

PROGRESS OF THE WASHINGTON CHARTER

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ABSTRACT

The Washington Charter for Communicating Astronomy with the Public, usually referred to as the 'Washington Charter', has its origins in the 'Communicating Astronomy to the Public' conference held at the US National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC, in early October 2003. The Charter outlines Principles of Action for individuals and organizations that conduct astronomical research and that "have a compelling obligation to communicate their results and efforts with the public for the benefit of all".

The IAU Working Group (IAUWG) on Communicating Astronomy with the Public has been active in seeking endorsement of the Charter from professional Societies and other bodies. The list of Charter endorsers currently includes:

- Astronomical Society of Australia
- European Astronomical Society
- British Astronomical Association
- Royal Astronomical Society
- Canadian Astronomical Society
- The International Union of Pure and Applied Physics, Commission 19 (Astrophysics)
- Danish National Committee (Astronomisk Udvalg)
- Royal Astronomical Society of Canada
- Particle Physics and Astronomical Research Council (PPARC)

Several of the above Societies, while endorsing the Charter, did have some minor reservations with the language. The reader may note a significant omission from the above list—the American Astronomical Society (AAS).

The AAS was approached to endorse the Charter in May 2004 but declined to endorse the Charter at that time. The AAS agreed wholeheartedly with the spirit of the Washington Charter and supported its goal to increase the amount and effectiveness of communication of astronomy with the public. However, the AAS felt that the broad language in the Charter amounted to an "unfunded mandate" and that its en-

dorsement of the Charter would encourage other institutions to reallocate precious resources. They also felt that the language called for outreach to be associated with every activity in astronomy and that not every individual, department, program, or institution should necessarily be involved in outreach.

The IAUWG sees endorsement of the Charter by the AAS as critically important since the U.S. leads the world in efforts to communicate astronomy with the public through NASA, NSF and other programs.

We (the IAUWG) felt that minimal changes to the language of the Charter might allay the concerns of the AAS. Who should make these changes? Who had the right to make changes? The IAUWG believed that it was in the best position to make changes to the language as it was leading the efforts to have the Charter endorsed. However, we felt that the original group that had produced the Charter had ownership and that until ownership was transferred to the IAUWG no changes could be made in the Charter language. The original group was approached by email and all of those who responded agreed to transfer ownership of the Charter to the IAUWG.

IAUWG member Rick Fienberg skilfully crafted a modified version of the Charter that softened the language but which kept the spirit of the Charter intact. This language was refined further at the CAP 2005 conference to address a few remaining points. When polled about these changes several people at the conference noted that their national organizations had endorsed the original charter despite having reservations about some of the strong language, and that the new softer language eliminates the sources of those reservations.

The final revised version now sits with the AAS Council. We are hoping that they will consider this before their next Council meeting in January 2006 to give us a chance to respond to any final questions or concerns.

On a final note, the Astronomical Society of the Pacific Board (ASP) of Directors will consider endorsing the Washington Charter at its September 2005 meeting. Hopefully by the time you read this both the ASP and AAS will be listed as endorsers on the IAUWG website!