

“Making Connections with Underserved Communities, Broadening Participation in the STEM Fields”: a panel discussion held at the annual meeting of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, August 2010

A Special Interest Group panel discussion on broadening participation was organized by NOAO co-diversity advocate Garmany at the ASP annual meeting in Boulder CO. A full report on this session will appear in the Conference proceedings to be published by the Astronomical Society of the Pacific (ASP). The U.S. faces a serious challenge: a decrease in the size of the highly skilled technical workforce, where minority groups are particularly underrepresented. Within the STEM fields the U.S. is at a disadvantage in educating U.S. citizens: this affects many issues including national security. This Special Interest Group (SIG) discussion addressed the question, "What are the obstacles to making real progress in broadening participation, and what can be started now, at the grass-roots or agency levels, to begin to reduce the worst obstacles?"

The nine panel facilitators included agency and organization representatives from NSF (Tom Statler), NASA (Mangale Sharma, Daniella Scalice), and the AAS (Rick Feinberg) as well as ASP Board member (Michael Gibbs, Capitol College), and representatives from the Vanderbilt-Fisk Bridge program (Erika Grundstrom), Sonoma State University (Kevin McLin), and Gemini Observatory (Janice Harvey). In discussing the goals for the session, the panel agreed to pose the following question to our audience: "What are the obstacles to making real progress in broadening participation, and what can be started now, at the grass-roots or agency levels, to begin to reduce the worst obstacles?"

The representatives from the federal agencies and the AAS provided handouts for the audience with links to useful material and programs, and the panel began the discussion with their own thoughts. Statler pointed out that Broadening Participation is one of the activities that are responsive to the NSF review criterion of Broader Impacts. Potential proposers should communicate with NSF program directors, who often have a certain amount of autonomy in directing their programs. NSF recognizes that partnerships are keys to successful Broadening Participation projects, and that success can often hinge on a key individual or relationship. Projects have to be tailored to the specific communities they are intended to serve. There was lively audience participation, and a number of important ideas emerged during the hour.