



Government Relations, Advocacy, and the Acoustical Society of America

Who should speak up for acoustics and advocate for acoustics on behalf of the members of the Acoustical Society of America (ASA)?

Do you think the ASA and its members should be available to provide technical expertise to help answer important questions being decided by the US Congress? Do you think that the ASA and its members should be requesting additional funding from the United States for acoustics research and fellowship and scholarship opportunities for students with interests in acoustics and related areas?

As a reminder, the bylaws of the Society state: “The purpose of the Society is to generate, disseminate, and promote the knowledge and practical applications of acoustics.” The 2019–2021 Strategic Leadership Plan (see bit.ly/2kvjcde) goes further, saying: “The Society is respected and matters to governments and to the society at large; public and private sector decision makers and influencers look to ASA for its expertise.”

As mentioned in Lily Wang’s summer 2019 column (*Acoustics Today* 15(2), 7-9; see bit.ly/2myJlsx), there were four new task forces formed to address key points that came out of the Tucson ASA Strategic Summit in 2019. Task Force C was charged to “Improved Communications and Public Relations,” and one of their major goals is to “expand the relevancy of the ASA to all stakeholders, including those in K-12 pipelines, funding agencies, governing bodies that oversee public policy, industry, academia and society at large.” So, the charge of Task Force C is quite large, with one role contributing to establishing better relations with the US Federal Government.

Why are we so sure we need to go in this direction? In May 2018, a quick verbal survey was taken at 12 of the 13 technical committee (TC) meetings held at the Minneapolis (MN) ASA meeting. Jennifer Greenamoyer of the government relations team at the American Institute of Physics (AIP) was on hand to help assess the feedback that was being received. The sense of several executive council (EC) members was that a formal poll should be taken of ASA members to collect statistical data on the topic of government relations and advocacy. In fall 2018, the EC agreed to go forward with such a survey

and targeted a wide segment of the ASA membership. An email survey was put into place so that members not at an ASA meeting would be included. The survey was sent out by the AIP at the end of March 2019, and the survey was closed mid-April 2019.

The AIP survey on ASA and Government Advocacy was prepared by the Statistical Research Center (SRC) of AIP, and the introductory email noted that the “ASA currently does not participate in advocacy efforts in the halls of Congress or with agency heads; other scientific societies do and have been doing so for many years. We want your opinion on whether ASA should actively participate in government advocacy and, if so, how we should proceed.” In addition, the email to fill out the survey contained the words “Today I am writing to ask your help determining how the ASA can best interact with the US Federal Government to engage and inform legislators and agency staff members to recognize important scientific acoustics contributions. We want to hear from all ASA members, both in the US and abroad. We recognize that scientific research spans geographic and national boundaries and is funded by many sources. It is vital that everyone participate to help us plan our next steps.” In the end, the SRC received 1,911 responses from 5,800 deliverable emails, for a 33% response rate. Responses were received from all the ASA TCs, with 64% from US members and 36% from non-US members.

Some of the key findings from the survey include:

- When asked “Not including yourself, whom do you rely on to advocate for acoustics,” almost three-fourths of respondents (73%) said they rely on the ASA to advocate for acoustics and 15% said they relied on no one;
- When asked “Do you believe ASA should advocate to the US Federal Government for acoustics,” 69% responded yes, 4% no, 20% I am not sure, and 11% no opinion;
- The US members alone were asked “If you were sitting in your congressman/senator’s office, what would you like to ask for,” and out of a long list the top four responses were
 - More funding for science agencies to support applied research in acoustics (64%);
 - More funding for science agencies to support basic research in acoustics (59%);
 - More funding for graduate education related to acoustics (42%); and
 - More funding to support outreach educating the public on the importance of acoustics (40%).

- When asked which of a long list of activities the ASA should pursue in the next three to five years, the top three responses were
 - Comment on legislation and regulations affecting acoustics (64%);
 - Place op-eds supporting acoustics in key publications (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*) (51%); and
 - Submit written congressional testimony on subjects of importance to acoustics (46%).

Interestingly, all of these responses are “Society-wide” activities, and grassroots activities that could be taken on by individuals were not rated as high.

Given these survey results, the question now is, where do we go from here? The AIP government relations team has made some suggestions of activities that the ASA could take up to become more involved in government advocacy, and here is a partial list:

- First, develop a set of principles of engagement regarding ASA advocacy to ensure advocacy efforts are bipartisan and are focused on constructive engagement;
- Second, define an advisory structure and policy/process guidelines, perhaps to advise the ASA EC;
- Pilot test some grassroots activities that have been successful for other scientific societies, especially bringing EC members or a small set of volunteers to Capitol Hill for congressional visits day once a year;
- Clearly define what specific funding requests would look like, to be prepared for having something to say to congressional offices and at hearings;
- Develop two or three overarching advocacy messages and another two or three specialized or targeted messages to guide advocacy efforts; and
- Add a part-time or full-time ASA staff member or buy AIP supplemental services to help establish an advocacy program.

Moving forward with any of these ideas needs to be considered carefully by everyone in the ASA but particularly by the EC and Task Force C on Improved Communications and Public Relations. So now is an important time for you to provide YOUR input. If you have strong feelings, one way or the other, about any of these recommendations or if you have other ideas that you want to put forth, please let me know (president@acousticalsociety.org), and I will be sure

that your thoughts get to the appropriate people on the ASA EC, Task Force C, and the ASA Panel on Public Policy and at ASA headquarters.

The ASA has never been involved in government advocacy before, but it is clear that a large fraction of the ASA membership wants this. Legally, the ASA is allowed to do this type of lobbying, so long as it grows to be no larger than a small part of our overall budget. Our members overwhelmingly say that we need to be available to the US government to answer important questions. And if the regulators cut our acoustics budgets year after year and no one cries “help,” then those funding cuts become permanent. Clearly, we have to be our own advocates. No one will do it for us. And the ASA membership deserves a scientific society that will stand up for its members and work hard on their behalf.

On another topic, I am very happy to report that the ASA has just completed a search for its first paid finance director. The purpose of this finance director is to work closely with both the ASA Executive Director and Treasurer to provide leadership and direction to the finance functions of the Society, including directing, recommending, implementing, and monitoring financial policies and procedures and developing financial reports understandable by ASA members. The finance director will be responsible for managing the day-to-day financial activities and will oversee the monthly, year-end, and annual budgeting as well as all aspects of the annual audit. The finance director will be the primary staff member from ASA headquarters to act as liaison to the ASA Audit, Finance, and Investments Committees as well as to the Acoustical Society Foundation Board.

The search came to a successful conclusion in September 2019 when Michael (Mike) R. McGovern, CPA, was named as the first ASA Finance Director. Mike’s main areas of expertise include nonprofit financial leadership and in corporate finance and accounting, and from earlier in his career, he has experience working on Wall Street. He made many connections there that could eventually be a benefit to the ASA. From the interview process, I can attest that Mike is very hands on, easy to talk to, good at explaining complex topics, and genuinely dedicated to ensuring the short- and long-term financial success of the ASA. He will report to Executive Director Susan Fox, and he will be regularly attending our ASA meetings. Please join me in welcoming Mike!