President-elect

(to serve as president 2023–2024)

Leeann Thornton

ASPB has been part of my identity as a scientist since I first learned about professional societies as an undergraduate. My research mentor made it clear that presenting and discussing research at conferences was critical to a profession in the sciences. I first became a member in 1998 after winning the undergraduate research presentation award at the Mid-Atlantic Section meeting. Getting introduced to ASPB so early in my career was one of the most influential aspects of my education. It would be a privilege to serve this society as President, building connections that support the membership throughout the year.

My undergraduate work in Arabidopsis at James Madison University led me to doctoral studies at Washington University in St. Louis where I examined the regulation of Photosystem II in *Synechocystis*. I stayed in St. Louis for my postdoctoral training but switched to a lab where I could return to vascular plant genetics and environmental growth regulation. I secured USDA funding to support the analysis of Cytochrome P450 enzymes (CYPs) that regulate brassinosteroids in rice. My postdoctoral training included time in a collaborator's lab at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, introducing me to research at a large land grant institution.

While in college and graduate school, I developed a passion for teaching young people how to become scientists. My postdoctoral mentor helped me develop an Arabidopsis project to continue at a small Primarily Undergraduate Institution (PUI). I started at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) in 2007 and was recently promoted to full Professor. At TCNJ, I support a team of undergraduate researchers that are learning to manipulate CYP genes to study their role in environmentally regulated plant metabolism. TCNJ is committed to supporting my research throughout the year. My work has benefited from NSF support of my sabbatical to learn corn genetics and USDA funding to continue that work at TCNJ. My scientific interests inform the courses I teach in the Biology Department and the First-Year Seminar. I have made it my mission to help each student I encounter appreciate the importance of plant science in their daily lives, which means I have learned to help them connect to plants on their own terms. For four years, I led TCNJ's First-Year Seminar Program, managing the students and faculty for more than 100 sections each year. My responsibilities included training instructors in inclusive teaching and other strategies for improving classroom learning.

Over the years, I engaged in leadership activities that ASPB offered. I was invited to become the first postdoc ambassador and member of the Membership Committee in 2005. The ASPB executive committee had begun investing in leadership activities for early career scientists. That investment has grown into a thriving Ambassador program and the Early Career Plant Scientists section that both contribute energy and ideas to all aspects of the ASPB mission. Later, I spent two additional terms on the Membership Committee and helped establish the PUI section of ASPB. I led the effort in securing external funding for the PUI faculty participation in ASPB and expanding networking opportunities for PUI faculty and those interested in a career at a PUI. As the section grew, we expanded our interactions to support each other throughout the year, as well as at the annual conference.

I highly value the effort that ASPB puts into facilitating networking at the annual conferences and throughout the year. I want to enhance opportunities for meaningful connections among all members of the plant biology community. ASPB meetings helped me develop collaborations with scientists at The Boyce Thompson Institute and receive training in plant metabolite analysis in Japan. Each step of my career has benefitted from working alongside scientists from other institutions in the US and internationally. One of the strengths of a large society is connecting those that have something useful with those that need it, such as jobs, workshops, protocols, and scientific findings. As President, I will work to improve opportunities for scientists seeking training to connect with those who have expertise and job opportunities in academia, government, and industry in the US and internationally.

Although I value each aspect of the ASPB mission, this objective resonates with me most: "promote the interests, growth, and education of plant scientists". My term as the PUI Representative on the ASPB Council showed me how each committee and the society leaders thoughtfully support plant scientists around the world. As with any group of people, it is a challenge for an organization to be everything to everyone, but ASPB can be the conduit through which members connect to what they need in the plant biology community. To solve the challenges facing humanity in the coming years, we need collaboration that respects the wisdom and perspective not historically represented in the upper tiers of science. We also need to maintain pathways for diverse young scientists to build careers in academia, industry, science communication, and policy making. I will be a leader who is willing to recognize my biases and seek out voices different from my own. I will listen to new ideas and help continue our shift towards efforts that improve access and support more equitable collaboration. I aim to help ASPB recognize whose voices need to be amplified in our on-going efforts to engage diverse plant scientists. ASPB is a strong society because it respects the varying perspectives of our members, and I want to support our membership by advocating for resources plant scientists need to thrive.