STEM Family Travel Initiative Panel Discussion:
The Role of Travel in Professional Advancement in the STEM Disciplines.

On 5-28-2010, a panel convened to discuss the amount of professional travel they undertook during their time as Assistant and early Associate Professorships, and their impressions on the importance of specific types of trips to particular aspects of career advancement. Of particular interest are their opinions on trips preceding the tenure decision by 1-2 years (the "tenure tour"). The panelists were concentrated in the physical sciences and engineering, at the junction of soft materials, materials chemistry, and biomaterials.

Panelists:

Greg Tew, Associate Professor
Department of Polymer Science and Engineering
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Working spouse, no children

Surita Bhatia, Associate Professor
Department of Chemical Engineering
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Husband works at another university and lives away from Amherst during the week
2 children

Terri Camesano, Professor (recently promoted)
Department of Chemical Engineering
Worcester Polytechnic University
Husband work in Army lab
3 children

Interesting Observations: The pre-tenure tour, in which assistant professors travel extensively to showcase their independent results and advance their reputations was substantial and may be institution-dependent. Panelists felt it was important to be able to list a good number of invited talks on the vita that was submitted as part of their tenure package and to use travel networking to groom letter-writers for the tenure package. For the two UMass faculty, this amounted to 10-15 trips / year in the 2 years preceding tenure. The number was lower (order 5 / year) for Camesano at WPI.

The amount of travel increases dramatically with rank, especially for highly "successful" faculty. Within a few years of promotion into the associate professor rank, faculty report 24-28 trips / year (for this sub-discipline).

Bhatia, having two children and a husband working at a university in another city, reports a lower current travel rate (3-4 trips / year), correlating directly with the births of her children and the necessity to decline travel invitations. Several female audience members at the post-tenure rank echoed a similar trend.

A variety of activities formed the basis for travel: large technical meetings (greater than 1000 attendees), small technical meetings (less than 150 attendees), departmental seminars, grant review panels, grantee meetings (required attendance when a grant is awarded).

Opinions / advice: The panelists recognized the different types of networking that goes on at small versus large technical meetings and that grant review panels provided an excellent and effective opportunity for networking. However, for academics with limited travel opportunity, there was a consensus that large meetings were the highest priority because of the potential to maintain the largest number of interactions.

Faculty with interdisciplinary research may need to attend several different large meetings to maintain connections with all the research disciplines relevant to their labs.

It was felt by at least two panelists that the networking outside the technical sessions and in the evening were among the most powerful and effective portions of the meeting rather than the technical sessions themselves. One panelist went as far as saying that she often skipped the technical sessions and focused limited time on the evening networking events.

One panelist felt that grant review panels were extremely critical to maintaining her own funding and she never declined these invitations. A counter-perspective was offered by another panelist who said that such review meetings were most important early in one's career of when one was trying to break into a new funding agency.

One panelist expressed the opinion that the departmental seminars, though prestigious, had the least impact and should be the lowest priority if travel opportunities are limited.