Letters to the Editor

Fellows Nominations

Editor:

This year I had planned to nominate a worthy colleague as a AAAI fellow. My request for references was turned down by two current Fellows on the basis that other more senior researchers had not yet been elected, and in particular, had not been elected last year.

I did some investigation, and discovered that the number of Fellows elected each year has dropped precipitously over the ten years since the program was instituted. In the most recent election (1999) there were only three new Fellows elected. The complete set of numbers is:

1990, 70 Fellows;
1991, 23 Fellows;
1992, 26 Fellows;
1993, 24 Fellows;
1994, 17 Fellows;
1995, 7 Fellows;
1996, 5 Fellows;
1997, 5 Fellows;
1998, 4 Fellows;
1999, 3 Fellows.

It doesn't take a statistical genius to see the pattern here.

It seems clear that there is little chance that my nomination will succeed regardless of the merits of the case. It looks to me as though the first few years of the program were used to give places to all of the then-prominent members of the field. Now that those slots have been filled, there is almost nothing a more junior member of the field can do to become elected, even if their more recent contributions are in fact of greater significance than those of previously elected Fellows.

I understand that the number of Fellows has been set at a fixed percentage of the membership. However, this seems to me to be an overly static and rigid restriction. At the least, it should be tied to the total all-time membership, since once elected, Fellowship is a life appointment. But even this seems silly: Do we really need to grade AAAI Fellows on a curve? Furthermore, since membership is remaining steady or even declining, the obvious conclusion is that soon one will only be able to become a Fellow if a current Fellow dies.

I respectfully request that the AAAI leadership revisit this issue, and change the rules so that those who are worthy of Fellowship can receive formal recognition from this community. Otherwise, the continuing nomination process is a sham and a great waste of everyone's time.

–*Marie desJardins*
SRI International

David Waltz Responds

The issue that Marie DesJardins raises was discussed at the AAAI Executive Council meeting last summer. We all agreed on the nature of the problem, which Marie describes well. The reasons for the problem are primarily that, at the time that the Fellows program was initiated, the membership of AAAI was significantly larger than it is today. The program stated that the total number of Fellows should number no more than 2.5% of the membership, so in the early years of the program, Fellows were selected at a rate that left considerable space for continued additions to their ranks.

By 1994 it became clear that the allowed percentage was going to be reached soon, not by adding Fellows, but by having a smaller number of total AAAI members. The decision was made to add new Fellows, but at a very low rate, now down to less than five per year. Since 1994, membership in AAAI has stabilized, but even the addition of people at a low rate has caused us to exceed the percentage specified by the Council.

So what to do? The opinions in the Executive Council ranged from raising the allowable percentage to allowing no new Fellows at all. The argument for adding more Fellows was very much along the lines Marie has argued; the argument against was that being a Fellow should be highly meaningful, and that if too large a percentage of the membership are made Fellows, the Fellow honor will cease to have much significance, and AAAI's reputation for high standards will suffer. In the absence of any consensus, the Council voted to leave things as they are, and to charter subcommittees to propose solutions that could gain general approval. Marie's idea of tying the number of Fellows to a percentage of total all-time membership is novel, and might prove useful in finding a consensus.

Of course the best solution would be to have a growing membership, and the Council did take some actions to help in this regard (e.g. judging and offering prizes in Science Fairs to encourage young people to go into AI, as well as other initiatives) though most will take years to come to fruition. This issue will be revisited this year by the Executive Council. We welcome new ideas and opinions on this issue from members.

–*David L. Waltz*
AAAI Past President
Chair, Fellows Selection Committee