



Turning Passion into Action: A Conversation with AAAS Donors Lawrence Linden and Robert Litterman

11 December 2017 Caitlin Jennings



AAAS DONORS ROBERT LITTERMAN AND LAWRENCE LINDEN AT THE MARCH FOR SCIENCE IN NEW YORK CITY.

Lawrence Linden (<http://www.lindentrust.org/about/people.php>) and Robert Litterman (<https://www.worldwildlife.org/leaders/robert-litterman>) have supported many AAAS initiatives through their personal giving. They recently talked with Juli Staiano, AAAS's Chief Philanthropy Officer, and Caitlin Jennings, the Web Content Manager for AAAS MemberCentral, about why they give back to science. This transcript has been edited for clarity and concision.

Caitlin Jennings: You were both the first to support the AAAS Force for Science (<https://www.forceforscience.org/>) initiative. Why was this effort important to you, and what do you think other people should know about AAAS advocacy efforts?

Robert Litterman (Bob): I would say, first of all, that Larry brought me into this. He has had a longer relationship with AAAS. My involvement got started with the What We Know (<http://whatwewknow.aaas.org/>) climate communication campaign. That happened to be a topic that I'm very passionate about—climate risk—and it's something that is in my field of expertise, risk management. It's a very complex and difficult topic; one in which the message from science is incredibly important to society as a whole. I was trying to help out any way I could to help the scientific community get that message across.

Caitlin: Larry, what were your thoughts? Why did you think this effort was so important?

Lawrence H. Linden (Larry): Well, first of all, I've been a member of the AAAS...since I was a grad student in the 70s, so basically my entire adult life. That's point A. Point B is that I'm well aware of the national stature of the AAAS and its importance as the premier and, by far, the largest professional society for scientists and its potential impact. The third thing is that an attack on climate science is an attack on all science in my opinion. ...Not only do I share Bob's concerns about the climate problem... but, beyond that, are we going to have a society which works on facts or on non-facts?

It is very important that the institutions of the scientific community stand up for... the proper use of facts in our world to support the progress of humankind and of our country. I therefore have two objectives on this front: A) dealing with the climate problem in a manner that brings the facts out; and B) defending the scientific process and the role of science in our society.

[Also], Bob said that I had introduced him into this topic. That's true, but Bob gave me a great conceptual framework for thinking about it—risk management. So we've had a real partnership.

Bob: Well that's fair enough, and I might say that I've also subscribed to *Science* for a long time —ever since my kids became scientists and they gave me a subscription.

Caitlin: Your philanthropy is moving the needle on climate change and education. What are your short-term and long-term goals for affecting those issues?

Bob: Maybe I'll try to respond first. By the way, Larry, I think you expressed very well my own concerns about the role of science in society and its key importance in making progress. And that whole endeavor, which has been attacked for hundreds of years in various different contexts...

Larry: Yeah, centuries. Absolutely right.

Bob: So this is part of a long struggle that humanity has had to make sense out of the natural world and make progress. It's something that behooves all of us to support against attacks, which come on a regular basis by interests that are threatened by the progress of science.

Larry: That's right. ...It was religious interests centuries ago, and now it's mainly economic interests. ...On climate, I completely agree with Bob, there is an enormous risk to the future of mankind—our economy, our welfare, our children, our grandchildren, and maybe people reading this. It's clear that it's a problem. The scale is not quite so clear because the science is not completely determinative. But, having said that, we know enough that we need to deal with it. So, my goal is to have [a robust] American policy and to ensure that America can play a leadership role in the international community, which it historically has. That's with respect to climate. With respect to education, I think that the American people, which can be led by the scientific community on this because this is what scientists do, have to

have a basis for distinguishing between facts and non-facts. [The] climate problem is a good example for that. So, there is a broader educational mission in working on climate science.

Bob: I think this problem—with respect to climate—is clearly driven by economic interests of those who would be negatively impacted by an appropriate response. It's a risk management problem. Everyone understands what we need to do is to price the risk appropriately. That will disadvantage fossil fuel interests, in particular. And they have mounted a very well-funded attack on science. They've exaggerated the uncertainty in the science. ...Because they've done that, this country, in particular—and more generally, societies around the world—have not responded appropriately; have been delayed in their response. That delay has created huge potential damages going forward. There's tremendous uncertainty about how big those damages might be. They might be catastrophic.

So, this is a risk management nightmare. Science has been trying to warn us for decades about this. And yet, there are organized interests who have very carefully planned an attack on science in order to prevent appropriate response. That's just got to stop. It's unacceptable, and it leads to a much more general degradation of rational behavior in society responding to evidence. It's not just related to climate, but more generally, it's willingness to countenance lying by government officials; attacks. I think this sort of lack of civil discourse has also been exaggerated by the technology of social media and the ability for individuals to listen only to ideas that they like. It's really a fundamental attack on democracy, on civil society, and it has been very destructive.

Larry: I would just add that those economic interests now can and do also work through our political system much more effectively than ever before, and have a direct influence on government policy such as emissions regulation, science funding, and the like.

Juli Staiano: What do you look for, how do you make an impact through your philanthropy in the advocacy space?

Bob: Well, I would go back to the What We Know campaign, which to my way of thinking was very important. It's very useful when a respected scientific institution or body comes out and says, "Look these are the realities. We have to deal with them." I think when the AAAS did that, it lifted the conversation from one of individual scientists to one of "This is really the consensus of the scientific community, and this is what we know."

Larry: And what we don't know. It also had what we don't know, because we have acknowledged the scientific uncertainties.

Bob: Right, there is tremendous uncertainty, and that's what we have to deal with. Making decisions in the context of uncertainty is a difficult but vital part of society.

Larry: Let me make a different point here....Bob and I were partners at Goldman Sachs together, and we have been very fortunate in our careers....So, I feel an obligation to work on social problems to build our country that's been so supportive of me. That led me to engage in philanthropy on causes that I understand and care about. To make that effective...I think the important thing that I do is to align myself with institutions that I trust and respect, and that I know have the capacity to use money wisely. So in that context, my historical association with the AAAS led me immediately to become supportive of AAAS. And then the AAAS, especially under its new leadership... has begun to take on the task of not only educating the public about science, but also engaging in defending science when it is attacked through budgetary means, through accosting scientists' work in the government, or other such venues, as has been occurring with more frequency over the last decade.

Caitlin: What are some of the most important lessons you've learned in life, and

how do you think they help guide your philanthropy?

Juli: Larry, I think you touched a little bit on that already.

Larry: I did touch on it. For me, I think the lesson that I've learned is that an individual's success is based on a lot more than the individual's capacity. A lot of it is based on good luck, which I've had a lot of, but also on the institutions and the culture in which I've grown up. These aren't something to be taken for granted, they have to be defended and invested in. That has led to my approach in philanthropy; my belief in philanthropy, if you will.

Bob: When I was young, I thought I was going to be a scientist. I started out as a physics major as an undergraduate. But, through various twists and turns, I ended up as an economist and a risk manager on Wall Street. Like Larry, I was very lucky in various ways that led to the point where I can be in the enviable position of thinking about how to direct philanthropic resources.

To me, science has always been the sort of North Star. It's the facts in which we ground our behavior. And so, when I see it come under attack and see the damage that that does—particularly in the context of climate—to rational decision making, I feel like I need to support the institution that represents the scientific community. It's pretty simple.

Larry: Bob, aren't you kind of a scientist? I mean, economics is a social science. I'm trained as an engineer. So I'm not really a "scientist" either.

Bob: Okay, I'm not pushing against that. In fact, I think these disciplines like physics versus biology or whatever tend to be very siloed. I was lucky enough when I was an undergraduate at Stanford to be in the inaugural class in human biology, which incorporated broad-based science like economics as well as biology and psychology

and so on. It was a very broad education. I do understand and agree that economics is a science and needs to be better connected to other sciences. In the case of climate, this is a problem that would benefit from much broader cooperation between economists and other scientists. Unfortunately, there is a bit of a gulf between the disciplines.

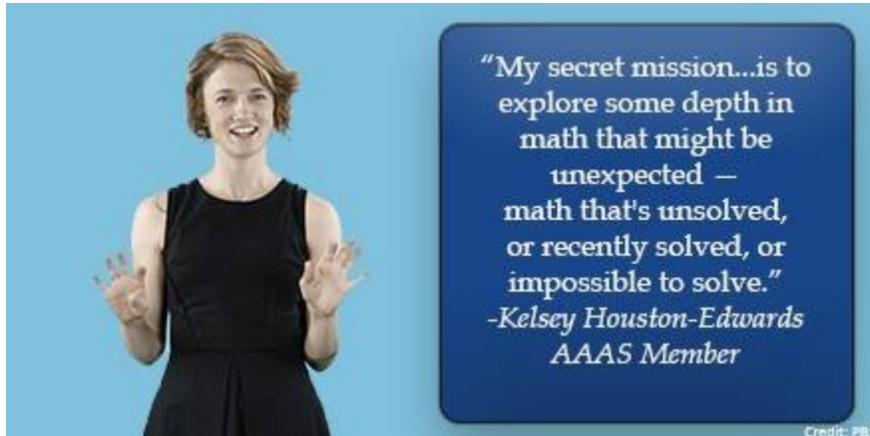
Larry: My trajectory is, in many respects, symmetric with Bob's. Science is also my North Star, but I was trained as an engineer and then went into different [types of] uses of an engineering background, which included time in government. Then I became a businessman, and then was a partner with Bob at Goldman Sachs. So it's interesting that both of us kind of moved in our work with AAAS to supporting science.

Caitlin: You both attended the March for Science. What do you think the march accomplished, and do you think there should be another one?

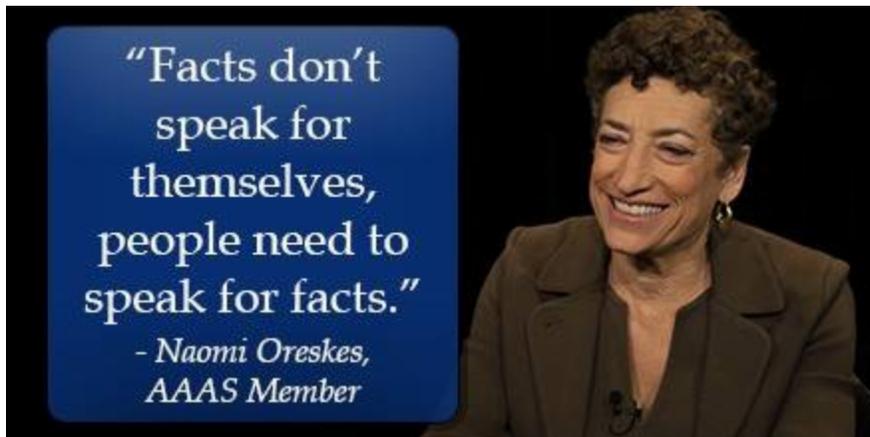
Bob: For people who marched in it, I'm sure it made them feel better. They recognized they're part of a community. And maybe it gives hope to those who didn't march but who heard about it or saw it and said, "There are folks who support this. We're not isolated." I think any way that we can show support for science and hold up a measure of disapproval for those who would attack science for their personal reasons is important. ...It wouldn't hurt to see more of that.

Larry: I completely agree, and I think that science, which was, until not long ago, largely supported as a matter of social consensus .. really since World War II ...has [recently] become much more political. The scientific community has to engage in the political process to defend both itself and its beliefs. And I think the March for Science was a visible demonstration of that. So yes, I think more such activities should take place. And I think the venue was perfect—it was peaceful, it was well attended, and it said, "We're here. This is not only a philosophy, it's a community."

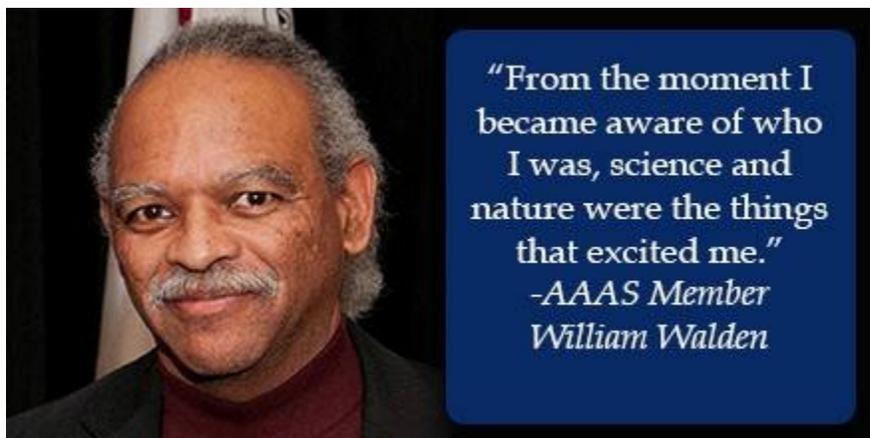
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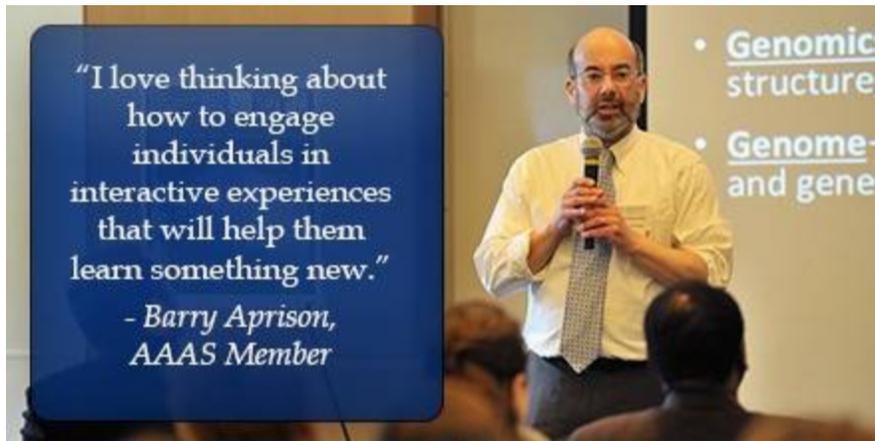
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