ARO Council Meeting
Date: March 18, 2026, 12:30 PM (ET)
Attendees: Lisa Cunningham, Ronna Hertzano, Konstantina (Tina) Stankovic, Alain Dabdoub, Amanda Lauer, Kristin Johnson, Lavinia Sheets, Katharine (Kate) Fernandez, Sonya Pyott, Shelby Payne, Mike Bowl

1. Welcome and Introductions

Summary:
The meeting opened with greetings and brief introductions. Lisa Cunningham chaired the meeting in her first Council session as ARO President, thanking outgoing President Ronna Hertzano and recognizing the success of the recent Midwinter Meeting. New Council members and officers introduced themselves, including the president-elect, secretary-treasurer, spARO chair, and the new Program Committee chair. The purpose of the call was framed to focusing on near-term strategic priorities for ARO.

Decisions Made:

- New council members and officer roles were acknowledged and welcomed.
- Agreement to proceed with the pre-circulated agenda and to focus the meeting on short-term strategic planning for ARO.

Action Items:

- None for this section.

2. Executive Office Updates

Summary:
Kristin Johnson provided updates from the Executive Office. New committee volunteers and chairs have been approved, and updated committee rosters will be posted on the website. Once rosters are finalized, the office will begin scheduling committee meetings. Financial reconciliation of the Puerto Rico Midwinter Meeting is nearly complete; the meeting operated at a loss due to lower-than-anticipated attendance (impacted by federal funding uncertainty, immigration concerns, and other travel issues), but the organization remains stable overall for the year. The post-meeting survey (sent to attendees only) closes tonight and has already received 576 responses—significantly higher than in prior years. Recruiting for the open Member Services Manager position is in final interviews with two strong candidates. Kristin also reviewed council liaison expectations, noting that each council

member serves as a liaison to at least one committee; some liaison assignments will be adjusted due to turnover and new members. She will send any new or shifting assignments via email.

Decisions Made:

- Committee rosters will be updated on the website soon.
- Council liaison roles will be rebalanced, removing the need for any member (e.g., Ronna) to serve as liaison on two committees.

Action Items:

- Executive Office to update committee rosters and the ARO website to reflect new volunteers and chairs.
- Executive Office to initiate committee meeting scheduling once rosters and web updates are complete.
- Council members with liaison changes (e.g., Ronna, Tina, Lavinia) will receive an email from Kristin Johnson regarding liaison assignments.
- Kristin Johnson to continue interviews and finalize hiring for the Member Services Manager position.

3. Meeting Venue, Attendance, and Puerto Rico Feedback

Summary:
Council revisited the recent Midwinter Meeting venue in Puerto Rico. Early anecdotal review of survey comments indicates strong enthusiasm among attendees for returning to Puerto Rico; however, concerns were raised about accessibility for West Coast and Far East Asian attendees due to long travel times. Kristin noted that international attendance was down overall, and that U.S.-based attendance also decreased—possibly influenced by visa and immigration concerns in addition to travel cost and location. Council also discussed the historical pattern of alternating East/West Coast venues and the emerging idea of a three-location rotation to better distribute travel burdens across regions while remaining within the U.S. (a requirement tied to NIH conference grant support).

Decisions Made:

- Council will defer any formal decision about returning to Puerto Rico until detailed attendance and survey data are analyzed.
- Council reaffirmed the goal of establishing a rotation of U.S. locations (e.g., East/West plus a third option such as Puerto Rico) to balance accessibility over multiple years.

Action Items:

- Executive Office to analyze Midwinter Meeting attendance data by geography (including U.S. regions and international regions) and provide an executive summary to Council and committee chairs.
- Council to revisit future venue decisions after review of survey data and the executive summary with a focus on 2029.

4. Strategic Planning Approach (2026–2029)

Summary:
Lisa Cunningham summarized the discussion from the February in-person council meeting regarding the ARO strategic plan. The current plan includes a broad set of goals and approximately 40 distinct items—more than can be realistically advanced in a three-year window. Council agreed that the next strategic plan should be more focused, time-bounded (~3 years), and oriented toward supporting the community through a period of uncertainty (funding pressures, visa issues, travel constraints, and concerns among trainees and junior faculty about long-term careers in science). The proposed approach is for Council to define a small set (approximately 3–4) of overarching priorities and then ask each committee to review and align its activities with those priorities.

Decisions Made:

- Council will adopt a short-term (approximately three-year) strategic planning framework rather than a broad, multi-year (5–7+ year) plan.
- Council will identify 3–4 focused priority areas and ask all committees to map their current and planned activities to those priorities.

Action Items:

- Lisa Cunningham and Kristin Johnson to draft a communication to committee chairs outlining the strategic planning approach and expectations for committee input.
- Kristin Johnson to develop a streamlined mechanism (e.g., a common form or template) to collect committee responses.

5. Virtual Meeting Participation and Barriers to Attendance

Summary:
Council discussed the balance between in-person and virtual participation in the Midwinter

Meeting. Currently, ARO offers a "recordings-only" registration category that provides access to recorded sessions and the e-poster gallery for approximately 30 days post-meeting. A fully hybrid model was considered but raised concerns: added costs (technical and staff time), risk to in-person attendance, and limited evidence of meaningful engagement with live-streamed content (several members noted that virtual attendees often multitask rather than actively participate). Given these concerns and recent financial pressures, Council agreed that the immediate priority is to understand why people are not attending in person, rather than expanding virtual offerings.

Decisions Made:

- Council will pivot from debating a fully hybrid model to systematically identifying and understanding barriers to in-person attendance (financial, visa/immigration, travel, institutional policies, etc.).
- Council will gather data from membership, trainees, and committees about attendance barriers and perceived value of virtual vs. in-person participation.

Action Items:

- Communications Committee and/or Long-Range Planning Committee to design and deploy a survey to membership focused on barriers to in-person attendance and meeting preferences.
- Committee chairs to poll their committee members (during upcoming meetings) about barriers to attending ARO in person and summarize themes.
- Shelby Payne to develop trainee-specific questions and disseminate a poll from spARO (likely via targeted email to trainees), focusing on what matters most to trainees and what prevents their attendance.

6. Supporting Early Career Scientists and Trainees (spARO)

Summary:
Council highlighted supporting early career scientists as a top priority, particularly given current funding and career-path uncertainties. Discussion focused on ensuring trainees know they are part of SPARO and understand available resources and events. Shelby noted that many trainees are unaware that membership as a trainee automatically includes spARO membership, and that spARO routinely grapples with how to communicate this. Ideas included targeted emails to trainee members and a more formal welcome process. Kristin confirmed that ARO already sends a monthly "new member" email and that an additional spARO-specific communication could be added.

Decisions Made:

- Council designated engagement and support of early career scientists as a high-priority strategic focus.
- spARO and the Executive Office will enhance communications to trainee members about spARO, available resources, and trainee-focused events.
- Council will ask all committees to explicitly assess how their activities support early career scientists and to identify gaps.

Action Items:

- spARO (Shelby Payne and team) to develop a spARO welcome communication (e.g., flyer, email, or digital brochure) describing spARO, resources, and events.
- Kristin Johnson to explore mechanisms to flag trainees at membership/registration (e.g., a checkbox or data tag) to support trainee-specific communications.
- Kristin Johnson and the Executive Office to explore sending follow-up emails to trainees who attend ARO as non-members, encouraging them to join as trainee members/spARO.
- All committee chairs to review their committee's portfolio and report how their activities support early career scientists, including potential new initiatives.

7. International Engagement

Summary:

Council emphasized that ARO is an international society and must maintain and strengthen engagement with members outside mainland U.S. Mike Bowl noted challenges with live-streamed meetings across time zones and highlighted the perception that planning sometimes defaults to U.S.-centric assumptions. Kristin confirmed that it is an established practice (documented in the policy manual) to ensure at least one council member is based outside the U.S., and that future nominations will continue to prioritize international representation.

Discussion also covered the growing strength of other regional meetings (e.g., Inner Ear Biology in Europe, an emerging meeting in China), which could lead to a "splintering" of the field if ARO is perceived as less accessible or less international. Sonya suggested exploring European (and other non-U.S.) funding or sponsorship options to support international participation or, potentially, rotating a meeting outside mainland U.S. However, Ronna and others noted that many U.S. institutions restrict international travel, and NIH conference grant rules effectively keep the Midwinter Meeting in the U.S., emphasizing the importance of maintaining a strong, comprehensive hearing meeting on U.S. soil.

Decisions Made:

- Council reaffirmed the importance of international representation on Council and in leadership roles (e.g., committee chairs, awardees).
- Council agreed to ask all committees how their activities support international engagement and what opportunities they see for improvement.
- Council acknowledged that while the Midwinter Meeting will remain U.S.-based due to NIH funding and institutional travel policies, partnerships and targeted efforts to include international members should be strengthened.

Action Items:

- All committees to assess and report on current and potential activities that support international engagement (e.g., international speakers, committee membership, outreach, award nominations).
- Sonya Pyott to explore potential European funding or sponsorship mechanisms that might support ARO international initiatives (e.g., travel support, joint events) and report back to Council.
- Council members and Executive Office to continue using the nominations and appointments process to encourage international candidates for Council, committee leadership, and awards.

8. Streamlining Committee Activities and Operational Efficiency

Summary:
Council discussed the need for committees to review their activity portfolios and identify opportunities to streamline or sunset lower-impact initiatives. Kristin explained that, even with the Member Services Manager position filled, ARO's staff capacity is essentially maxed out. Additional initiatives without corresponding reductions elsewhere risk overloading the Parthenon team and increasing management costs. Examples were given (e.g., web video content) where analyzing usage metrics could help committees decide which initiatives have the most value and which could be discontinued or de-emphasized. Lisa and Amanda both emphasized that many programs persist simply because "we've always done them," and that new chairs should be explicitly empowered to make changes.

Decisions Made:

- Council will ask each committee to review its current activities, identify lower-impact or underused programs, and consider sunsetting or scaling back where appropriate.

- Council affirmed that any new initiatives proposed by committees should be accompanied by a consideration of what can be reduced or ended to keep overall workload manageable.

Action Items:

- Kristin Johnson to provide relevant metrics (e.g., video views, web traffic, participation statistics) to committees upon request to support data-informed decisions about sunsetting activities.
- All committee chairs to review their portfolios, identify candidate activities for streamlining or sunsetting, and report recommendations back to Council.
- Lisa Cunningham and Kristin Johnson to incorporate explicit language about "permission to streamline" into communications and orientation materials for committee chairs.

9. Increasing Clinician Participation

Summary:

In addition to international and trainee engagement, Council briefly revisited an earlier Council priority: expanding clinician participation in ARO (e.g., otologists, audiologists, other clinician-scientists). Ronna reminded the group via chat that this effort had previously been identified as a multi-year focus area. Council agreed that engaging clinicians remains important and that committees may have additional ideas for clinician outreach and program design.

Decisions Made:

- Council reaffirmed "increasing clinician participation" as a strategic focus area alongside early career support and international engagement.
- Council agreed to include clinician engagement in the set of topics committees are asked to address in their strategic planning responses.

Action Items:

- Kristin Johnson and Lisa Cunningham to ensure that questions about clinician participation are included in the guidance to committee chairs.
- Committees (especially Clinician Scientist, Education, Program, and spARO) to consider specific measures to enhance clinician engagement and report ideas and existing activities to Council.

10. Next Steps and Closing

Summary:

Lisa summarized the agreed-upon focus areas and next steps. The original topic of "virtual vs. hybrid meeting format" evolved into a broader effort to understand barriers to attendance. Council agreed on a short list of strategic themes: (1) understanding and addressing barriers to in-person attendance, (2) supporting early career scientists and trainees, (3) increasing international engagement, (4) increasing clinician participation, and (5) streamlining committee portfolios for efficiency.

Committee chairs will be asked, via a standardized request from Kristin and Lisa, to describe how their activities address these themes and where changes or new initiatives may be needed. Lisa reiterated appreciation for council members' service and noted her commitment to ending meetings on time.

Decisions Made:

- Confirmed the strategic focus areas for the next ~3 years (see consolidated list below).
- Agreed that Kristin and Lisa will coordinate a unified communication to all committee chairs with a standard response template.

Action Items:

- Kristin Johnson and Lisa Cunningham to finalize and send guidance and a response form to all committee chairs, outlining:
    - Strategic focus areas;
    - Questions on early career, international, and clinician engagement;
    - Expectations for streamlining and for reporting attendance barriers.
- Committee chairs to respond by the requested deadline (to be specified in the communication) and share their committee's plans and suggestions.

Summary

The March 18, 2026 ARO Council Meeting focused on translating broad strategic discussions from the February in-person meeting into a clear, short-term (three-year) set of priorities for the society and its committees. After welcoming new Council members and officers, the group reviewed Executive Office updates on committee appointments, meeting scheduling, Midwinter Meeting finances, and the ongoing search for a Member Services Manager. Council noted that the Puerto Rico meeting, while very positively received by attendees,

experienced lowered attendance, prompting a commitment to more detailed analysis of geographic and demographic participation before making future site decisions.

A major theme of the discussion was the need to clarify ARO's near-term strategic focus. Council endorsed a concise set of priorities and agreed to ask all committees to align their activities around them. Rather than committing substantial new resources to full hybrid meeting formats, Council chose to first understand barriers to in-person attendance through targeted surveys and committee-level polling—especially among trainees and early career scientists. Engagement and support for early career members were affirmed as top priorities, with SPARO and the Executive Office working together to improve trainee communications and welcome activities.

Council also reaffirmed ARO's international identity, acknowledging both the growing prominence of regional meetings abroad and the constraints of NIH funding and institutional travel policies that keep the Midwinter Meeting within the United States. Committees will be asked to identify ways they currently support, and could better support, international members. Similarly, increasing clinician participation was elevated as a continuing strategic focus alongside early career and international engagement.

Finally, recognizing staff capacity limits and the risk of "initiative creep," Council emphasized the importance of streamlining committee activities. Committees will be encouraged to review long-standing programs critically, using engagement metrics where available, and to sunset or scale back lower-impact efforts to make room for higher-priority initiatives. Lisa and Kristin will coordinate a unified request to committee chairs, providing a template for reporting on how committee work advances the agreed-upon strategic areas and where adjustments are recommended.

Decisions Made (Consolidated)

- Agreed to proceed with a short-term (~3-year) strategic planning cycle rather than a broad, long-range plan.
- Confirmed that Council will define 3–4 main strategic focus areas and ask all committees to align activities accordingly.
- Deferred any final decision about returning to Puerto Rico as a venue until attendance and survey data are fully analyzed.
- Reaffirmed a venue strategy that aims for a rotation of U.S. locations (e.g., East, West, and a third location) to balance accessibility.

- Shifted the "virtual vs. hybrid" debate toward systematically understanding barriers to in-person attendance (financial, visa, travel, etc.) rather than immediately expanding virtual formats.
- Designated support for early career scientists and trainees as a high-priority strategic focus for ARO.
- Agreed that spARO and the Executive Office will strengthen communications to trainees about spARO membership, resources, and events.
- Reaffirmed the importance of maintaining at least one non-U.S.-based member on Council and ensuring international representation in leadership and awards.
- Agreed to ask all committees how their current and planned activities support international engagement and where there are opportunities to improve.
- Reaffirmed "increasing clinician participation" as a strategic focus area to be addressed by committees.
- Agreed that all committees should review their portfolios, identify lower-impact initiatives, and consider sunsetting or scaling back activities to manage staff capacity and costs.
- Confirmed that any proposed new initiatives should be accompanied by consideration of what existing activities can be reduced or ended.
- Agreed that Kristin Johnson and Lisa Cunningham will coordinate a standard communication and response template to committee chairs, covering:
    - Strategic focus areas;
    - Attendance barriers;
    - Early career support;
    - International engagement;
    - Clinician participation;
    - Streamlining opportunities.

Action Items (Consolidated)

Kristin Johnson/Executive Office

- Update committee rosters and the ARO website with newly approved volunteers and chairs.
- Begin scheduling committee meetings once rosters and web updates are complete.
- Continue interviewing and finalize hiring for the Member Services Manager position.
- Analyze Midwinter Meeting attendance data by geography (U.S. regions and international) and prepare an executive summary for Council and committee chairs.

- Work with Lisa Cunningham to draft and distribute a unified communication and response template to committee chairs outlining strategic focus areas and requested input including a streamlined mechanism (form or template) for committees to report on their activities relative to the strategic themes.

Lisa Cunningham

- Collaborate with Kristin Johnson to finalize the strategic planning communication and reporting template for committee chairs.
- Work with committee chairs (as needed) to interpret Council's strategic priorities and expectations.

Shelby Ashton Payne / spARO

- Develop a spARO welcome resource (email, flyer, or guide) explaining spARO membership, trainee resources, and events.
- Design and distribute a trainee-focused survey or poll to assess barriers to attending the Midwinter Meeting and needs/priorities for trainees.
- Share survey/poll results with Council and relevant committees (e.g., Education, Clinician Scientist, Program).

Sonia Pyott

- Explore potential European funding or sponsorship opportunities that could support ARO's international engagement efforts (e.g., travel assistance, joint events) and report findings to Council.

All Committee Chairs

- Review current committee portfolios and:
    - Describe how existing activities support the strategic focus areas:
        - Understanding/addressing attendance barriers;
        - Early career/trainee support;
        - International engagement;
        - Clinician participation.
    - Identify gaps and propose new or revised initiatives where appropriate.
    - Identify lower-impact activities that may be candidates for sunsetting or scaling back to manage workload and staff capacity.
- Poll committee members regarding barriers to attending the Midwinter Meeting in person and include synthesized feedback in their response to Council.

Communications Committee and/or Long-Range Planning Committee

- Draft and deploy a membership-wide survey focused on:
    - Barriers to in-person attendance;
    - Perceptions of venue/accessibility;
    - Preferences for virtual/recorded content.
- Provide Council with a summary of key findings and recommendations.