

SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
Structures for Space Education (2)

Author: Mr. Sanjoy Som
University of Washington, United States, sanjoy@u.washington.edu

THE ASTROBIOLOGY GRADUATE STUDENT CONFERENCE (ABGRADCON)

Abstract

The Astrobiology Graduate Student Conference (AbGradCon) is a grass-roots effort that has been undertaken by 4 previous groups of early-career astrobiologists since 2004, with significant support from the NASA Astrobiology Institute (NAI). The primary objective of AbGradCon is to improve the future of astrobiology research by bringing together in a unique setting the early-career astrobiologists (graduate students and post-doctoral fellows within 2 years of finishing their Ph.D.) who will lead such research in the years to come. The conference is unique in that it is a student-led meeting, from the organization to the presentations.

AbGradCon strives to remove the "pressures" of typical scientific meetings by providing a relaxed atmosphere in which presentations and round-table discussions are fostered along with numerous social activities. More specifically, the goals are: i) to create an environment of shared learning by providing time for oral and poster presentations; ii) to create and maintain a network of interdisciplinary scientists; iii) to encourage interdisciplinary research projects by providing time during the congress and rewarding outstanding collaborative ideas; and iv) to broadcast the conference to the internet community via web 2.0 technologies.

The spirit of AbGradCon fits-in noticeably with NAI's mission to carry out, support and catalyze collaborative, interdisciplinary research, train the next generation of astrobiology researchers, provide scientific and technical leadership on astrobiology investigations for current and future space missions, and explore new approaches using modern information technology to conduct interdisciplinary and collaborative research amongst widely-distributed investigators. As a testament to AbGradCon diversity, the 2008 conference attendees included astronomers, astrophysicists, astrochemists, microbiologists, evolutionary biologists, molecular biologists, atmospheric scientists, chemists, geologists, geobiologists, and planetary scientists from 22 different US institutions and 9 international institutions. The 2009 conference will be held at the University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA, in July 2009.

This paper will describe the philosophy behind AbGradCon, how the conference has evolved since its conception with its associated successes and failures, and look to the future. It is the hope that this work will catalyze further student led conferences.