

Memorandum

To: Board of Directors, Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP)
From: Joya Misra, Chair, 2008 Racial/Ethnic Minority Scholarship
RE: SSSP 2008 Racial/Ethnic Minority Scholarship Committee Report
Date: July 7, 2008

The members of the SSSP 2008 Racial/Ethnic Minority Scholarship Committee were Adriana Bohn, Robert Duran, Kamini Grahame, RaeDeen M. Keahiolalo Karasuda, Chavella Pittman, Madeline Troche-Rodriguez, and Joya Misra (Chair).

Changes to Process

We began the year making a recommendation to the SSSP Board of Directors to limit the applicant pool to students who are ABD status. With the help of the Board of Directors, we revised the criteria to include students who would attain ABD status by the time the award was made (September 1, 2008). This change was approved, and we revised all of the materials regarding the fellowship accordingly.

Applicant Pool

The change was a success, in that we received much higher caliber applications this year, although we also received fewer. While the 2007 committee evaluated fifty-six applicants, we evaluated only sixteen applicants (additionally, one applicant withdrew after receiving another fellowship). These applicants included 13 women (81.25%) and 3 men. In terms of race/ethnicity, four candidates (25%) were African American, seven were Latino/a (43.75%), and six were Asian (37.5%) (these do not add up to 100, since one candidate is both Latina and African-American). Candidates came from a range of disciplines, including Education, Counseling Psychology, Political Science, African-American Studies, and Sociology, though the majority (62.5%) were from Sociology. As noted before, we only considered students who would reach ABD status by September 1, 2008. This substantially cut down the number of students in their first years of graduate school. We had one applicant (6.25%) in her third year, five applicants (31.25%) in their fourth years, and the rest of the applicants (62.5%) ranged from five to fifteen years of study in their doctoral programs. The modal value for years in program was fourth year; the median was 5.5 years.

Role of the Executive Office

We commend the Executive Office for their efficient and helpful participation in the process. The Executive Office was involved in helping us make changes to the publicized information about the award, received and followed up on all of the applications, and sent all of the materials to the committee members in a timely way. SSSP is one of the most well-run organization of its type, and we appreciate how much easier this efficiency makes our work as a committee.

Selection Process

After receiving the applications, the committee members negotiated a timeline for our process, and received a criteria rating sheet from the chair, based on the sheet developed by Shirley Jackson when she chaired the committee. We scored applicants in terms of activism in school-related activities as well as community involvement, and their commitment to activism and scholarship as expressed in their personal statement. In addition, we scored their SSSP involvement (beyond membership), their past research and scholarly activities (presentations, grants, publications), the strength of their dissertation proposal, and their letters of recommendation. Finally, we also scored applicants in terms of financial status (resources, background), and use of scholarship (clearly articulated use).

After the first round ballots were received, the scores were averaged. The number of exceptionally high quality candidates was very high this year. Based on the committees ratings and conversations, we re-evaluated the five top-ranked candidates and conferred about them via email, discussing their many strengths, and the candidates that we would most like to see receive the award. Based on this conversation, we ended up with three top-ranked candidates. A formal vote between the top two candidates led us to offer the fellowship to Isabel Martinez, a doctoral student in Education and Sociology at Columbia University. The committee chair notified Ms. Martinez of the award by phone (followed up by a formal letter), and all of the other applicants were notified of the decision by letter by the SSSP office. The chair provided additional feedback about how their application was assessed to any applicants who requested it.

Concerns and Recommendations

As in previous years, we are concerned that so few of the applicants have been involved in SSSP. Two of the sixteen applicants had presented papers at SSSP, and none had been more involved in the Society. We would encourage our organization to do more to encourage students already involved to apply for the scholarship, and to follow up with those who have applied, perhaps encouraging them to submit papers for the SSSP meetings or take part in mentorship programs at the meetings.

Another concern, also echoing previous years, was the difficulty we had in weighing the applicants' financial resources, background, and use of the scholarship. Clarifying how financial need is weighed, and ensuring that the right questions are included in the application form, seems like an important next step. For example, we would encourage next year's committee to ask for more detailed information regarding the dollar amounts of student loans each student has taken out, fellowship funding, and resources provided by the students' family. Another approach might be to ask for more detailed information regarding RA and TA funding over the students' years in graduate school, as we might expect a stronger publication record for students who have spent little time in the classroom.

We also needed more information regarding the use of the fellowship. The budgets of many of the applicants were vague or simply missing, perhaps reflecting a lack of mentoring around budget-writing skills. Since our conception of the fellowship is primarily that of providing the student an opportunity to focus on writing, we would recommend that the fellowship materials make this even more explicit. At the same time, we would encourage the committee to give more detailed instructions regarding how to write their budget, and to ask the students to explicitly address how the fellowship would affect their work and dissertation plans for the coming year. Based on our assessment, a “budget guide” for applicants included in the FAQ on the SSSP website would likely be very helpful to most applicants. Such a question might more effectively get to the heart of how they would plan to use the fellowship.

Finally, we noted some difficulty in determining why students take less or more time in graduate school. Next year’s committee might include in the application for a question asking applicants for any additional comments that might help the committee assess their application and their rate of progress through graduate school.

Thank you for this opportunity to take part in such an important committee’s work.