clear boundary between programs for K-12 education and programs for higher education. SfN is

principally a research society, and within the research community, teaching is sometimes regarded skeptically or disdainfully. Readers of JUNE understand that graduate and undergraduate teaching can be challenging, creative, and intellectually demanding; but this is not always understood by neuroscientists whose principal activity is research and who may teach very little, if at all. Merging higher education with K-12 risks tainting the teaching that we do with disparaging attitudes -- fair or unfair -- about teaching children. I must confess my own prejudices here: when I see teaching posters about third-graders making brains out of modeling clay, I worry that those posters demean the nearby row of posters on simulation software for teaching neurophysiology. The two kinds of teaching are quite different enterprises, and I believe it would be a strategic mistake to blur the line within SfN between higher education and K-12 outreach.

A second reason for keeping the two programs separate is that teaching at the college and university level is part of the explicit professional responsibilities of a substantial fraction of the SfN membership. The Society needs to support its members’ professional work in teaching just as it supports their work in research. Both are integral career components for many neuroscientists. In contrast, the SfN’s efforts toward public education and K-12 outreach are voluntary, and not part of the explicit career responsibilities of any but a few SfN members. These efforts may be worthy and generous, they may be shrewd in establishing public support for federal funding of research, and they may be a desirable role for neuroscientists as public citizens, but they do not underlie the hiring and promotion of many neuroscientists. Higher education is integral to our careers, while outreach to the public and children is not.

That said, Ann Stuart’s editorial is absolutely right that a global change in SfN’s attitude toward higher education is long overdue. In spite of incremental improvements (teaching posters in the 1990s, teaching workshops more recently), we have far to go compared to other professional societies in the life sciences. Although Faculty for Undergraduate Neuroscience and the Association of Neuroscience Departments and Programs cover part of this territory, only SfN has the broad membership to reach neuroscientist-teachers at every level of higher education, and the deep pockets to support substantial programs. As the editorial urges, it is indeed time for those who care about teaching to find ways of encouraging the Society to support the full range of professional work that its members do.

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