

## **Astrobiology News February 2022: Celebrating 50 Years of the Planetary Science Institute**

This month marks the 50th anniversary of one of the largest planetary science organizations in the world. During the late 1960s, a small group of scientists, most of whom had studied at the University of Arizona, worked in a space division of the Illinois Institute of Technology Research Institute (IITRI), an organization that provided planning and mission analysis support to NASA Headquarters for post-Apollo exploration of the Solar System.<sup>1</sup> IITRI's location in Chicago apparently worked against attracting other young scientists, so a Tucson planetary division of IITRI was opened and the Planetary Science Institute (PSI) was established on Ground Hog Day in 1972. Today, the nonprofit organization that began as the vision of a few young scientists has more than 160 employees, with scientists working remotely from 30 states and 10 other countries.

PSI is a unique organization in many ways. Most academic institutions devoted to research seek primarily to attract individual “superstars” in their respective fields. From the beginning, PSI exemplified a different philosophy, focusing on developing a collaborative, mutually supportive, atmosphere where member scientists with both overlapping and distinct areas of expertise work together in a climate conducive to producing excellent science. Nearly 50% of current PSI scientists are women – a percentage that is significantly higher than the vast majority of institutions devoted to scientific research! In my experience, PSI is the most egalitarian scientific society I’ve encountered during my decades as a professional astronomer, and I couldn’t be prouder to be part of this amazing organization during my career’s “golden years.”

PSI has been a pioneer in another respect – the use of remote technology to create and sustain a workforce that is distributed around the world, while maintaining a tight-knit community. Unlike many other organizations that had to acquire new *modi operandi* at the onset of the pandemic, PSI had the framework and expertise to navigate what has become the “new-normal” way of doing things. CEO and Director Mark Sykes maintains daily opportunities for PSI members to connect with each other about anything, a welcome counteraction to the isolation that’s been imposed on so many of us!

Over the past few decades, with the discovery of thousands of exoplanets and the birth of astrobiology, PSI has become a bellwether in creating connections between scientists in the multi-disciplinary fields that are critical for investigating questions of life and habitability – on Earth and far beyond. In order to do this, PSI relies on fundraisers and public donations in addition to grants. Though founded as a research institution, “PSI scientists and educators have been pioneers in engaging the public in citizen science and integrating real science experiences with the programs of faith communities.”<sup>2</sup>

As Mark says, “PSI would not exist without the support of the public, and we are committed to sharing what we learn with them. Our science takes many models

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.psi.edu/about/history.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psi.edu/news/50thanniversarypr>

developed for our world, and tests them in literally alien contexts. This helps us to better understand our own planet and the threats it is facing today.”

Happy Birthday, PSI – may you live long and prosper!

Until next month,

Grace

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