

TO: Kathleen Ferraro, President, Society for the Study of Social Problems

FROM: The Committee on Reinvigorating the Annual Meeting (Claire Renzetti, Kathe Lowney, and Robin Haarr)

DATE: August 2, 2004

RE: Committee Report and Recommendations

The Committee on Reinvigorating the Annual Meeting was charged in 2002 with developing strategies for encouraging meeting attendance and reinvigorating participation in the annual meetings. Our report last year was developed following consultation with then-president Nancy Jurik as well as SSSP members who, at various times, passed along their concerns or ideas about the annual meeting. The committee also drew on personal experiences and the results of a survey of former SSSP members that had been conducted by the Membership Committee in 2001. Although these sources can in no way be construed as a random or “representative” sample of SSSP members, we compiled a number of interesting suggestions for reinvigorating the annual meeting and we recommended in our report to the President and the Board that they seriously consider the cost/benefit of each suggestion, develop a strategy for implementing each one that they felt would be most helpful, and also develop a method for evaluating each suggestion so that its success could be determined. These suggestions included:

1. A mass emailing to related organizations “advertising” the meeting (dates, special events, reduced rates for certain member categories).
2. Posted information/advertisements about the meeting on the web sites of related organizations as well as a link to the SSSP web site.
3. Save the date postcards sent to SSSP members, former members, and members of related organizations “advertising” special events, rates, and our web site for more information.
4. Better promotion of the meeting site as a “fun city” with lots of things to see and do, along with more emphasis on the affordability of the SSSP meeting relative to other professional meetings.
5. More social opportunities for networking (e.g., afternoon ice cream social, welcome reception with cash bar but registered meeting participants get a couple for one free drink)
6. Separate mailings or promotions for different constituencies highlighting aspects of the meeting and sessions that would be of most interest to them.
7. Holding the meeting simultaneously with the ASA annual meeting, instead of overlapping for just a couple of days; subsequently promoting this schedule by emphasizing the ease of going between the two meetings and perhaps working out an

agreement with ASA for reduced registration for both meetings if a person is presenting at both or is presenting at one but wants to attend both.

8. More breakout sessions.
9. Increase from 3 to 5 the number of sessions allocated to divisions while retaining the rule of one presentation per person.
10. Promote the meeting all year by developing a promotion schedule with dates for mailing/emailing/posting specific materials.

Following last year's annual meeting, President Ferraro and the SSSP Board asked the committee to continue our work for a second year. We continue to believe that the suggestions raised in last year's report are worthy of very careful consideration and evaluation. However, using the same methods we used last year, the committee collected additional suggestions from current and former members, trying to get input from those who regularly attend the annual meeting as well as those who have stopped attending or who attend only sporadically. Once again, our sample is not representative, but it does provide some "food for thought":

1. Offer computer kiosks (as ASA does) where meeting participants can check email. Not everyone has a laptop they can take to the meetings or can afford the in-room charge for connectivity. A couple of computers centrally located (e.g., in the book exhibit area) with a use time limit (e.g., 15 minutes) would be an attractive meeting amenity for many participants.
2. At times the SSSP has sacrificed hotel quality for getting the lowest room rate possible. Not many meeting participants, though, want to stay in dark, dreary or not well-kept hotels, which in the long run are not that inexpensive anyway. Improving the quality of the hotels, not only in terms of the meeting rooms, but also in terms of the sleeping rooms, would make attending the meetings more attractive.
3. Offering at least one social event each day that is relatively inexpensive so new Ph.D.'s and grad students can attend. It would also be helpful at such social events if there could be "mentors" available to serve as a kind of welcoming group to break the ice for new folks. It can be very intimidating going into a room even for a social event when one knows no one or almost no one. Figuring out a way to make such events open and welcoming to newcomers would really enhance participation in the meetings. Also holding social events for people of color (e.g., ASC has a minority student dance) would be a way to attract more diverse participants.
4. Develop strategies for increasing attendance at paper sessions. In recent years there have been sessions where only the paper presenters (and sometimes not even all of them) attended. It's just not worth going if no one attends your presentation.
5. Involve more local groups from the convention city who are doing front line work in social service, community organizing, social justice, and so on. Keep in mind that this

sort of focus is one way that SSSP sets itself apart from ASA and its bureaucratic, formal rational approach.

6. Get as many different people on committees as possible. Many people will only attend the meeting if they have a “role” to play and they may not want to present a paper. The more people on committees, the more likely they will be to attend the meeting and this may also strengthen their tie to the organization overall. Service to the organization is a good way to increase commitment to the organization.
7. Offer more professional development workshops for people at all stages of their careers. Workshops on journal publishing, publishing monographs, publishing textbooks; a workshop on writing the dissertation; a workshop on job interviewing; workshops on getting tenure and promotion; workshops on chairing or other administrative roles (that are not all-day boring affairs like ASA’s where you’re charged a high workshop fee, too); a workshop on changing careers perhaps from academe to the public sector; a workshop on retirement. All of these should be within the time frame of regular sessions and should be free. More teaching workshops would also be of interest, where individuals share innovative ideas and teaching materials for particular courses.
8. Get more people meeting outside the windowless hotel meeting rooms with informal lunch roundtables at local restaurants. You’d need to open each one to a small group of people (limit 10 or 12), emphasizing discussion not paper presentations on an interesting topic and have one or two people as facilitators to get things rolling. Participants could just pay as they go rather than SSSP having to worry about pre-orders and the like. This approach increases networking and the social aspect of the meeting too. It also breaks up what can be a very long day in a dark hotel conference room.

Recommendation of the Committee

Reiterating our recommendation from last year, the Committee urges the President, Executive Committee, and Board to consider each suggestion in this report in light of SSSP’s budget and the added work load some of these strategies may place on the Executive Office. Each suggestion should be carefully evaluated in terms of its cost versus its benefit and, if implemented, a method should be developed for evaluating the suggestion’s success, with baseline data collected prior to implementation.