ARO Council Meeting

Date: January 15, 2026

Attendees:
Kristin Johnson, Alain Dabdoub, Ronna Hertzano, Jeff Holt, Sunil Puria, Anna Lysakowski, Mike Bowl, Radha Kalluri

1. Welcome and Attendance

Summary:
Kristin Johnson opened the meeting, noted that several council members were unable to attend (Yuri, Kate, and Lisa were mentioned as absent), and confirmed that no formal votes were anticipated during this call. Puria, Sunil joined for part of the meeting while on a break from study section.

Decisions Made:

- The council proceeded with the agenda despite several absences, recognizing that no formal votes were expected.

Action Items:

- None for this item.

2. Midwinter Meeting Registration, Travel Environment, and Attendance Projections

Summary:
Kristin Johnson reported that Midwinter Meeting registrations had initially tracked ahead of historical trends but stalled after U.S. government activity related to Venezuela raised concerns about travel and flight disruptions, including to Puerto Rico. Although actual airspace restrictions do not affect San Juan, many potential attendees appear to be reacting to perceived risk and recent widespread flight cancellations. As of the meeting, there were approximately 1,357 registrants, compared to a typical final total of ~1,700. The 2026 budget assumed 2,000 attendees based on prior indicators, so even if the meeting reaches historical attendance, the event is likely to operate at a loss. Hotel blocks are sufficiently filled, and no attrition penalties are expected.

Decisions Made:

- The council acknowledged that the 2026 Midwinter Meeting may operate at a financial loss given current registration levels and the 2,000-attendee budget assumption.
- The meeting will proceed as planned in Puerto Rico; no changes to the venue or core meeting structure were proposed.

Action Items:

- Kristin Johnson will continue to monitor registration closely and keep council informed, especially if there is a significant positive uptick before the meeting.

3. Early-Bird Pricing, Promo Codes, and Recordings-Only Registration

Summary:

The council discussed whether to reopen or extend early-bird registration in response to travel and funding uncertainties. Puria, Sunil suggested a one-week extension to capture hesitant attendees, but concerns were raised about fairness to those who registered during the short period at higher rates and the administrative burden of issuing refunds. The group also noted that late funding approvals (VA, NIH, academic institutions) are being handled through individual promo codes that honor early-bird pricing. Additionally, Kristin Johnson described ongoing promotion of the "meeting recordings only" registration option, which provides access to main session recordings and e-posters at a flat $200 rate, unaffected by early-bird deadlines.

Decisions Made:

- Early-bird registration will *not* be globally reinstated or extended.
- Individuals who email with documented late funding approvals or special circumstances may continue to receive promo codes that honor early-bird pricing.
- The "meeting recordings only" registration option will continue to be actively promoted as a lower-cost, remote participation alternative for those unable or unwilling to travel.

Action Items:

- Kristin Johnson and the management team will continue issuing early-bird promo codes on a case-by-case basis to attendees who reach out with appropriate justification (e.g., delayed funding approvals, NIH/NIDCD travelers).

- Council members will inform their networks that individuals who contact the ARO office can request promo codes to receive early-bird pricing under the current unusual circumstances.
- Kristin Johnson and team will continue featuring the "meeting recordings only" registration type in outbound communications as a key alternative to in-person attendance.

4. Attendance Demographics, Funding Climate, and Travel Considerations

Summary:

In response to questions from Jeff Holt and others, Kristin Johnson presented preliminary breakdowns of registration by country and membership type. Unexpectedly, the largest drop in registrants appears to come from the United States rather than solely from international attendees. Several countries (e.g., South Korea, Canada, Australia, China, India, Denmark, Israel) show notable declines compared with prior years. The council discussed multiple contributing factors, including visa and immigration concerns (especially for visa holders with U.S. addresses traveling to Puerto Rico), confusion about whether Puerto Rico is an international destination, and the very challenging NIH and broader research funding climate (canceled grants, delayed awards, reduced paylines). There is also a visible drop across membership categories: student members, non-member students, regular members, and regular non-members.

Decisions Made:

- The council recognized that reduced attendance likely reflects a combination of travel anxiety, immigration concerns, increased flight costs, and a difficult funding environment, rather than a single factor.
- No additional changes to pricing or meeting structure were made specifically to target these demographic shifts, beyond the promo-code approach and recordings-only option already in place.

Action Items:

- Kristin Johnson will continue to analyze registration trends (by country and membership type) to inform future planning and budgeting.
- Council members will continue to share contextual information with their communities (e.g., clarifying that Puerto Rico is not an international flight for U.S. travelers) to help reduce misconceptions about travel.

5. Budget Overview, Contracts, and Insurance

Summary:

Kristin Johnson provided highlights from the meeting budget. Sponsorship and exhibitor revenue has exceeded the original projection of $28,800, with some additional small meeting requests (e.g., a paid workspace for Regeneron staff) still being added. On the expense side, the organization is benefiting from reduced shuttle costs (approximately $28,500 instead of a previously quoted $50,000) and lower-than-budgeted meeting cancellation insurance (~$6,000 instead of ~$11,000), while maintaining comprehensive coverage including weather, terrorism, and other catastrophic risks. A commission/rebate from Discover Puerto Rico tied to hotel occupancy appears on track but may be slightly reduced if final occupancy drops just below the 90% tier. At current registration levels (as of the day prior to the meeting), the projected loss would be roughly $140,000, though additional registrations will reduce that figure. Kristin Johnson also noted staff travel costs, including a potential loss associated with Rhiannon's already-purchased flight prior to her resignation.

Decisions Made:

- No changes will be made to the existing convention center and hotel contracts; renegotiation is not feasible at this stage.
- The previously purchased higher-tier meeting cancellation insurance will be maintained as a prudent risk-management measure.
- Shuttle service will proceed with the lower-cost vendor and extended hours already contracted, including coverage for the Tuesday social event ("hairball").

Action Items:

- Kristin Johnson will continue to refine budget projections as registration and final hotel pickup numbers evolve.
- Kristin Johnson (and team) will investigate whether Rhiannon's flight can be refunded or converted to a transferable credit and, if possible, apply it to another traveler.

6. Meeting Evaluation Survey – Review and Edits

Summary:

The council conducted a detailed, question-by-question review of the draft Midwinter Meeting evaluation prepared for the Long Range Planning Committee. Topics included

demographic questions, venue and childcare items, session-format feedback, communication and website usability, future meeting timing, and student/trainee programming (spARO). Key themes were: ensuring clarity on how respondents should categorize themselves (e.g., adding "physician/clinician"), capturing specific reasons for any "unsatisfactory" ratings, enabling feedback on newer session formats (special sessions, mini-podium, late breaking, poster blitz), and making sure the survey is informative but not overly burdensome.

Decisions Made:

- Add or clarify response options so that practicing clinicians/physicians can accurately identify themselves (e.g., "physician/clinician").
- Add explicit instruction in the comments section following the venue table asking respondents who rated any aspect as "unsatisfactory" to explain why, so organizers can act on the feedback.
- Add optional comment boxes for key program-format questions (special sessions, mini-podium, late breaking, poster blitz), ensuring these comment fields are *not* required so as not to lengthen the survey burden.
- Revise the question about email frequency so that answers distinguish between "too many," "about right," and "too few" rather than a simple yes/no.
- Include a link from the question on awareness of ARO's strategic goals to the "About" section of the website (mission, vision, core values, strategic plan).
- Retain open-ended questions about what attendees value in the meeting, what might discourage attendance, accessibility, community-building, and five-year improvement suggestions, recognizing that themes emerge even from unstructured input.
- Remove a redundant SPARO question so that students/trainees are not asked essentially the same thing twice.
- Do **not** add a survey question this year about changing the name of the Association (e.g., to emphasize otology and neurotology). Instead, refer the naming/scope question to the Long Range Planning Committee for deeper consideration.
- After edits, the Long Range Planning Committee will test and finalize the evaluation before deployment.

Action Items:

- Kristin Johnson will incorporate all agreed edits into the survey (new options, wording changes, and comment prompts).
- Kristin Johnson will send the updated evaluation to the Long Range Planning Committee for review, testing, and sign-off.

- The Long Range Planning Committee will consider the broader question of whether and how to revisit ARO's name and scope and, if appropriate, recommend how to solicit member input in a future cycle (outside the current survey).

7. Award of Merit Talk and In Memoriam Plans

Summary:
Kristin Johnson updated the council on Award of Merit presentations. Paul Fuchs will give the extended Award of Merit talk at this year's meeting, as Alfred Nuttall had been too ill to attend in person. Dr. Nuttall had hoped to provide a recorded talk, but his health declined rapidly, and he has since passed away. In response, the program has been adjusted to include approximately 15 minutes during the session for one of his nominators (noted as Larry Trussell) to speak about Dr. Nuttall's contributions and his absence, with a separate in memoriam session for Dr. Nuttall planned for next year's meeting.

Decisions Made:

- Paul Fuchs will deliver this year's extended Award of Merit talk.
- A 15-minute tribute to Alfred Nuttall, led by one of his nominators, will be added to the program in lieu of his own talk.
- An in memoriam session for Alfred Nuttall will be planned for the following year's meeting.

Action Items:

- Meeting organizers (managed by Kristin Johnson and team) will finalize schedule adjustments to accommodate the tribute segment and will plan an in memoriam session for next year.

8. JARO Editor-in-Chief Transition and Conflict-of-Interest Concerns

Summary:
Kristin Johnson reported that the current JARO Editor-in-Chief, Dr. Cederroth , intends to step down earlier than expected at an unspecified time in 2026. To avoid disruption, she is preparing a formal call for applications including a job description, application form, and announcement routed through the society's submission system.

The council also discussed an email from Dr. Cederroth expressing concerns that: (1) some JARO editorial board members also serve on editorial boards of other journals, and (2) some

council members are editors for other journals, which he characterized as conflicts of interest potentially limiting support for JARO. He proposed that council members be required to relinquish other editorial roles within a set time after joining council. Council leadership, including Hertzano, Ronna (NIH/NIDCD), noted that in their experience across multiple prominent journals, such restrictions are highly unusual and may actually weaken the field by discouraging service on either JARO or other key journals. However, the group stressed that since council members are themselves implicated, they should not unilaterally dismiss the conflict-of-interest concern.

The group agreed that this issue warrants review by a neutral party (e.g., publisher ethics resources) and that the immediate priority is to launch a transparent search for a new Editor-in-Chief while documenting JARO's governance expectations clearly.

Decisions Made:

- Proceed with opening a formal call for applications for the next JARO Editor-in-Chief, using a standardized application process in the society's submission system.
- Do not adopt, at this time, a requirement that council members or JARO editors resign from other journal editorial boards. Instead, seek external guidance on best practices regarding editorial conflicts of interest.
- Communicate back to Dr. Cederroth that council discussed his concerns, does not feel comfortable "self-judging" on the conflict question, and is consulting appropriate external resources.

Action Items:

- Kristin Johnson will finalize and circulate the Editor-in-Chief job description, application form, and announcement, and configure the online submission process.
- Kristin Johnson will consult with the publisher (Springer) and Lori at PMG regarding:
    - Whether the publisher has an ethics officer or formal guidance on editors serving on multiple editorial boards, and
    - Any standard conflict-of-interest expectations for society leaders who are also journal editors.
- Kristin Johnson will respond to Dr. Cederroth, explaining that council discussed his email and is seeking external advice before considering any policy changes.

9. Committee Reports and Follow-Up (DMAC, Membership, and Others)

Summary:

Due to time constraints, the council did not review all committee reports in detail during the call. Kristin Johnson noted that she has annotated the compiled report document with comments based on staff experience and feedback from Rhiannon, who attends several committee meetings. Most committees are functioning well, though a few areas of concern were highlighted.

For the Development, Mentorship, and Advancement Committee (DMAC), Kristin Johnson noted that co-chairs Tajbeer and Jeff will be rolling off and have struggled to identify successors, partly due to heightened concerns among some institutions about visibility and safety around DEI-focused roles. Council has previously approved an additional seat for the ARO Scholars PI on council, currently held by Avril Genene Holt, with an expectation that this role includes co-chairing DMAC during the council term. Kalluri, Radha, as council liaison, emphasized that in the current political climate, junior faculty may be discouraged from DMAC service, and more senior individuals might need to be recruited to provide stable leadership.

For the Membership Committee, Kristin Johnson and Hertzano, Ronna (NIH/NIDCD) reported persistent challenges: meetings are often driven mostly by the co-chairs, with limited engagement from other members; the committee has made slow progress on website-related tasks despite repeated explanations of the process; and overall it is not yet functioning as the highly active, strategic group that membership development requires. There are extenuating circumstances, including a recent extended leave for one chair, but longer-term structural improvements may be needed, potentially including membership refresh and clearer expectations.

Decisions Made:

- Committee reports will be reviewed asynchronously; comments and concerns will be collected via the shared document rather than attempting to cover all details in this meeting.
- DMAC leadership transition will be actively supported by council, with the ARO Scholars PI council representative (Avril Genene Holt) expected to co-chair and additional co-chairs to be identified, potentially at a more senior career stage.
- The Membership Committee's current level of engagement is a concern; council acknowledges the need for stronger activity and may consider future structural or roster changes after further review.

Action Items:

- Kristin Johnson will distribute the compiled committee report document (with her and Rhiannon's comments) to council via email.
- All council members will review the committee reports and add comments, questions, or suggestions in the shared document.
- Kalluri, Radha (as DMAC liaison) will:
    - Consult with current DMAC co-chairs Tajbeer and Jeff regarding leadership transition, and
    - Coordinate with Avril Genene Holt to identify one or more additional DMAC co-chairs, prioritizing individuals whose institutional context allows them to serve visibly in this role.
- Council leadership and the Membership Committee co-chairs (including Maria Chait) will continue conversations on how to increase committee engagement, clarify website-change processes, and, if necessary, adjust committee composition.

10. Next Steps and Closing

Summary:

The meeting concluded with agreement to handle several remaining items via email, including circulation of the JARO Editor-in-Chief call documents, the committee report packet, and any substantial registration updates. Hertzano, Ronna (NIH/NIDCD) asked Kristin Johnson to share positive registration news promptly if the numbers increase meaningfully, and Kristin Johnson confirmed she would do so. The council will reconvene in person at the Midwinter Meeting in approximately three weeks.

Decisions Made:

- Remaining detailed items (full committee report review, final JARO call documents) will be completed via email prior to the Midwinter Meeting.

Action Items:

- Kristin Johnson will email council with:
    - Final JARO Editor-in-Chief call materials; and
    - The committee report packet for asynchronous review.
- Kristin Johnson will notify council if registration significantly improves in the weeks leading up to the meeting.

Summary

The January 15, 2026 ARO Council meeting focused heavily on the upcoming Midwinter Meeting's registration, budget, and risk environment, as well as key governance and committee-health topics. Kristin Johnson reported that registrations, while still increasing, have slowed relative to expectations due to geopolitical events, travel concerns, and a challenging funding climate. The meeting is likely to operate at a loss because it was budgeted for 2,000 attendees but may reach only historical levels (~1,700). Nonetheless, hotel blocks are sufficiently filled to avoid attrition penalties, sponsorships are performing well, shuttle costs have been reduced, and comprehensive cancellation insurance is in place.

Council confirmed that early-bird registration will not be globally reopened, but that individual promo codes will continue to honor early-bird pricing for those with delayed funding approvals. The "meeting recordings only" option is being emphasized as an accessible, lower-cost alternative. Detailed registration-by-country and membership-type analysis shows declines across several countries and categories, with a surprisingly large drop in U.S. registrants, and the group acknowledged the combined role of funding cuts, travel costs, immigration concerns, and misperceptions about Puerto Rico.

A substantial portion of the meeting was devoted to refining the Midwinter Meeting evaluation survey. Council agreed on specific edits, including preserving childcare questions (for NIH compliance), clarifying roles (especially physicians/clinicians), adding targeted comment prompts for "unsatisfactory" ratings and new session formats, revising the email-frequency question, linking to strategic-plan content on the website, and removing a redundant SPARO item. A proposal to poll the membership about changing ARO's name was postponed; instead, the Long Range Planning Committee will first consider how and whether to address this question.

Council also addressed program and governance issues: finalizing Award of Merit plans, including a tribute segment for the late Alfred Nuttall and an in memoriam session next year; planning an early search for a new JARO Editor-in-Chief following Dr. Cederroth's intention to step down; and treating his conflict-of-interest concerns about editors serving on multiple journals as a matter for external ethics guidance rather than immediate internal policy change.

Finally, committee health was reviewed in brief. DMAC faces leadership transition challenges in a sensitive political environment, and council will actively support recruitment of new co-chairs, including engagement by ARO Scholars PI council representative Avril Genene

Holt. The Membership Committee remains a concern due to limited engagement and slow progress on website-related items, though recent personal circumstances affecting a co-chair were acknowledged. Committee reports and JARO call documents will be finalized via email ahead of the Midwinter Meeting, and council will reconvene in person in San Juan.

Decisions Made (All Items)

- Proceed with the January 2026 Midwinter Meeting in Puerto Rico as planned, acknowledging the likelihood of operating at a financial loss given attendance projections versus the 2,000-attendee budget assumption.
- Do not globally reinstate or extend early-bird registration; instead, continue handling special cases with individual promo codes.
- Actively promote the "meeting recordings only" registration type as a key alternative for those unable to travel.
- Maintain existing contracts with the convention center and hotels; renegotiation is not feasible.
- Maintain the purchased higher-tier cancellation insurance coverage for the meeting.
- Continue with the lower-cost shuttle vendor and extended shuttle hours, including coverage for the Tuesday social event.
- Retain and refine the childcare-related survey question to meet NIH conference-grant expectations.
- Enhance the evaluation survey by:
    - Adding "physician/clinician" (or similar) to role options;
    - Prompting comments for any "unsatisfactory" ratings;
    - Adding optional comment boxes for key session formats (special sessions, mini-podium, late breaking, poster blitz);
    - Revising the email-frequency question to "too many/about right/too few";
    - Linking to the ARO mission/vision/strategic-plan web page; and
    - Removing a redundant SPARO question.
- Defer any member survey question about changing ARO's name; refer the naming/scope issue to the Long Range Planning Committee for further consideration.
- Confirm that Paul Fuchs will deliver this year's extended Award of Merit talk, with a tribute segment for Alfred Nuttall and an in memoriam session planned for next year.

- Launch a formal call for applications for the next JARO Editor-in-Chief using the society's submission system.
- Decline, for now, to require council members or JARO editors to resign from other journals' editorial boards; instead, seek external ethical guidance on this concern.
- Communicate to Dr. Cederroth that council has discussed his concerns and will seek external input rather than self-adjudicating the conflict-of-interest issue.
- Handle detailed committee report review and JARO call approval via email rather than extending this meeting.
- Support DMAC leadership transition by engaging the ARO Scholars PI council representative as a co-chair and recruiting additional co-chairs, potentially at more senior ranks.
- Recognize the current functioning of the Membership Committee as a concern and commit to exploring ways to strengthen its activity and structure.

Action Items (All Items and Assignees)

- Kristin Johnson
    - Continue monitoring Midwinter Meeting registration and provide updates to council, especially if there is a significant positive uptick.
    - Continue issuing early-bird promo codes on a case-by-case basis for attendees with delayed funding approvals or special circumstances.
    - Continue highlighting the "meeting recordings only" registration option in communications.
    - Refine budget projections as registration and hotel pickup evolve.
    - Investigate refund or credit options for Rhiannon's previously purchased flight and use any credit if possible.
    - Incorporate all agreed edits into the Midwinter Meeting evaluation survey.
    - Send the updated survey to the Long Range Planning Committee for testing and finalization.
    - Adjust the Award of Merit session schedule to incorporate the tribute to Alfred Nuttall and plan an in memoriam session for next year.
    - Finalize and circulate JARO Editor-in-Chief call materials (job description, application form, announcement) and configure the online submission process.
    - Consult with Springer and Lori at PMG about norms and ethics guidance on editors serving on multiple boards and council members serving as editors.

    - Respond to Dr. Cederroth summarizing council's discussion and the plan to seek external guidance.
    - Distribute the annotated committee report document to council via email.
    - Email council with final JARO call documents.
- All Council Members
    - Inform their networks that individuals who email the ARO office can request promo codes to receive early-bird pricing in justified circumstances.
    - Continue clarifying travel details to their communities (e.g., that Puerto Rico is not an international flight for U.S. travelers) and share context on funding/travel challenges as appropriate.
    - Review committee reports in the shared document and add comments, questions, or suggestions.
- Long Range Planning Committee
    - Test and finalize the updated Midwinter Meeting evaluation survey.
    - Consider the question of ARO's name and scope and propose, if appropriate, how and when to solicit member input in a future cycle.
- Meeting Organizers (staff under Kristin Johnson)
    - Implement the finalized session schedule for Award of Merit and tribute content.
- Kalluri, Radha (DMAC Liaison)
    - Consult with DMAC co-chairs Tajbeer and Jeff regarding their upcoming rotation off and leadership needs.
    - Coordinate with Avril Genene Holt (ARO Scholars PI council representative) to identify one or more additional DMAC co-chairs, with attention to institutional and political constraints on service.
- Membership Committee Co-Chairs (including Maria Chait) and Council Leadership
    - Continue discussions on strategies to increase Membership Committee engagement, clarify website-change processes, and, if necessary, adjust committee composition to better support ARO's membership goals.