

## **SSSP Report on the 2014 Membership Survey**

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### **Background**

The SSSP leaders have a long standing interest in how successful the organization is in serving its membership. In 2007 a survey was used to obtain general information on membership satisfaction with the organization. The strategy was to survey and interview members, and to focus especially on the Society's ability to serve the unique needs of different groups that make up the organization's membership. A number of suggestions and specific critical areas were uncovered through this method. However, the result was a very long questionnaire that included few members of certain groups, including members of historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups.

By 2014 the Board agreed to authorize a new membership survey, building on the experience of 2007. This new survey asked more detailed questions about member participation and opinions, and followed with questions identifying different groups, areas of concern, and interests. The difference in method from 2007 apparently produced different results. While members answering the 2014 survey responded in terms of their personal experiences and opinions, not as representatives of a group, the hope was that the survey would give us insights on how well the Society was serving the needs of different groups. The result was less difference among groups in member satisfaction, compared with the 2007 survey.

Table 1 in the Appendix shows the comparison between the two surveys on the demographics of the responding members.

In planning for the 2014 survey, some thought was given to the development of a database for all SSSP members, which would allow a complete management of member participation and opinion. This could be done by routinely requesting basic data at the time of registering for the annual meeting and membership renewal, and would produce results similar to those found from the 2014 survey. The method of asking many questions about specific services and benefits produces a lot of data. The Initial Report of October 1, 2014 providing the raw data consists of 61 pages. Targeted tables reporting all subpopulations would be many times that

length. As a result, this Report only gives an overview of how the 2014 survey data can be used, and a limited number of selected findings. I am available to answer questions that any Board member might have concerning further information from the survey.

#### The Main Question: Member Satisfaction

Both membership surveys were motivated by leadership concerns about satisfaction, including satisfaction by group that raised concerns about inclusion. These types focused on gender, race, and sexual orientation with some attention to such traits as US citizenship and disability status.

In 2014 general questions about satisfaction and inclusion applied to all as individual members, as presented in the output of the Initial Report of 10/01/14. Table 2 [Appendix] displays all satisfaction and evaluation items from the survey in rank order. The journal is the most highly ranked, while the SSSP's presence on Social Media ranks last. However, while this may be a useful example of information, these data can change their meaning when taken in context. For example, student members report significantly greater satisfaction with the social media than others ( $p < .05$ ). This Report is designed to provide an outline of that context.

One context comes from separating results by member group. The 2014 survey method makes it possible to compare each member group with the remainder on a variety of opinions and evaluations. The advantage is that any other member group of interest can be included (such as students, non-academics, age categories, etc.). In addition, the degree of participation in the Divisions and other SSSP activities could be evaluated and compared with member satisfaction. Here is an overview of this kind of analysis.

First, the use of satisfaction as an outcome measure has limitations. It is useful insofar as the expectations and needs of the respondents are similar for different items. There is a significant relation between reported satisfaction and the importance given to seven of the nine areas of SSSPs operations reported in Table 3. In each of these seven cases, the more important the service/benefit, the greater the satisfaction. This is a highly favorable outcome. It appears to show that the services/benefits that the SSSP offers generally are reaching the people who

want them. It also demonstrates that the overall ranking of a service/benefit may suffer merely because it is wanted or needed by a smaller proportion of respondents.

Table 4 begins an examination of the Divisions, as seen through the responses of those who identify as their members. There is only minor overall difference in general satisfaction with the SSSP among the divisions, save for one case. The respondents who “don’t recall” their division are significantly less satisfied with the SSSP in general than those who do identify their Division(s). The other cases which approach significance are all positive, more satisfied than the average. But Table 5 shows seven significant differences among the Divisions, when the general question is agreement with this statement, “SSSP provides adequate opportunity to participate in divisions.” More directly, we have the question about satisfaction with the division newsletter (Table 6). The more the survey question can be targeted at a specific service and its users, the more useful the information.

#### SSSP’s Homes for Members

The divisions form the homes for members to meet and participate with their peers according to interests and specialties. It may take some time for a new member to find a home and then become an active participant in it. This is the “career” of the SSSP member. I note that questions about satisfaction are more meaningful when analyzed at the level of the divisions, and for individual members, where they are located at steps along their SSSP career. These social processes are displayed in Table 7. Beginning with the first column, gender, we find a substantial variation in percentage of female members among the divisions. The divisions appear to have different profiles, with different homes for members with different demographics. The disabled are significantly more likely to be found in the Disabilities Division, as females are in Educational Problems, Institutional Ethnography, and Family. LGBT respondents are high in proportion in Sport, Leisure, and the Body Division, as well as the Sexual Behavior, Politics, and Communities. Racial and Ethnic minority members are the large majority in Racial and Ethnic Minorities.

It looks like the SSSP is diverse and varied enough to provide a satisfactory experience for all. The problem for leadership and member retention may be to facilitate the connection between

the potential home and a new or intermittent participant. Table 8 demonstrates that member judgments of importance of the general services/benefits do not vary much among the divisions, while their member demographics do. So we turn away from the divisions to look more closely at those demographics. Table 9 allows this examination. The original thinking when designing the survey was that the demographics of race, gender, sexual orientation, and possibly disability, would be the grounds for dissatisfaction with exclusion and lack of opportunity. But Table 9 shows otherwise. Among 22 different evaluations with six demographics, only 20 of 132 measures are statistically significant. Of these twenty, a majority (11) are from a single demographic, the respondent's age, not one usually thought to be a matter for exclusion or lack of opportunity. On the other hand, race and ethnicity was not found to be significantly different on any of the measures. This appears to be positive news. In addition, some of the measures show that the minority was significantly more satisfied, as were the disabled members' evaluations of their member benefits. It also changes some of the thinking we share about barriers to participation in social systems. The SSSP is not a rigid hierarchy, but rather a loose confederation of divisions, interest groups, and informal activities which should offer something for everyone, and in most cases, it does.

#### The Integration of Demographic Groups into the SSSP

In order to clarify the matter of how to tap the needs and interests of members, I crossed the demographic categories with the perceived importance of the SSSP's services/benefits. The results are shown in Table 10. Here we can see that Age is the most significant variable. In fact, it may underlie some of the other results, for women and racial/ethnic minorities are predominant among the newer, younger members, as shown in Table 11. What may appear to be a matter of race or gender may well be simply a result of the inclusion of young people who differ from the traditional academic model of the older, white male professor.

I close with an examination of the changing demographics of the membership and comment on the implications for the organization. Table 12 demonstrates that several services/benefits vary in importance by years of membership. This supports the conclusion that there is a "career" within the SSSP leading from the student member more interested in mentoring to the senior

members who are more integrated into a place within the SSSP. Those who are least involved in a career are those who report their membership to be intermittent, and they are generally those who report the features of the SSSP as less important to them. Table 13 follows with the levels of satisfaction reported with the SSSP's opportunities, by years of membership. If years of membership indicate a career within the SSSP, they are associated with increasing satisfaction. The SSSP career appears to involve more satisfaction with peers, divisions, the annual meeting, awards and scholarships, and volunteering. Professional opportunities and Mentoring do not follow this pattern. Finally, Table 14 shows the relationship (if any) between demographic background and reported participation in services to the SSSP. We see that there are only a few cases of lower participation among the different demographic groups, except for Age. This suggests that there indeed is an SSSP career, and the potential lesser participation by demographics is mainly due to the younger populations within those demographic groups.

### Going Forward

These results are quite different from the results of the 2007 survey, where members of underrepresented groups were identified and asked for complaints and suggestions about how to improve the SSSP. I suspect that the difference mainly comes from the different methodology employed in 2014. When asked their personal experience, orientations, and opinions, we find SSSP members generally do not differ according to their backgrounds. Instead, the 2014 survey database can be used to inquire into other sources of differences and satisfaction than those originally thought to be problematic.

In 2014 we find that member satisfaction is most related to variables of participation in the SSSP and marginality. I found three direct measures of marginality: (1) failure to recall their division membership; (2) an intermittent renewal of their SSSP membership and/or indication of nonrenewal for the coming year; and (3) Department membership faculty. There are other possible measures of marginality which relate to the "career" of the SSSP member. One example is the proportion of members who have never served on a committee or in other capacity. For new members, not serving could be considered normal, while with the passage of years, it becomes an indicator of marginality.

The survey results suggest that we may want to change the way we think about member satisfaction. While gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation are key indicators of member diversity, in this survey they don't seem to serve as indicators of dissatisfaction within SSSP. They may carry other meaning, such as newer demographic groups also representing lower seniority and/or commitment and participation. It is the lower participation and experience, not the demographic characteristic that seems to be the source of dissatisfaction in these cases. The method used in the 2014 survey is most useful when it is applied to specific questions about targeted services/benefits and subpopulations. To maximize the benefits of the survey to the SSSP, there needs to be a feedback between the results of questions and the leaders who are responsible for maintaining and improving the member experience. One aspect of this feedback process is for individual leaders to apply the survey data to better understand their subpopulation and improve our services/benefits. A second, long-term benefit comes from use of more targeted questions and measuring the results of improvements.

The survey process would be maximized by including basic questions on the membership renewal and annual meeting registration forms, to link member behavior with survey results. For example, we have survey data on a small number of respondents who indicate they do not intend to renew their membership for the coming year. But we can find out more if we have a data bank on SSSP members, and then know who actually has not renewed.

In conclusion, I recommend that the SSSP Board members make use of the present data from the 2014 survey by formulating specific questions and presenting them for analysis using the available data. For those questions which cannot be answered with the present data, planning for future data capture can incorporate these queries.

Disclaimer: This Report represents the opinions and analysis of the author, and not the SSSP leadership. Any errors or misinterpretations are the responsibility of the author alone.

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