

Monday, July 21, 2014

Turning down an endowed lectureship because their gender ratio is too skewed towards males #WomenInSTEM  
Just got this invitation. I have edited it to remove some of the identifying factors since I think the specific details do not matter.

Dear Dr. Eisen:

I am writing to invite you to present a lecture in the endowed XXXX Lecture Series at XXXX University. The XXXX Lecture is a platform to allow leaders in the areas of XXXX to communicate research advances to a general audience. Recent speakers include XXXX and XXXX and XXXX. For your talk, we were hoping you could discuss advances in understanding human microbiomes and their significance to health. I think this is an enormously important area that the general public is still largely unaware of, and also an area with incredible promise that will see exponential progress going forward. I know this is relatively short notice, but we are hoping that the lecture would be sometime in October or November of 2014.

The lectureship includes an honorarium of \$2,000 in addition to covering your travel, lodging, and meal expenses. Because XXXX we generally hold duplicate lectures XXXX on consecutive evenings (typical Tues-Wed or Wed-Thurs). Speakers generally arrive early in the afternoon of the day of the first lecture, and depart after the second lecture the following day. Between the two lectures there will be a dinner and meetings with research or medical groups and an outreach activity in which, if you are willing, you would XXXX.

We would be honored to have you speak in the XXXX series and hope you will be able to fit us into your busy schedule.

Sincerely,

XXXX

Well, wow. That would be really nice. I do not think I have ever given a named lecture before. Then I made one fateful decision - I decided to look up who had spoken at the lecture series previously. And, well, it was not what I wanted to see. And another lecture series from the same institute had the same problem. Bad gender ratio of speakers. So, after some thought and a brief discussion with a post doc in my lab Sarah Hird whose opinions I trust on such issues. I wrote this to the people who invited me:

XXX

Thank you so much for the invitation and the respect it shows to me that I would be considered for this. However, when I looked into past lectures in this series I saw something that was disappointing. From the site XXXX where past lectures are listed I see that the ratio of male to female speakers is 14:3. I note - the XXXX lecture series - also from XXXX - also has a skewed ratio (11:2). As someone who is working actively on multiple issues relating to gender bias in science, I find this very disappointing. I realize there are many issues that contribute to who comes to give a talk in a meeting or seminar series or such. But I simply cannot personally contribute to a series which has such an imbalance and I would suggest that you consider whether anything in your process is biased in some way.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Eisen

UPDATE 7/22/2014

The person who invited me responded to my email. Here is what this person wrote:

Jonathan:

Thanks for response and your concern. I noted this uneven representation also when I took over the series a couple years ago and have worked (not as successfully as I would have liked) to get more balance. For example, in trying to book the XXXX lecture this year I have been turned down by XXXX, but did manage to book XXXX. For the XXXX lecture series, a related but separate series aimed at professional rather than the lay public audiences that I also run, I was turned down by XXXX, but I've booked XXXX. You have been the sole male invite to either series this year. But I will agree that in previous years the ratio has not been as good as I would like. In part this is because it seems even harder to book top female speakers than males speakers - presumably because they are in such demand and are always asked to be representative on a million committees etc, but in past XXXX I did bring in XXXX and XXXX. For the XXXX lecture I brought in XXXX last year. So numbers are getting better, and this year the ratio will be at least 2:1 (max) in favor of females.

But your point is well taken, and perhaps I can even things out a little with your help. Although I think microbiomes are an incredibly important and under appreciated area, this is not my area of research, so I don't know the players. If you can