

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Race and Racism August 2011 - Las Vegas, NV

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The committee met in Atlanta to discuss the degree to which the SSSP is an organization in which faculty and students of color feel comfortable and included. The following is a summary of that conversation and conversations that preceded it.

- The issue of perception versus reality was raised several times in our discussions. There is a perception that the SSSP has not been sufficiently effective in diversifying its membership. Even if it is not in fact the case, we as an organization must address the perception. In any event, how do we measure it? If we want to diversify the organization we need to revisit what we have tried in the past to address the issue of racial and ethnic inclusion and participation. What can we do now?
- We do not have very good data on the racial and ethnic composition of our membership. We definitely need to obtain better data, and we will only be able to do that by impressing on our membership the importance of having these data, since it is optional for them to provide it.
- Outreach was a major theme in our discussion in Atlanta. We discussed the fact that the internal structure of the organization may contribute to problems with outreach. Most of our membership is academic. While we want to attract more academics of color, we should think very seriously about increasing the non-academic membership (e.g. community groups and organizations) and this in turn may require structural changes. The issue of internationalization came up as well. We'd like to increase our international membership, but while being mindful of the fact that it is not a substitute for efforts to increase the numbers of and participation by faculty and students from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups.
- We discussed the issue of paternalism and how well-meaning individuals can be "guilty," or at least be accused, of being paternalistic. There are obvious cases, and not so obvious cases. The issue of "mentoring" was brought up in this context, and how it, if we're not careful, can be easily construed as a form of paternalism, especially if the mentors are typically white and the mentees people of color. This is less of a problem with graduate students, but one faculty member mentoring another is a different dynamic. If we do something like this, we may want to call it something other than "mentoring." One member observed that she found the SSSP inviting, but once she joined, she felt somewhat lost, and had it not been for Michele, she could have felt completely lost. The SSSP can perhaps do a better job of providing more structure for new members.
- Another major theme in our conversation was *climate*. How do we create an atmosphere in which everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. feels comfortable? One member noted that she, and probably most members of the LBGT community who are members of the SSSP, feels very comfortable in and welcomed by

the Society. This observation was not offered to equate the two, but rather to see if we can learn something from the experience of LGBT members. One important difference is that one of the “things” people of color have had to deal with in academia (and academic organizations) historically, are questions and assumptions about whether they truly measure up intellectually (e.g. “She got the job because of affirmative action.”) Since the SSSP is principally an academic organization this becomes especially problematic. Climate is difficult to measure, but at minimum requires listening to the experiences of members and creating opportunities for them to share these experiences, and then having the resolve and commitment as an organization to address them.

- Too often institutions and organizations want diversity, but once people from previously excluded groups come in, they are expected to adapt to the existing culture. A commitment to diversity requires the recognition and willingness to change on the part of the organization and its majority-group members. Diversity also means understanding that despite the organization’s best efforts, people bring experiences and other baggage with them that may result in, even as a defense mechanism, distrust. White privilege (as is the case with male and heterosexual privileges) is conferred, whether one wants it or not, but steps could be taken to extend these privileges (so that they cease to be privileges) to everyone within the organization, and in the interim, and in the end, “the privileged” must be prepared to deal with the inconveniences and discomfort that typically accompany confronting these issues openly and honestly.

The following are recommendations of the committee.

- In the 2011 Annual Meeting there will be a Special Session for individuals to discuss their own personal experiences, feelings, and observations regarding issues of exclusion in the organization, both intentional and unintentional. The session is titled, “Open Meeting: Creating an Anti-Racist Agenda within the SSSP” and is scheduled in the Laughlin Room from 2:30 to 4:10 PM, Saturday, August 20.
- Send out a survey to our membership, working both through the administrative office and divisions, to get their perceptions, feelings, and other insights on these issues. It is something that this committee can do, and can use the open meeting on August 20th to help in the design of the survey.
- We’re in the process of redesigning the SSSP website and should take the opportunity to see how it can be a useful tool to address these issues and as a recruitment tool.
- Encourage the membership to provide demographic data on race and ethnicity in order to improve the ability of the organization to get a better handle on and address these issues.
- Finally, we discussed the possibility of making a committee like this a permanent committee of the Society. Among other things, it can serve as an “*ombudsgroup*” for members to go to discuss problems, concerns, etc. Provisionally we can call it something like *Committee on Inclusion*.