

# THE AWARDS PROJECT



Funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation\* to the  
Association for Women in Science

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## BACKGROUND ON AWARD COMMITTEE DYNAMICS

Because the American Geophysical Union has been without a permanent Executive Director since September 2009, this summary of society practices mainly includes information from the remaining 6 societies.

### OVERVIEW

The focus of the AWARDS Project is awards, prizes and medals given for research or scholarship. While most participating societies have at least one award restricted to women, we have limited our study to those that are gender neutral. Each of the societies also gives at least one award primarily for service to the discipline or the society. The proportion of women among service award recipients in each society tends to approximate or exceed PhD-based estimates of women in the profession, whereas the proportion of women receiving scholarly awards is consistently much lower. Because of this disparity, we have separated service awards into a distinct category. We have also set up a category for awards limited to younger scholars (defined as age less than 45); like the service awards, women are more likely to receive awards restricted to younger scholars than the scholarly awards without age restrictions. Five of the 7 societies participating in this workshop offer one or more young scholar awards. These may accomplish several aims at once: offering encouragement for career development, improving the chances of getting a good position, and establishing a pool of potential nominees for more senior awards.

Among the participating societies, 5 have awards focused on women: either honoring contributions of women in the field or honoring individuals with a record of promoting women. An additional set of awards, designated for women in mathematics, comes from the Association for Women in Mathematics (AWM), an organization that has collaborated on the AWARDS project since its inception. Although gender-specific awards have some merit in that they recognize women for their accomplishments, they come with a potential down-side: the perception that other awards committees are relieved of any responsibility for considering women for their award.

With two minor exceptions, all award decisions in all societies use the same general system to select recipients: there is a committee constituted to select the recipient of each award, i.e. one committee per award. These committees tend to operate without any guidance other than that specified by the society's conflict of interest regulations, procedural rules, and the specific criteria for each award.

One source of variation among societies is a parameter that is not clearly defined– the perception of who “deserves” a scholarly award. In some societies the selection is based on a job well done, which might range from a really good paper or an important set of experiments to a lifetime of contributions to the discipline. In other societies, awards might be reserved for the extraordinary scholar, who is

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deemed among the top half-dozen in the world in a particular field. Thus, the concept of merit may depend on disciplinary or society culture.

### COMMITTEE SELECTION AND COMPOSITION

As indicated in the benchmarking survey, most committee members are appointed by society leadership: the President, an Executive Committee, or a Committee on Committees. Several societies keep the membership of award selection committees confidential, while others make this information available on the society website or in public announcements. However, award selection committee members are apparently allowed to disclose their identities to one another (which has not always been the case).

Based on limited information about 96 committees provided by 4 of the societies, there appears to be increasing efforts to appoint women to committees. Nonetheless, almost half of the 96 awards committees had no women, and less than one-third had more than 1 woman. There was no obvious correlation between having women on the committee and women awardees. However, as found with studies of faculty hiring, committees chaired by women may be more likely to select a woman recipient; in one society, only 2 committees out of 61 were chaired by a woman and both of those committees selected a woman recipient.

### COMMITTEE OPERATIONS AND OVERSIGHT

Awards committees usually do not meet face-to-face, instead relying on email or teleconferences. Thus, there is little or no interaction among the committee members. At least one society specifically asks each committee to refrain from reaching a consensus; instead individual members are expected to send in a short list of recommended candidates. Some committee chairs are appointed by society leaders (usually the president), but others serve by virtue of seniority or are selected by committee members. As noted above, lack of control over who chairs a committee might have an impact on the number of women award recipients.

We currently have little information on how awards committees make their decisions. This is probably inevitable, given the large number of committees and their frequently changing composition as well as a general culture of confidentiality. In the case of committees selecting on the basis of one published paper, the decision seems based on one or more committee members reading the paper, followed by discussion. However, for most committees, the decision is based on a dossier which usually contains letters of recommendation, a CV, and perhaps copies of seminal publications. The relative weight awarded to each of these is unclear – and probably variable.

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Most of the societies have a committee or council that is responsible for general oversight over individual awards committees. In most cases, issues related to grants and awards is this council's sole focus; however, in 2 societies, grants and awards is only one of their responsibilities on a list of many. The oversight groups often are asked to suggest members to serve on grants and awards committees, and they are usually asked to make recommendations to society leadership on procedural and efficacy issues. However, we have identified only one society in which the responsible oversight committee's charge includes ensuring diversity, and we have found no example of guidelines for awards committees that suggest best practices for maintaining fairness and avoiding inequities.

### NOMINATIONS

While some societies retain records of nominees for each award and committee membership, others do not; nonetheless, 5 societies came up with nominee information for at least one year. The average number of nominations per year for a given award tends to be low (often in single digits). Some societies will not give an award if the nominee pool drops below a certain number, but others allow a committee to develop its own list of nominees. The proportion of women among nominees is usually lower than expected based on estimates of "availability pool" of women, but there seems to be no consistent correlation between a low proportion of women in the nominee pool for an award and low proportion of women receiving that award. An example: one award had been given to 19 men but only 1 woman (5%) in the past 20 years, although the nominee pool averaged 27% women. Several other committees in the same society gave their award to a woman at least 30% of the time, although the proportion of women among nominees averaged less than 12%. For one (younger scholar) award, the nominee pool was assembled by self-nominations. The proportion of women among these self-nominations was over 30%, equal to high-end estimates of PhD-based availability pool for the discipline. Nonetheless, the proportion of women among recipients was less than 6%, suggesting that self-nominations may not be a good route to increase the proportion of women nominees.

### CONCLUSION/NEXT STEPS

The lack of information available on the processes and dynamics involved in selection committees for awards validates the importance of this project. We are looking forward to working with the leadership, members, and awards committees of the participating disciplinary societies: ACS, AGU, AMS, ASA, MAA, SfN, and SIAM not only to learn about their selection processes, but also to help design ways to address practices that may lead to inequities. Our long-term goal is to develop best practices that can improve the prize selection processes of many other disciplinary organizations.

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