

COMMISSION C2, COMMUNICATING ASTRONOMY WITH THE PUBLIC: OUTREACH PROFESSIONALIZATION & ACCREDITATION WORKING GROUP

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TRIENNIAL REPORT 2015-2018

1. Introduction

The Outreach Professionalization & Accreditation (OP&A) Working Group (WG) was formed in 2012 under Commission C2's predecessor, Commission 55, also called Communicating Astronomy with the Public (CAP). Its mission was "to bring a sense of professionalism and professional respect to the field of astronomy communication, to advocate for our needs as professional communicators, and to serve as a means for information sharing and networking." Its deliverable was "a procedure to handle requests for IAU associate membership (presumably including several levels of accreditation) and methods/standards/requirements for achieving accreditation."

2. Professionalization & Accreditation

At the General Assembly in 2015, in addition to adopting a reorganization of the Divisions and Commissions, the IAU formalized the qualifications and rules for granting "Associate status" to individuals who are not IAU members but are actively involved in the work of the Union as members of a Working Group, Commission, or Division. As noted in the IAU's Working Rules (Section XII), "The status is temporary and must be reconfirmed at the time of the General Assemblies. Associates are nominated by the Working Group, Commission, or Division with which they are working, and are listed on the IAU web site as 'Associates.'" In addition, and crucially, "In recognition for their role, Associates working closely with the IAU for a long period of time may be recommended for IAU membership to the Executive Committee by the President of the relevant Division."

The Working Rules for Associate status conform closely to the terms of "associate membership" that the OP&A WG had discussed during the 2012-2015 triennium, though because they apply to all Divisions, Commissions, and Working Groups, and because they do not involve actual IAU membership, they don't say anything about accreditation. But association with, and potential membership in, the IAU is itself a form of accreditation, since one has to apply and be approved. And since the IAU is a professional society, association with, and potential membership in, the IAU is by definition effectively professionalizes the person so associated or belonging. Thus the IAU has effectively provided a mechanism for professionalization and accreditation of astronomy communicators. In other words, the C2 OP&A WG's deliverable was delivered — by the IAU itself, not by the WG — in 2015.

3. Toward a Revised Mission & Deliverables

In retrospect, while some parts of the mission of the OP&A WG remain relevant and appropriate, others arguably do not, and the deliverable(s) for the 2015-2018 triennium should have been revisited and revised in light of the new Associate status and path to IAU membership available to outreach professionals interested in working with IAU C2. Concerning the mission, “to serve as a means for information sharing and networking” more properly falls to C2’s CAP Journal and CAP Conference WGs, which have succeeded admirably in both information sharing and networking. The other parts, “to bring a sense of professionalism and professional respect to the field of astronomy communication” and “to advocate for our needs as professional communicators” still make sense as the mission of the OP&A WG.

Our WG has struggled to define what it means to be a “professional” in astronomy outreach and public communication, especially in cases where a person isn’t recognized as a “professional” in astronomy, and in light of the rapid changes occurring in communication generally and science communication specifically. One could argue that the field of astronomy communication has become more professionalized without our WG’s help, not only through the new working rules for Associate status, but also, e.g., through the rise of social media, where many astronomy communicators of different types have large public followings. And the number of awards recognizing achievement in various forms of astronomy communication, e.g., science writing and/or public outreach, seems to increase every year.

At the 2015 General Assembly, we noted that awards for astronomy communicators are generally national in scope, not international — and thus the idea was born of creating a global/international award (or several awards) for communicating astronomy with the public, perhaps to be overseen by the IAU and/or its Office for Astronomy Outreach (OAO). This idea seems worth pursuing, but for various reasons we did not make much progress on it during the 2015-2018 triennium. Creating such an award (or awards) and defining the criteria for selection of its/their recipient(s) could be a suitable deliverable for the OP&A WG or, as recommended below, its successor/replacement.

4. Recommendations for the 2018-2021 Triennium

Members and Associates of C2, as well as participants in the CAP conferences that have been held approximately every two years since 2002, come from the following populations: “producers” of astronomical information (e.g., research scientists and their support staff), “public information officers” (e.g., connected with colleges and universities, observatories, and space missions), and “mediators” (e.g., science reporters and writers; staff members from museums, planetariums, and national parks; operators of commercial websites focused on astronomy; writers of science fiction; and K-12 and college teachers). This is a hugely diverse group, and it is not straightforward to conceive of official accreditation standards that could possibly apply to them all. Moreover, each of these populations already has its own professional organizations, such as the IAU and various national societies of professional astronomers, associations of science writers (often including both journalists and public information officers), amateur astronomy clubs, organizations of science teachers, organizations of people who work in science museums and/or planetariums, and so on. As described in Section 2 above, the opportunity to apply for Associate status with a path toward IAU membership effectively confers any professionalization and accreditation not already available to active, engaged astronomy communicators through other means.

Given all this, it seems reasonable to let the OP&A WG expire in 2018 but, potentially, to create a new WG with a more narrowly defined mission and a new set of deliverables related not to the accreditation of astronomy communicators, but to recognition of their importance and celebration of extraordinary achievement. We will discuss ideas for new C2 WGs at the CAP 2018 conference in Japan in March 2018 and the IAU General Assembly in Austria in August 2018.

One last thought: The IAU's new working rules recommend that no individual occupy more than one role within a Division or Commission. The OP&A WG was granted an exception to this policy to let the C2 VP serve as Chair of the OP&A WG. We should have recognized that the IAU has the right idea here. The C2 VP was sufficiently busy with general C2 business that he was unable to devote much time to leading the OP&A WG, which is another reason the WG didn't accomplish more in the triennium just ending. Lesson learned! For the 2018-2021 triennium and beyond, C2 will follow the IAU's guidelines and make sure that WG chairs are not distracted by other roles within C2.

Richard Tresch Fienberg
Chair of the Working Group