

Analytical and Bioanalytical Chemistry
© Springer-Verlag 2008
10.1007/s00216-008-2190-x

Building a Professional Career

Everything you ever wanted to know about awards

Patricia Ann Mabrouk¹ ✉

(1) Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, USA

✉ Patricia Ann Mabrouk
Email: p.mabrouk@neu.edu

Published online: 5 June 2008

Without Abstract

Patricia Ann Mabrouk is Professor of Chemistry and Chemical Biology at Northeastern University (Boston, MA). Her research interests are in chemical education (graduate education, active learning, and undergraduate research), green chemistry, and bioanalytical chemistry.



My favorite service activities are award committees. I have served on and/or chaired several national award committees. I enjoy the opportunity this form of service gives me to learn more about my peers, many of whom are so very talented. That said I find my service on these committees very frustrating at times. Many awards for which there should rightly be many nominees are undersubscribed. Over the years I have seen very few women and minorities nominated even though there are many who should be nominated and in receipt of awards. Another frustration is seeing deserving nominees passed over simply because of a poorly prepared nomination packet or a weak nominating letter. Considering the value that we place on professional awards in academe, I have been somewhat surprised that there have not been any columns or articles published that discuss professional awards: explaining the nomination process,

providing information and advice on preparation of a competitive nomination packet, and discussing the evaluation process. I currently serve as an associate on the American Chemical Society's (ACS) Women Chemists Committee (WCC). Over the last several years the WCC has been involved in several efforts to encourage the nomination of women and minorities for the considerable number of ACS national awards. Recently, concerned about the low volume of nominations received by the respective awards committees for the many national ACS awards, the WCC organized two symposia at the Spring 2008 National ACS Meeting in New Orleans to disseminate information to the greater chemical research community concerning professional awards and the application process. Because of my interest in this subject and involvement in the WCC, I decided to focus my ABC column on this subject in hopes that it will demystify the process and spur more of you to actively participate as nominators in the award selection process in the professional societies in which you participate.

Process overview and role of nominator

Most professional societies use the same basic process: Fundamentally, someone, the "nominator," formally nominates the candidate. This means the nominator submits a "nomination letter," the nominee's curriculum vitae (CV) and the requisite number of letters of recommendation required by the awards committee. The nomination letter is the most important element of the nomination package. Ideally, the nomination letter summarizes the accomplishments of the nominee that are relevant to the award for which the nominee is being nominated. An awards committee usually constituted of individuals recognized as accomplished experts in the field reviews the nomination packages and selects an awardee. If the nominee is selected and if the award has an accompanying symposium and/or presentation, the nominator may also be called upon to introduce the awardee at the symposium or award presentation and to summarize his/her accomplishments. Finally, if there is a symposium the nominator may also be asked by the awardee to organize the award symposium on his/her behalf.

In some colleges and universities, academic departments may have award canvassing committees that seek to identify and nominate their faculty for professional awards. However, the majority of nominations in my experience are made by individual scientists who graciously offer their time and energy to recognize the accomplishments of deserving peers.

Self-nomination

This brings me to an important point. If you believe that you are qualified for an award and would like to be nominated, don't be a wall flower! Consider asking a respected friend and colleague to nominate you for the award for which you would like to be nominated. If you are uncomfortable asking someone to perform this function for you, don't let that stop you either consider nominating yourself.

Responsibilities of award nominees

If you are contacted by someone wishing to nominate you for an award the first and most important thing you need to do is determine whether or not you should let yourself be nominated. If you are not familiar with the award it is a wise idea to ask your nominator and/or do a bit of background research on the award on your own concerning the award criteria. If you decide that you wish to be nominated, you will likely need to provide your nominator with up-to-date version of your CV that highlights your career accomplishments relevant to the award, a summary of what you perceive to be your most significant

accomplishments, and any supporting evidence you have of your impact on your discipline. Now is not the time to be modest in communicating your accomplishments and their significance. It is also helpful to provide your nominator, if requested, with a list of names and complete contact information for those individuals whom you believe have the strongest professional reputation in your area of scholarship and whom you believe would be in the best position to submit the strongest supporting letters. Of course, it goes without saying that you should provide all this information as quickly and completely as possible to your nominator.

The nomination letter

If you are nominating someone, it is a good idea to obtain a list if possible of previous award recipients so you can gauge the strength of the case you can make for your candidate. While you most certainly can nominate someone without asking them, it is wise to contact your intended nominee in advance to make sure that they are indeed eligible for the award and that they are willing to stand for nomination for receipt of it. This will also give you the opportunity to ask the nominee for a copy of their updated CV, which is usually a required element of a completed nomination package. Finally, you can also query the nominee concerning the names and contact information for possible supporting recommenders.

Anyone who is very familiar with the nomination file and the nominee can prepare the letter, and, therefore, serve as the nominator. The primary responsibilities of the nominator are to compose the nomination letter and to assemble and submit the nomination package. It is easiest to write the nomination letter if you first solicit and obtain the supporting letters of recommendation. You can then refer to these letters directly in your nomination letter. In soliciting letters of recommendation it is important to provide recommenders with the criteria for the award, a deadline for receipt of their recommendation letters and to specify where and in what format (paper and/or electronic, on letterhead) the recommenders should provide their supporting letter. Be sure to give a deadline to your letter writers that gives you enough time to complete your work before submitting the entire nomination packet to the award committee for consideration.

The purpose of the nomination letter is to outline the key qualifications of the nominee and to point the reviewer to the other elements of the nomination package that provide direct supporting evidence. Usually this evidence is the CV and/or the letters of reference that are submitted with the application form (if any) and nomination letter.

To be effective your letter should be compelling. If possible make it personal by sharing how the nominee and his/her work have impacted your life, professionally or personally. Don't be afraid to write a letter that will engage the selection committee emotionally.

If you have any questions regarding the application and/or the process, email or telephone the chair of the award committee and ask.

Proof read everything! A well prepared nomination packet will reflect well on you professionally. Be sure to submit your materials to meet the published deadline. If the letters of reference will be submitted directly by the recommenders, be sure to follow up with each recommender and with the chair of the awards committee to ensure that your nominee's package is received and is complete before the deadline.

After you submit the complete package, do not contact the awards committee. They will contact you if they need anything. You are not likely to be informed of the outcome of the award competition until the committee formally announces the name of the awardee. When you do learn the outcome, be sure to

contact the nominee and the recommenders and inform everyone of the outcome. Be sure to thank the recommenders.

The recommendation letters

If you are asked to write a recommendation letter let me offer some concrete suggestions for how to write an effective letter. Begin your letter by introducing your nominee by name, describing the specific activity/service for which the nominee should be recognized, and explaining what your relationship is with the nominee. Summarize the essentials of the case and provide specific examples that illustrate why your nominee deserves the award. If it makes sense, provide quantitative data demonstrating the impact and/or effectiveness of the nominee's work. A good question to consider is: what would the field be like if your nominee had not contributed to it? The nominee's contributions should be appropriately framed within the relevant larger context (university, organization, discipline, etc.). Make sure that you have read the award criteria (contact the nominator if he/she did not provide you with this information) and that your letter directly addresses these criteria. Be sure to keep your letter brief—one to two pages in length. Close your letter by summarizing why the nominee deserves this award. Be sure to include your name and complete contact information so the award committee can get in touch with you if they require additional information or follow up including notifying you of the outcome of the nomination.

It goes without saying that you should proofread your letter. Your credibility as a nominator is on the line every bit as much as that of your nominee. Make sure that your letter is well written stylistically and grammatically and be sure to verify the accuracy of the technical content.

A few words to nominators and recommenders regarding gender and racial issues

If you are writing a nomination letter or letter of recommendation, it is important to recognize that several studies have shown that letters of recommendation written in support of women differ systematically from those written on behalf of men. The evidence suggests that these differences could disadvantage female candidates. Trix and Psenka [1] examined more than 300 letters of recommendation submitted on behalf of medical faculty seeking employment at a large U.S. medical school and found that letters written on behalf of male applicants were significantly longer, used professional titles and standout adjectives more frequently, and contained fewer doubt raisers than those written on behalf of female applicants. More recently Madera, Hebl, and Martin [2] analyzed 685 letters of recommendation submitted on behalf of 194 applicants for eight faculty positions at a southern U.S. university and found that agentic adjectives were more frequently used in describing male applicants while communal adjectives and references to physical appearance were more frequently made in letters for female applicants. While I have no direct evidence, I believe it is important given the evidence regarding the significance of gender to consider that ethnicity may also unconsciously impact letters written in support of underrepresented minorities and I urge nominators and recommenders to review their letters for language carefully in view of the available information.

Selection process

Nominations are usually evaluated by committees of three or more individuals who have been invited to

serve because of their professional reputation in the discipline relevant to the award. It is important, however, to recognize that each committee member is not necessarily a technical specialist in the discipline of each nominee. Consequently, it is vital for nominators and letter writers to clearly identify, provide the context for, and succinctly explain the significance of their nominee's accomplishments. While the criteria and details of the evaluation process do vary somewhat, decisions are usually made by committee votes based on relative scoring of each candidate after all committee members review the files for all the applicants. Some committees complete all of their deliberations and discussions via email. Other committees meet physically in one location for one or more meetings and still others hold one or more teleconferences to discuss candidates. Consequently, reviewers appreciate applications that are complete, succinct, and which provide information that directly addresses the evaluation criteria.

What if the nominee is declined?

There are no hard and fast rules regarding who will be notified of the outcome of the committee's deliberations, how the information will be communicated or to whom the information will be communicated. Consequently no matter who you are—nominee, nominator, or recommender, I suggest that when you are notified of the outcome of the award deliberations, be sure to contact all involved, notify them of the outcome, and express your thanks for their efforts and best wishes.

If at first you don't succeed either as a nominator or nominee, it is important not to be discouraged. In my opinion there are many more deserving nominees than there are awards. Be sure to attempt to solicit feedback concerning the nomination and if it makes sense apply again! If you do decide to reapply, be sure to submit a thoughtfully and thoroughly revised nomination package that includes any recently acquired evidence supporting the case. Resubmission without additional evidence is generally not likely to be successful. Depending on the award, unsuccessful nomination packages may be kept in queue for several years. If this is the case, I reiterate, it is wise to update the file each subsequent year for which the packet remains eligible for consideration.

If you are a nominee who has been declined, don't be disheartened. Award nominations rarely succeed the first time. Take heart from the fact that a valued colleague singled you out for nomination and took the time and considered effort required to submit a nomination on your behalf. Also, recognize that the nomination itself may have a positive effect on your career by bringing your name to the attention of the awards committee.

Benefits of receipt of professional awards

The benefits of receipt of awards are many. Some are direct as many awards provide monetary remuneration. Others are indirect. An award may provide no honorarium but instead a regional, national, or international platform for professional exposure and public recognition. Some awards involve delivery of an awards address in a symposium. Receipt of a national award in one's discipline could be invaluable in advancing one's case for a merit raise, tenure and/or promotion. Often, the recognition gained by receipt of one award translates into caché facilitating the receipt of additional awards and honors.

I will close with an exhortation: If you have nominated or written in support of a colleague, on behalf of chemists everywhere I thank you for stepping up to the plate and participating in this noble practice. If you have not yet participated and know someone, including yourself, who deserves to receive an award, please nominate them and thanks in advance for your time and effort!

Acknowledgements I would like to express my sincere thanks to my dear friends and colleagues Dr. Robert Lichter (Merrimack Consultants, LLC) and Dr. Novella Bridges (Pacific Northwest National Laboratory) for reading and critiquing this column.

References

1. Trix F, Psenka C (2003) *Discourse Soc* 14:191



2. Madera J, Hebl M, Martin R (2007) Annual Meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, New York