Managing Editor-in-Chief Transitions

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Whether the process happens every two years or every ten, editor-in-chief transitions can affect every aspect of a publication, and managing that process effectively can mean the difference between a clean, smooth transition and a disruptive season of discontent. In this session, five expert panelists discussed the ins and outs of editor-in-chief transitions, from the minutiae of everyday decision making to the big picture of long-term strategy.

Heather Goodell started off the session with a tutorial on conducting an editor search. This process can take many forms and include a variety of stakeholders, from publication boards and outside search firms to editors who are encouraged to groom internal successors. Touching on the essential aspects of candidate review, from what to ask for in applications to how to conduct face-to-face interviews, Goodell stressed the importance of communication and outreach to keep organization leaders, members, and the editorial board informed and engaged in the process and to encourage "buy in" from them once the next editor is selected.

Next, Feng Chen presented an overview of necessary qualities and training for prospective editors-in-chief. As the captain at the helm of a journal's ship, the editor-in-chief must have certain key traits and qualities: strategic insight and vision to translate trends in the field into editorial direction; strong team leadership to manage the team effectively and open mindedly, delegate responsibility, and partner with collaborators; effective decision making to consistently, fairly, and transparently move the journal's operations forward; and excellent communication skills to engage with the community and deliver sometimes difficult messages.

Continuing our stepwise tour through the process, Judy Connors then discussed the business logistics of transitioning a new editor-in-chief. Outlining the significant components of an editor-in-chief contract and emphasizing the need to manage expectations, Connors walked the audience through such important and nuanced topics as employment status, compensation, roles and responsibilities, and reporting structure. Establishing these parameters and documenting them early in the relationship between the society and the editor will set the tone and help prevent conflict down the road.

Alice Ellingham addressed the details of editorial workflow during an editor-in-chief transition. What is the timeline and how will the workflow transition? Is it a clean break, a staggered handover, or something in between? Ellingham outlined the pros and cons of various transition models and further considerations for editorial office operations, recommending automation over manual processes as much as possible and emphasizing the value of setting boundaries for both incoming and outgoing editors-in-chief.

Finally, Katherine Bennett covered key points in society and editorial office logistics during an editor-in-chief turnover. If organizational structure or workflow models are changing, promote the new model and try to obtain buy in from various stakeholders. Encourage editors to share the workload, delegate responsibility, and make connections with other editors-in-chief to create a peer group to offer advice and act as a sounding board. Promote communication among the editorial board members to increase cohesion and transparency.

In summary, an editor-in-chief transition is quite a bit more than that, having lasting implications for not only the journal and the editorial team but also the parent society and the field as a whole. Taking ownership of the process early on, setting an appropriate tone, and managing expectations will help the team prepare for the unexpected and progress more smoothly through the many microtransitions that happen along the way.