

ASHG Information and Education Committee Update

According to the American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) bylaws, the mission of the Information and Education (I&E) Committee is to

...recommend, and upon Board approval carry out, activities concerned with information relevant to human genetics as it relates to the education of students in general, the training of professionals in human genetics, and the awareness of human genetics by the general public. The committee shall be especially concerned with education at all levels relating to human genetics, particularly at the professional level, and should encourage liaison with the education committees of other groups. The committee shall also consider requests to communicate basic genetic knowledge, its advances, and its applications to the public at large.

For many years, the I&E Committee has worked on numerous projects, including recommendations for a core curriculum in medical genetics for medical school (ASHG Information and Education Committee 1995), a rigorous analysis of undergraduate genetics education for nonmajors (Hott et al. 2004), an education summit on enhancement of genetics education in kindergarten through grade 12 education (<http://www.ashg.org/genetics/ashg/pubs/K12Summitreport.pdf>), training workshops for high-school students and teachers, and student-mentor luncheons. This year, the I&E Committee has agreed to focus its efforts on undergraduate genetics education.

To further the Society's commitment to genetics education, the Board of Directors approved the creation of a new position, Director of Education, in Fall 2004. In August 2005, Dr. Kenna M. Shaw (kshaw@ashg.org) filled this position at ASHG to coordinate educational outreach efforts and to identify new opportunities in this growing area.

We describe here some of the educational activities that have occurred over the past year and highlight some upcoming projects.

Mentor Network and DNA Day

The Mentor Network was initiated formally in 2002, as a resource to help teachers and schools find local genetics experts willing to participate in activities marking the first DNA Day, on April 25, 2003. This annual celebration, sponsored in cooperation with the National Human Genome Research Institute, commemorates the anniversary of the publication of the structure of the double helix by Watson and Crick and the completion of the sequencing of the human genome. DNA Day aims to promote the teaching of the biology of DNA, including genetics, heredity, and molecular biology.

More than 1,200 members of ASHG, the Genetic Alliance, the National Society of Genetic Counselors, and the Genetics Society of America belong to the Mentor Network. We are currently trying to promote the use of the Mentor Network apart from DNA Day, with the goal that our mentors will be

used throughout the year. To help facilitate this expansion, an informal e-mail survey was sent to all mentors in September 2005 to gather information about how often they were being used in their communities.

Genetics Education Clearinghouse

One concern voiced by mentors preparing for classroom visits was that they were not aware of age-appropriate teaching materials or specific genetics content that they should cover for different grade levels. Moreover, as each state and grade require coverage of different aspects of genetics, it was difficult for the mentors to prepare activities that would cover specific curriculum standards prescribed by each state. Additionally, preparation for classroom visits was complicated by the lack of a centralized resource for Web sites that could provide age-appropriate graphics or other information useful for the design of a lesson plan.

To address this gap and improve our mentors' outreach efforts, in January 2006 the Genetics Education Clearinghouse will be launched. This first version will be a searchable database of genetics standards for each U.S. state and Canadian province and each grade. Shortly thereafter, many of these standards will be linked to age-appropriate Web sites that provide accurate coverage of specific standards, as well as descriptions of inquiry-based activities that can assist in teaching the material. This database will continually be updated with additional reviewed Web sites and novel activities. Members are encouraged to contribute electronic resources for the advancement of this initiative.

In addition, an updated version of the Educational Resources section of the ASHG Web site will also debut in early 2006. Serving as a resource for all learners, the Genetics Education Network will be located at <http://www.genednet.org/>. We invite all members to visit the site and learn about and, we hope, become more engaged in our educational outreach efforts.

Annual Workshops

For almost 10 years, ASHG has hosted a High School Student-Teacher Workshop on the day before the official opening of the annual meeting. The primary goals of the workshop are to educate students and teachers about human genetics, to engage students in discussions on various current topics of interest, and to provide an opportunity to meet with genetics professionals from different disciplines. Teachers from the local region were invited to bring student groups to attend the 1-day workshop at no cost. Several interactive sessions covering a range of topics were offered, including genomics and evolution, forensics, cancer genetics, and newborn screening. Approximately 220 students and teachers attended the workshop

in Salt Lake City. ASHG is grateful to the Howard Hughes Medical Institute for support of the workshop.

In addition, the Student-Mentor Luncheon was held on October 25. More than 140 genetics trainees registered to attend the luncheon. Trainees had the opportunity to meet and talk informally with almost 20 invited mentors in a small group setting.

Career Resources

To improve and expedite the search for new positions by genetics professionals, ASHG introduced a number of new career services. Starting in September 2005, ASHG hosted a Virtual Career Fair for candidates/job seekers for a limited time (<http://ashgcareer.faseb.org/careernet>). Because of its popularity, interested individuals can continue to post resumes and qualifications online, search online listings, and request/schedule interviews at no charge. For a registration fee, employers can

post an unlimited number of employment opportunities online and access candidate resume profiles.

In addition, a "Meet and Greet" reception was held at the annual meeting to introduce attendees to the on-site Career Fair and to provide networking opportunities between potential employers and candidates. More than 150 people attended this first reception, and plans are being made to improve and expand this event.

Beginning in Spring 2006, the Educational Resources section of the ASHG Web site will feature a "Career of the Month." Individuals with backgrounds in genetics who have pursued a variety of careers (including both traditional and nontraditional paths) will be interviewed to provide insights into different careers.

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Chair
ASHG I&E Committee