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AEJMC members supportive, involved – but questioning the future

Results of spring, 2004 membership survey on involvement/ resource issues

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This project was conducted with the assistance of an Undergraduate Student Research Team in the UW-L Department of Communication Studies - Kim Gillman, Jill Johnston, Maria Luepke, and Steve Phalen.

A great many of us who work in academe feel increasing pressure to remain involved with our professional peers. There never seems to be enough time to engage in the scholarship, research, and creative activity that we would like to be doing. Early in 2004, the AEJMC Membership Committee began a discussion of this issue as part of an ongoing dialogue about how to attract and retain members in the association. We wondered what kinds of pressures members are feeling to stay involved – with their disciplines, with their peers, and particularly with the association.

Are AEJMC members finding it more difficult to remain active in the association? Are members receiving adequate institutional support to attend conferences? What could the association do to make it easier for members to be involved?

It became clear that the Membership Committee should make an effort to find out what members are thinking. If the AEJMC is to retain current members and attract new ones, we must have as much information as possible about what it takes for members to stay involved.

It's equally important that we have a good sense of what's happening at the institutional level for our members. What kinds of support are AEJMC members able to receive for their involvement in association activities? What changes can be expected in this level of support in the future?

These and other questions were addressed in a 29-item questionnaire that was prepared by the Membership Committee and mailed to a randomly-selected sample of AEJMC members (regular faculty and graduate students) in spring, 2004. Completed questionnaires were received by Doug Swanson at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and analyzed by a research team comprised of five senior-level undergraduates in the UW-L Department of Communication Studies.

The results portray a membership that is active and involved in the association. Among those who

answered our survey, the average length of membership in AEJMC is 13 years. We asked respondents how many AEJMC conventions they had attended in the past five years. Responses ranged from 0 to 5, with an average of 3.6.

While members seem to be highly involved with the association, and generally happy with the direction AEJMC has taken to foster that involvement, there are some challenges on the horizon that will need to be addressed by association leadership. For example, most respondents reported that their employers provide financial support for convention attendance. However, at least 20% of respondents also reported an anticipation that institutional support will diminish in the near future. Since half of respondents reported that institutional support was “vital” for their convention attendance or “a key factor in decision-making,” we could expect that many AEJMC members may cut back on their convention attendance in the years to come. Obviously, this is concern that warrants attention by association leadership.

Other troubling issues were identified in the area of scholarship. Some faculty respondents wrote that the association is losing “cutting edge” scholarship – while others questioned specifics of the peer review process. These concerns would also seem to warrant attention and perhaps further study.

Respondents offered interesting comments about AEJMC conventions, and changes that might be made to make conventions more representative of all sectors of the association.

This report will briefly address the theoretical basis for the survey and the chosen methodology. It will then profile the results obtained, and offer conclusions that can be reached as a result of what members reported. We will offer some general suggestions about how the AEJMC can use the findings of this survey as a starting point for greater outreach to the membership.

Theoretical basis for the survey

Our research team decided to use framing theory as we examined this issue. Past research has shown there are a variety of ways to apply framing theory in a research context. A frame serves as a means for individuals to organize information (Jah-Nambiar, 2002). It is through this organizing process that people assemble sets of ideas and adopt particular beliefs about those ideas.

A frame helps define the meaning of a message by shaping the inferences made by people who are exposed to the message (Hallahan, 1999). By adopting a frame, people can select some ideas from their experience and “make them more salient” than others as they define, interpret, and propose solutions to communication problems (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Because the appropriate use of framing allows us to isolate issues that are salient for public discussion from those that are not (Tankard, 1997), it also permits “selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of experience or ideas over others” (Andsager & Smiley, 1997, p. 2). In the case of this research, framing helps us understand why members decide to interact with an organization, how they choose their level of interaction, and how they plan to further their interaction in the future.

The research team felt framing was the most appropriate perspective under which to examine this issue – because what’s really being discussed here is how the members of this association frame their involvement with AEJMC in general, and how they frame conference attendance. Specifically, we were interested in finding out the extent to which institutional support currently received by members has an impact on involvement and attendance, and how that might change in the future.

Literature review and methodology

Members of any professional association will frame their involvement with the association in different ways. Some members maintain their membership but never attend conventions. Other members attend conventions regularly but do not get involved in association governance. Other members attend conventions, present papers, and take leadership positions in association governance. Ideally, any association wants to have as many members as possible at this maximum level of involvement. We recognize, though, that there are a number of variables that influence how members frame their involvement with an association. This survey doesn’t address all the variables – but it does help us know more about at least a few of the influences that affect members’ level of involvement in this particular professional association.

The survey questionnaire is a commonly-used means of gathering this kind of information. In the past, surveys done by membership associations have identified and tracked members’ opinions in general (Kweethai, Wooley, Stork, & Luttrell-Dennis, 2004), members’ level of fulfillment with their association

(Membership is highly valued, 2000), members' opinions on social and disciplinary issues (Keye & Bradshaw, 2004), and opinions held about future directions for a professional association (Members tell us plenty, 1999).

Surveys of members can be done in person, by telephone, or through electronic means via e-mail or through a WWW link. There are, of course, advantages and drawbacks to each of these methods.

A quick review of the literature reveals that response rates vary greatly for opinion surveys. Many experts believe 60% is the minimum response rate necessary to produce valid, reliable results (List, 2004) although certainly many studies obtain a lower level of response and are still considered authoritative.

Postal surveys are a preferred means of gathering information, in part because they have been used extensively over the years to gather information. Postal surveys tend to cost about half of what would be expected for a face-to-face survey. Respondents value the convenience of being able to work on the survey whenever their leisure time allows as well as being able to put extensive thought into the responses offered. The postal survey has the added benefit of allowing respondents to remain anonymous. The distribution of surveys through the mail helps to reduce opportunities for bias through presentation of the survey to the respondent (Erdos, 1970).

In our particular case, a postal survey worked well because we knew it would be mailed out in the late spring – at a time when many faculty were planning for summer vacations and not terribly attentive to what was contained in their mailboxes. We knew that responses would trickle in over the course of several months. Even though we put an August 1 deadline on the questionnaire, we continued to receive responses well into the month of September – and all were included in the results.

Results

AEJMC staff mailed a total of 500 survey questionnaires to members selected at random (400 to faculty members and 100 to graduate students). Completed questionnaires were returned by 150 respondents (overall rate of return 30%). It appeared most respondents carefully read the instructions, as all questionnaires returned were usable. (Two questionnaires submitted to the research team were accompanied by checks for

membership renewals; those checks were – belatedly, unfortunately – forwarded to the AEJMC office.)

Most respondents identified as members of tenure-track faculty. Eighty-five (56%) were at the level of associate or full professor. Forty (26%) were at the level of assistant professor. The remainder identified at the rank of lecturer/ instructor or below.

A majority of respondents (109, or 72%) reported that they were working in public colleges and universities, and 105 of those respondents (70%) reported they were in programs offering graduate degrees.

Responses came from the Midwest (47, or 31%), southeast (35, or 23%), northeast (33, or 22%), western states (28, or 18%), and outside the U.S. (3, or 2%).

Importance of membership

AEJMC members responding to the survey overwhelmingly said membership was important to them. A total of 108 respondents (72%) ranked AEJMC membership as “a necessity” or “very important.”

Few respondents reported receiving significant financial help from their employer to cover membership costs. Only 29 respondents (19%) reported institutional support for at least half of the cost of their membership dues.

Lack of institutional support for membership costs does not seem to be problematic for most members who responded to the survey. Only a small percentage reported that institutional financial support for their membership was vital for continued membership in AEJMC. Half of the respondents (76, or 50%) indicated that support has “no bearing on retention of my membership.” A lesser number (37, or 24%) indicated that institutional support “is important but not critical to retention of my membership.”

Institutional support for involvement

While less than one-third of respondents reported receiving institutional support for membership, a much larger number of respondents reported receiving assistance with costs of conference attendance. A total of 98 respondents (65%) reported institutional support for at least half of the cost of conference attendance. Thirty-eight respondents (25%) reported their conference attendance costs are paid in full.

At the same time, many respondents indicated that support is contingent upon their level of

conference involvement. These respondents said support is contingent upon involvement in a research presentation (63, or 42%), program involvement such as that of being on a panel (48, or 32%), or being involved in convention business (24, or 16%).

Future levels of support?

About one-third of respondents (47, or 31%) reported the expectation that institutional support will be reduced in the near future. More than half of the respondents said that they will not attend a convention unless they are able to receive institutional support for attendance.

When asked about changes in their personal level of involvement in AEJMC in the future, 107 respondents (71%) said their involvement will stay the same or increase. Thirty-one respondents (20%) expect their level of involvement to diminish.

Other professional involvements

Results showed that AEJMC members commonly hold memberships in other professional associations. Several respondents reported holding memberships in eight other professional/ scholarly associations in addition to AEJMC. When asked how many association memberships were held in groups other than AEJMC, the average of all responses was 2.4.

Comments

Our survey asked for respondents to respond to several questions dealing with more qualitative aspects of their involvement with the association. The two questions that elicited the most comment from members – and some of the responses offered – are shown below.

- 1. For you, what are the greatest obstacles to being actively involved as a member of a scholarly/ professional organization such as AEJMC? (Please describe)**

Several respondents reported that time and finances were obstacles to becoming more actively

involved with the organization. As noted by one respondent, “Though much of my overall expense is covered, the AEJMC experience is pricey. It eliminates nearly all my annual travel budget. The convention’s steady growth to 2 weeks of meetings takes precious time away from course prep and my family.” Another respondent wrote that “the high price of rooms makes it difficult to stay in the convention hotel.”

Concerns about the location of AEJMC conventions was mentioned in several completed questionnaires. “The cities often are dreadful in the summer and I’d like AEJMC to shift into the academic year where it wouldn’t conflict with research commitments, etc.” wrote one respondent. Others suggested that the AEJMC schedule conventions in “college campus locations,” or “encourage smaller, more focused and interactive (specialized) conferences multiple times a year.” Several respondents asked that the association hold two smaller conventions annually as opposed to one large gathering.

AEJMC members from smaller colleges and universities expressed concerns they were at a disadvantage during the conventions. One respondent noted that “the convention has become so huge that it can be daunting for new faculty.” Another said that “smaller schools are at a distinct disadvantage in their ability to interact with other faculty from larger schools.”

2. What could AEJMC do to make it easier for you to make valuable contributions to the association as a member?

Even though almost three-quarters of the respondents ranked AEJMC membership as “a necessity” or “very important” it was clear from the comments received that institutional support for involvement with the association is still an area of great concern to members. Although none of the respondents specifically suggested AEJMC should or could have influence on colleges and universities to provide more support to members, one respondent did suggest that AEJMC dues “should be based on the size of the school” while another respondent wrote that the association could “hold the line and cut dues.”

Several respondents expressed doubts about their opportunities to take positions of leadership within the association. One respondent wished for AEJMC to “provide more opportunities for association

involvement beyond panel and research presentations.” Another encouraged the association to “take a look at the some of the anti-democratic practices in some of the divisions where leadership posts are inherited.”

Several respondents expressed concern about research issues. One wrote that “more emphasis on research is needed at the conferences.” In a similar vein, another member complained that convention “research has lost its cutting edge and is being conducted for the sake of research” while a third respondent claimed to be “thinking about investing... time elsewhere where research presented is more substantial.”

While these more established members complained about existing research opportunities, other respondents who identified as newer expressed concern about the lack of opportunities to present research.

One wrote that “we need ways to get our beginning research efforts noticed...it may not be top quality but we should keep in mind that small colleges don’t have mentors for research, research assistants, or time to do research.” Another respondent expressed the need for development of a “tenure track research presentation opportunity or more post sessions” to increase the level of involvement of newer faculty in the research experience. Another complained of peer reviewers’ comments that were exceptionally “nasty” in tone.

3. What could your employer do to make it easier for you to make valuable contributions to AEJMC or other scholarly/ professional associations?

Not surprisingly, several members expressed the wish that their institutions could provide more time and funding for participation in research. One respondent lamented the difficulty of completing research amid “outside commitments” while another said that their “employer should... increase funding for outside programs.”

Conclusion

We can conclude from the results of this survey that AEJMC members overwhelmingly feel membership in the association is a worthwhile investment. Almost three out of four members ranked membership as “a necessity” or “very important” and almost 40% of members indicated that convention

attendance is equally important. We thought it interesting that respondents' average length of time in the profession was 13 years – and that the average length of respondents' AEJMC membership also was 13 years. Clearly, there's a strong undercurrent of member loyalty to this association.

At the same time, the results show that AEJMC members commonly belong to at least one other professional/ scholarly group. There is a widespread perception among members that they are pressed for time – time to teach, time to serve their communities, and time to participate in valuable research. The AEJMC should do everything within its power to communicate to members its support of these valuable commitments so that members will return their support to AEJMC. We should never take membership for granted. It would be very easy to lose membership to the competing associations (associations with whom many AEJMC members are already involved at some level).

We can conclude from the results of this survey that members are concerned about the lack of institutional support for association involvement – and that many members feel already low levels of support may drop even further in the next two to three years. The association should watch this trend very carefully, because it is clear from the opinions expressed in this survey that lower levels of support will likely bring about lower levels of involvement by AEJMC members.

It is our hope that this survey is not an ending point – but rather a starting point for a lively discussion among the membership of what can be done to keep the AEJMC as 'connected' as possible with members' interests and concerns. It's clear that there needs to be much more communication – among individual members, among interest groups, and among the leadership – to bring attention to the issues raised by those who participated in this study.

The Membership Committee has begun preliminary conversations about how we will make the most valuable use of the information obtained through this survey. Some members of the committee have suggested a wider array of member benefits (such as merchant discounts, travel opportunities and seminars) to attract and retain professionals within the association. Others have suggested varying levels of membership, so that (for example) AEJMC involvement might be made more attractive to graduate students.

It has also been suggested that we sponsor a panel discussion of the issues during the 2005 convention in San Antonio. If you support this proposal, please communicate that support to your interest section

organizers and convention planners. The Membership Committee would be pleased to take an active role.

Finally, it may be advantageous to conduct this survey of members on an annual basis, to allow us to continue gathering information on developing trends. The UW-La Crosse Communication Studies Department Undergraduate Research Team enjoyed the opportunity to work on this project and would welcome the chance to undertake the effort again. We would also solicit suggestions from the membership on revisions in the format used and the questions offered. (A web-based survey could easily be developed for administration in 2005.)

Certainly the knowledge we have gained about AEJMC members through this survey will help us evaluate where we stand now – and where we want the association to be in the future. We welcome your input as we move forward in this direction.

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