

Proposal to form an Early Career Researcher Section of the American Society of Plant Biologists

Background:

The American Society of Plant Biologists (ASPB) is an innovation leader and staunch supporter of development opportunities for its membership. Early Career Researchers (ECRs) - students, post-docs, scientists in transition, and generally anyone who self-identifies as an ECR - are a prominent, and vibrant part of current membership. Based on membership statistics from 2019, student and post-doc ECRs comprise ~28% of general ASPB membership, a percentage that has stayed consistent since 2011. Additionally, ECRs are fixtures at sectional meetings as well as the annual meeting, often presenting their work, organizing and participating in workshops, or coordinating formal and informal networking sessions like 'Tweet-ups'. As an example, at the 2019 Annual meeting ECRs (post-docs, graduate and undergraduate students) made up 50% of registrants, while at the Midwest and Northeast meeting ECRs made up 65% and 71% of the registrants, respectively.

Beyond in-person meetings, ECRs are establishing successful initiatives, such as the LGBTQ+ Plant Science Network and the renovation of the Ambassador Program, and are leading the charge on digital and social media based networking. ECR membership and participation are an integral part of the ASPB community, so much so that ECRs are often touted by ASPB leadership as the 'future of the society.'

However, ECR representation and voice within the governance of ASPB does not reflect this message. It wasn't until 2018 that an ECR seat was added to a majority of society committees, and until 2019 that a single ECR had a seat on the ASPB Council, a body composed of 24 seats. While ECRs have made great strides in recent years, the movement for representation of this diverse and active group of society members continues. The recent 2018 and 2019 town hall meetings, as well as social media engagement, brought forth concerns of ECRs feeling unheard in society governance and advocating for change. An ECR Section would work to hear these concerns, represent them, and support activities towards making the society inclusive and helpful to all.

Moreover, given the power dynamics of academia, which bleed into scientific societies, ECRs feel awkward or scared to voice their opinion about societal issues or stances with individuals who could, or do, have an impact on their career trajectory. Currently, there are no consistent or safe methods for ECRs to advocate for change within the society, a standard mechanism is needed for ECRs to voice their concerns. An ECR Section can act as an intermediary between the ECR community and the ASPB governance, a mechanism maintained by ECRs for ECRs.

The creation of an official ECR Section can increase the representation of ECRs, provide a community of individuals eager to help the society, and maintain the future membership of ASPB. Moreover, an ECR Section provides increased representation within the ASPB leadership, solidifies internal ECR communication and organization, and establishes a mechanism for ECRs to advocate for change with the eventual development of an ECR

platform. It should be noted, that this organization is already happening, ECRs are communicating and coordinating without official resources, which makes the efforts protracted and disjunct. The formation of an ECR Section will foster ECR community building and showcase that ASPB is leading the charge on ECR representation and inclusivity.

Benefits of an ECR Section:

We believe that forming an official ECR Section will provide numerous benefits, both to the ECR community within ASPB and the broader society membership.

Official section status would provide greater stability for ECR activities, networking, and training. Additionally, this will formalize an ECR leadership structure, after years of ad-hoc organization. This enables, and encourages communication between ECR committee and section representatives, as well as transparent communication of the ECR leadership with the broader ECR membership.

An ECR Section will facilitate ECR community building within ASPB. Currently, there is no “home” for ECRs within the society. The closest established groups representing the diverse voice of ECRs are the Membership Committee, which represents all society members, or the Ambassador Program, which represents only a handful of ECRs. With the current leadership structure of ASPB, ECR representation on committees and sections is confined to the nature of the committee or section, that is, membership representatives talk about membership as a whole, the publications representative talks about publications. Having an ECR Section can be a great step towards breaking down committee and section silos, and increasing communication for that subset of membership. Moreover, an ECR Section will give the ECR membership a standard mechanism to advocate for change from society leaders that embody their demographic. These leadership and communication changes will foster increased ECR participation and the development of an ECR platform that an ECR Section can cohesively act upon.

An ECR section will facilitate ECR networking and member attendance at the annual and sectional ASPB meetings. While increasing registration costs are the leading reason ECRs can't regularly attend the annual meeting, another major reason is the isolating nature of a large conference. ECRs are looking to network with other ECRs and build relationships across geographic boundaries. An ECR Section can provide resources and networking opportunities during and beyond in-person meetings to establish connections and incentivize attendance at all ASPB events.

Given how diverse the ECR membership is within the society, the ECR Section anticipates supporting all committees and sections within the society. To foster dialogue across committees and sections, the structure of the ECR Section would mimic that of the ASPB Council, with all appointed and/or elected ECR representatives on committees, sections, and programs, having a seat and vote on ECR Section governance. Additionally, the ECR Section will function as a hub for information relevant to the ECR membership; any ECR activities or opportunities proposed by other committees, sections, or programs, will be amplified to ensure maximum exposure to the target audience.

While the main mission of the ECR Section is that of ECR membership representation and voice, this section can also increase the visibility of other ECR programs such as the Ambassador Program or Conviron Scholar Program, and synergistically work with these programs to enhance their missions (professional development, recruitment, and outreach). Further, many qualified ECR members apply to these programs, but due to limited openings, are turned away. This section can provide an alternative method for these impassioned ECRs to be involved in their society and their plant biology community. For information on how the ECR Section is different and complementary to the ASPB Ambassador Program, see section below. The ECR Section can also partner with other ECR groups such as the eLife Ambassador program to fostering networking and training opportunities.

The ECR Section will provide support and guidance to those ECRs transitioning to new positions either continuing within academia (graduate school, post-docs, faculty jobs) or for careers beyond academia. This support can be invaluable for retention of scientists in the field of plant biology, particularly diverse scientists who search for mentoring and role models as they look ahead and transition into new opportunities. While ASPB currently supports this through the SURF, Conviron Scholars, and Ambassador Programs, an ECR Section can amplify those programs to a larger audience, in addition to providing exclusive webinars and networking opportunities, as well as workshops open to all.

A major benefit of an ECR Section is establishing a system of institutional memory for ASPB leadership from established members to early members. The creation of an ECR Section would allow ECR leaders to learn from the larger leadership body as well as each other. As an example, of the other scientific societies our membership subscribe to (BSA, SSE...etc), all have ECR members on committees and boards - with only the Entomological Society of America having a full Committee on Student Affairs. This Committee is made up of students from each ESA Section and Committee within their governance, a structure similar to what we are proposing here. The creation of an official ECR Section can give that governance leadership training, help the society retain institutional memory, and make ASPB a forward-thinking leader in the plant sciences.

Activities of an ECR Section for the ASPB Membership:

The ECR Section will provide the benefits outlined above through activities, some of which the section would engage in under probationary status, while other activities are envisioned for the future.

1. Under probationary status the section will develop and ratify a constitution that will formalize the structure and function of the section. Among other articles, this constitution will define a process to elect and maintain leadership for the section.
2. Under probationary status the section will establish a mechanism(s) for bidirectional information sharing between the section leadership and the ECR membership. This will allow ECRs membership to advocate for change, as well as enable the ECR Section leadership to amplify relevant opportunities, be transparent in section

activities and allocation of section dues. Moreover, this mechanism can highlight efforts/research/accomplishments made by ECR members to other ECRs, and the society at large.

3. Under probationary status, the ECR Section will develop a series of surveys and questionnaires to better understand what initiatives, needs, and concerns the ECR membership would like the ECR Section to focus on. This will foster the development of an ECR platform that all ECR committee and section representatives can rally behind. Further, as a method to measure community building, the ECR Section will track ECR membership involvement and response to these initiatives. Beyond probationary status, these metrics will continue to be tracked to best serve the ECR community within ASPB.
4. The ECR Section will host networking events, which have previously been held informally. Further, in 2021 (under probationary status), the ECR Section will propose a workshop at the annual meeting focusing on career development and training. This proposal will build on the Membership Committee workshops of 2019 and 2020 that focus on similar content.
5. The ECR Section will collaborate with, and support other committees and sections (e.g., Education, Membership, and PUI) to give ECRs a better understanding of relevant careers and career paths, particularly non-R1 academic positions. The ECR Section understands that this is a goal of other committees and sections, our goal is to maximize the exposure of such opportunities to better serve the ECR membership, not reinvent the wheel.

How is this different and complementary to the ASPB Ambassador Program?

The authors of this proposal understand that at a cursory glance, this section can be considered redundant with the ASPB Ambassador Program. Here we outline the differences between the two groups and how they can be complementary. It should also be noted that this proposal was authored by many voices, including the 2019 and 2020 Ambassador Alliance members.

As outlined within this proposal, the main goal of the ECR Section is to increase representation and the voice of the ECR membership to the larger ASPB governance. This will be accomplished by formalizing an ECR leadership, establishing mechanisms for effective communication between leadership and the ECR membership, and enabling the formation of an ECR platform that ASPB appointed ECR representatives can rally around. The Ambassador Program, as currently written, falls under the Membership Committee and has the main role of ECR recruitment into the ASPB membership. Over the years this role has expanded to include outreach as a method of recruitment and incentivizing ambassador retention. For this work, Ambassadors are given certain benefits (e.g., 50% annual meeting registration discount, funding for outreach grants) and visibility within the society. It should be highlighted that the ECR Section does not ask for these benefits, what Ambassadors do for the society is valuable and this section would not infringe upon that work.

While the mission statements and benefits of each group are different, their activities can (and would) be complementary. As stated in the *Benefits of an ECR Section*, the ECR Section can promote Ambassador activities and recruitment initiatives, amplifying the reach of the Ambassador Program through the ECR Sections expanded membership. Moreover, the Ambassador Program has the infrastructure and resources to execute ECR outreach projects. Thus, any ECR Section members interested in outreach can easily identify on-going/upcoming projects, and coordinate with the Ambassador program. To increase the incentive to become an Ambassador, workshops and webinars hosted by the ECR Section will be open to Ambassadors first, before the general ECR membership. This will extend to Conviron Scholars and SURF fellows. The proposal authors want these ECR Programs to remain sought after endeavors. Finally to better coordinate efforts, the Ambassador Alliance can elect to have a representative on the ECR Section leadership. This Ambassador representative will have full voting rights.

In regards to representation on the ASPB Council, there is already an immense benefit in having an ECR voice in leadership meetings through the Ambassador Alliance representative. Given that ASPB continually values new and differing perspectives, adding another ECR voice and vote through the ECR Section can only benefit Council meetings. Moreover, as stated by the Council, ECRs are the 'future of the society', as such, they should have greater involvement in shaping that future. That being said, the goals each ECR group (Ambassadors and ECR Section) have are not overlapping, and votes by each group will reflect the needs of the members they represent.

Section Leadership During Probationary Status:

During the probationary status, prior to approval of the constitution, the section will be led by a steering committee of the proposal authors (see section below). The primary responsibility of this steering committee will be to guide the Section's development of a constitution and to develop the long-term leadership structure, including overseeing the election of officers.

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