



2007

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Recommended Citation

Howard, Jay R. 2007. "North Central Sociological Association Presidential Address: Teaching and Learning and the Culture of the Regional Association in American Sociology." *Sociological Focus* 40:250-264.

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2007 North Central Sociological Association Presidential Address: Teaching and Learning and the Culture of the Regional Association in American Sociology

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In this essay, I examine the role of teaching and learning in the culture of the regional association in American sociology. I analyze the programs of (1) the 2007 joint meeting of the North Central Sociological Association (NCSA) and the Midwest Sociological Society (MSS); (2) the 2007 annual meeting preliminary programs of the Eastern Sociological Society (ESS), the Pacific Sociological Association (PSA), and the Southern Sociological Society (SSS) along with the 2006 annual meeting programs of the MSS and NCSA, as well as the American Sociological Association (ASA); and (3) the 1991 NCSA and 1992 ASA annual meeting programs. I identify program trends with regard to teaching, professional development, undergraduate students, graduate students, and research on higher education. I conclude by identifying regional association annual meeting best practices regarding each of these areas.

When trying to settle on a topic for my NCSA Presidential Address, I was a bit overwhelmed. I don't remember my proseminar courses in graduate school addressing this occasion! Given the lack of guidance from my graduate training, I decided to take a look at what others have done with their presidential addresses. There seemed to be several approaches.

A first approach to presidential addresses is to take advantage of your captive audience and subject it to a talk on your area of research specialization. There are some presidential addresses of this type that have succeeded magnificently—for example, Kent Schwirian's 2005 NCSA Presidential Address in which he analyzed the 2002 SARS outbreak in the People's Republic of China. He captivated us with stories of the outbreak and how political decisions contributed to the infection of more than 8,000 people and the deaths of 774 in just a few months. I thought about subjecting you to my areas of research specialization. But a dirty little secret about presidential addresses that take the "I'm going to make them listen to a talk on my area of research in focused detail" approach is that despite the occasional smashing success such as Schwirian's SARS talk, most presidential addresses of this type are deadly dull.

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A second approach to presidential addresses is to attempt to assess the state of sociology as a discipline. Now, I am not arrogant enough to try to assess the state of the discipline as a whole. So I also scratched the "assess the state of sociology" approach off the list of possibilities. Well, sort of. I'm not arrogant enough to address the state of sociology as a discipline, but as NCSA president, I've had to spend a lot of time thinking about the role of the regional association in American sociology.

In reviewing previous NCSA presidential addresses, I took note of Bruce Keith's 2004 talk examining the contextual and historical relationship between the national and regional associations in American sociology. He and I have had many discussions regarding the role of regional associations in general and the NCSA in particular. One outcome of those discussions was the creation of the NCSA Future Faculty Program—but more on that later.

So taking my lead from Keith (2004) and building on his findings, I want to take a look at one of the roles of regional associations—promoting effective teaching and greater learning in sociology. I also want to examine the role of the regional association in encouraging the professional development of sociologists—a task that clearly overlaps with promoting more effective teaching and greater learning.

Why should we care about these issues? Aren't professional conferences all about research? Why bother with a focus on teaching and professional development in the regional associations? There are a host of reasons why we need to pay more attention to these issues. First, accreditation organizations, state legislatures, and university administrators are all paying increasing attention to the assessment of teaching and learning. This year the governor of Texas proposed tying increases in funding for higher education to exit exams for college graduates—sort of a No Child Left Behind program for higher education (Fisher and Hebel 2007). The students' "Academic Bill of Rights," which purportedly seeks to ensure that faculty members do not use their classroom position for the "purpose of political, ideological, religious, or antireligious indoctrination" has gained a hearing in several state legislatures (Horowitz 2006; Lipka 2006). Faculty members are increasingly being asked to provide assessment evidence regarding student learning outcomes. I think there is little doubt that others are beginning to take a careful look at what is happening in college classrooms. Perhaps we should apply our sociological imagination to our own daily setting and provide evidence of how sociology contributes to students learning to think critically and to see how social structures influence their lives.

Another of my favorite presidential addresses was Maxine Atkinson's (2001) address to the Southern Sociological Society, which focused on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Atkinson was a trailblazer in daring to use a regional association presidential address to talk about teaching! She stressed that in a culture of higher education increasingly concerned with educational reform, we need to make sure we have our house in order. A focus on effective teaching and the assessment of student learning can help us through the process of such initiatives as post-tenure review—one of those things that state legislatures frequently demand.

On the one hand, we should be concerned with teaching and learning because outside forces are going to make us document our contribution to the university whether

we like it or not; on the other hand, we should be concerned with teaching and learning because it is the right thing to do. As the father of a college student, I face those tuition bills. I want to be certain that my child is learning something as a result of my significant financial investment in her education. It has been instructive to be on the other side of the equation for a while. Admittedly, many of our students are coming to us so that they can get a high-paying job when they graduate. But part of the bargain is they should get an education along the way. We have an obligation to offer them one—even when they aren't always sure they really want to be bothered with it.

THE ROLE OF REGIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

Keith (2004) noted that regional sociological associations largely emerged in the 1930s in an effort to provide sociologists access to professional conferences because travel difficulties and expense prevented many sociologists from attending the national meetings of the American Sociological Association. In essence, the meetings of the regional associations attempted to be mini-ASA meetings providing sociologists the opportunity to present their work and learn about the latest research findings. Indeed, this continues to be a major and important goal of regional associations today.

However, times have changed. Despite all the air-travel hassles that followed September 11, 2001, travel to the national meetings of the ASA is certainly cheaper and easier than it was in the 1930s. Many more faculty members can and do participate in the national association today than did in the 1930s. In particular, faculty members from research-oriented institutions have tended to focus their participation on the more prestigious national meetings. Keith (2004) suggests the result is that the regional associations, with some clear exceptions, largely serve the needs of faculty from institutions that do not grant PhDs in sociology. Keith (2004) examined five major regional associations in American sociology: the Eastern Sociological Society (ESS), the Midwest Sociological Society (MSS), the North Central Sociological Association (NCSA), the Pacific Sociological Association (PSA), and the Southern Sociological Society (SSS). He found these regional associations to have much in common and to be diverging from the American Sociological Association (ASA).

One of Keith's key findings was that regional associations underutilize the populations they represent. The NCSA, squeezed in the area not claimed by the MSS and ESS, draws primarily from only three states: Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan. This leaves the NCSA by far the smallest of the regional associations. Each of the other four regional associations is comparable in terms of membership, ranging from just under 1,000 members to roughly 1,300 members in 2003. By estimating the population base of prospective faculty and student members, Keith (2004) revealed that regional associations fall far short of their potential membership, with the NCSA reaching only about 11% of its potential population of faculty.

Another key finding of Keith's (2004) analysis is that constituencies of the national and regional associations are diverging. Regional associations are increasingly serving

faculty from four-year colleges, rather than from institutions granting MAs or doctorates. At the same time, it has proven difficult to attract members from two-year colleges.

So what's a regional association to do? One strategy is to "give up" on doctoral institutions and focus exclusively on meeting the needs of faculty from two- and four-year colleges, high school sociology teachers, and applied sociologists. However, as Keith (2004: 96) points out, 89% of graduates of those doctoral programs will end up with jobs at institutions that do not grant PhDs. Thus, regional associations have a role in the professional socialization of graduate students to prepare them for the types of jobs they are likely to find when they complete their doctoral work. Additionally, graduate students constitute a significant proportion of the membership of regional associations—we would be foolish to ignore them.

So where do we go from here? I will offer some direction based on analysis of where we have been and where we are currently as regional associations. In particular, I am interested in the role of professional associations in promoting effective teaching and learning in sociology and in providing professional development opportunities for faculty members and graduate students. I believe these are important foci if regional associations are truly going to appeal to and meet the needs of faculty at two-year and four-year institutions and graduate students in doctoral programs. Clearly, everyone from state and national legislative bodies to accreditation agencies is interested in assessment of student learning. Likewise, given the seemingly always tight job market for sociology PhDs, anything that graduate students can do to better prepare themselves for jobs at the types of institutions where they are likely to work is a good thing. In addition, an increasing number of institutions is looking for ways of documenting faculty commitment to improvement and professional growth. Given these national trends, regional associations have an opportunity to stake out new ground and meet the needs of their constituents in ways we have not previously done.

RESEARCH METHODS

First, I examine the program of the 2007 combined annual meeting of the North Central Sociological Association and the Midwest Sociological Society. If we step back and look at the big picture, what are we doing? Second, I compare the preliminary programs of the 2007 annual meetings of the ESS, PSA, and the SSS to the 2006 programs of the NCSA and MSS—their most recent programs as separate associations. Next, I compare these with the 2006 program of the ASA. Finally, I make a comparison of the NCSA and ASA programs of 15 years ago with 2006 programs. By analyzing what we are doing with regard to teaching and learning as well as professional development in regional associations and the ASA, I hope to identify what we're doing well, where we could improve, and what people in K-12 circles call "best practices."

I began by analyzing the conference programs to identify (1) teaching sessions, (2) professional development sessions, (3) sessions directed specifically toward undergraduate students, (4) sessions directed specifically toward graduate students, and (5) sessions focused on research pertaining to higher education. I defined "teaching

sessions" as any program session that focused on the teaching of a particular course (e.g., "Teaching Social Problems"), focused on a particular pedagogical strategy (e.g., service learning), or any meeting that focused on teaching included on the program (e.g., a meeting of the teaching committee). If a single session combined teaching and research, I counted it as a teaching session if 50% or more of the paper topics were teaching-focused. For roundtable sessions with multiple tables with distinct topics, I counted each table with a topic that focused on teaching as a separate session.

"Professional development sessions" were defined as guidance or advice for faculty members in areas other than teaching (e.g., "Surviving the First Few Years on the Job" or "How to Negotiate with Your IRB"). "Undergraduate sessions" were defined as sessions designed for the benefit of undergraduate students (e.g., "Applying to Graduate Schools") or sessions designed to give undergraduates an opportunity to present their work (e.g., undergraduate paper or poster sessions). Most graduate students present their research as a part of regular sessions at regional association meetings. However, some regional associations, such as the Pacific Sociological Association, have specially designated sessions for graduate student research, if the students prefer to present in a session that includes only other graduate students. These sessions, along with sessions directed toward graduate students (e.g., academic job search sessions), were labeled "graduate student sessions." Finally, I identified sessions as "research on higher education sessions" if they addressed topics relevant to higher education but were not clear about teaching or professional development. For example, this category included sessions on such topics as "Socioeconomic Status and Achievement in College" and "21st Century Campus Race Relations." Because these sessions on research on higher education apply the sociological eye to our own institutional context, I believe they make a contribution that is qualitatively distinct from sociological research on other social institutions and processes.

2007 MEETING OF THE NCSA/MSS

As Table 1 shows, there are 40 teaching sessions on this year's NCSA/MSS program, accounting for roughly 12% of the total program. There are sessions on teaching particular topics (e.g., "Strategies for Teaching Politically Charged Topics"), on teaching particular skills (e.g., "Teaching Quantitative Literacy"), on teaching particular courses (e.g., "Rethinking the Introductory Sociology Course"), and on the use of particular pedagogical strategies (e.g., "The Use of Music in Sociology Classrooms").

This year's program also shows a commitment to professional development for sociologists with sessions that cover such topics as publishing (e.g., "A Conversation with Journal Editors"), funding sources ("NSF Funding Opportunities"), research skills (e.g., "Social Analysis Tools from the Census Bureau"), and mentoring (e.g., "Feminist Mentoring"). There are 14 professional development sessions on the program, which account for about 4% of the program sessions.

Our commitment to students, as judged by the 2007 NCSA/MSS program, is weaker. There are only three sessions specifically directed toward undergraduate

Table 1. 2007 North Central Sociological Association/Midwest Sociological Society Joint Annual Meeting Program Sessions by Session Type

Sessions	MSS/NCSA	Sample Session Titles
	2007	
Total	338	
1. Teaching	40 (12%)	Strategies for Teaching Politically Charged Topics Teaching Quantitative Literacy Rethinking the Introductory Sociology Course The Use of Music in Sociology Classrooms
2. Professional Development	14 (4%)	A Conversation with Journal Editors NSF Funding Opportunities Social Analysis Tools from the Census Bureau Feminist Mentoring
3. Undergraduate	3 (1%)	Undergraduate Research Poster Undergraduate Student Paper Competition Undergraduate Perspectives
4. Graduate	2 (.5%)	Graduate Student Paper Competition Feminists in Graduate School: Negotiating a Chilly Climate
5. Research on Higher Education	10 (3%)	21st Century Campus Race Relations Financial and Structural Issues in Higher Education Assessing the Collegiate Student Culture Self-perception of Student Achievement
1, 2, 3, 4, & 5 Combined	69 (20%)	

students—an undergraduate paper competition session, an undergraduate poster session, and a session called “Undergraduate Perspectives.” We also have only two sessions focused specifically on graduate students—a graduate student paper competition session and a session titled “Feminists in Graduate School: Negotiating a Chilly Climate.” The combined sessions specifically directed toward undergraduate and graduate students account for only 1.5% of the program.

Finally, we have research sessions on the topic of higher education. The NCSA/MSS joint program features ten such sessions, about 3% of the program. These sessions include such topics as “Financial and Structural Issues in Higher Education,” “Assessing the Collegiate Student Culture,” and “Self-Perceptions of Student Achievement.”

In sum, roughly one of every five sessions, 69 of the 338 sessions on the 2007 NCSA/MSS program, cover one of these five topics: teaching, professional development, undergraduate students, graduate students, or research on higher education. This, of course, leaves about 80% of the program for sessions that are primarily traditional sociological research sessions. The question is: Is this the ideal balance? Is this

balance in the long-term best interests of the NCSA, MSS, and other regional associations? A way to begin answering that question is to compare the NCSA and the MSS with other major regional associations, the ESS, the PSA, and the SSS. Are our approaches similar to or different from theirs?

COMPARING THE REGIONAL ASSOCIATION PROGRAMS

While our 2007 joint meeting of the MSS and the NCSA was a tremendous success, with over 1,500 sociologists in attendance, it is unique. There were more sessions and more participants in 2007 than in years past for both organizations. It is possible as well that the nature of the program changed because of our collaborative efforts. Therefore, in order to compare the programs of the MSS and the NCSA with other regional associations, I took the 2006 final programs of the MSS and the NCSA and compared them with the 2007 preliminary programs of the ESS, the PSA, and the SSS. Table 2 presents the results of this comparison.

Teaching Sessions in the Regional Associations

The five regional associations committed an average of 12% of the program to teaching sessions. The NCSA had the most teaching sessions both in terms of the number of sessions (30) and the percentage of the program focused on teaching (30%). The

Table 2. 2007 Eastern Sociological Society, 2007 Pacific Sociological Association, and 2007 Southern Sociological Society Preliminary Program Sessions and 2006 North Central Sociological Association, 2006 Midwest Sociological Society, and 2006 American Sociological Association Final Program Sessions by Type

Sessions	NCSA 2006	MSS 2006	ESS 2007	PSA 2007	SSS 2007	Regional Association	ASA 2006
						Mean Percentage	
Total	99	197	272	228	165		608
1. Teaching	30 (30%)	22 (11%)	12 (4%)	20 (9%)	14 (8%)	12%	48 (8%)
2. Professional Development	5 (5%)	16 (8%)	9 (3%)	6 (3%)	5 (3%)	4%	34 (6%)
3. Undergraduate	4 (4%)	10 (5%)	4 (1%)	14 (6%)	14 (8%)	5%	5 (1%)
4. Graduate	4 (4%)	4 (2%)	0 (0%)	11 (5%)	2 (1%)	2%	5 (1%)
5. Research on Higher Education	0 (0%)	6 (3%)	1 (.004%)	21 (9%)	4 (2%)	3%	5 (1%)
1, 2, 3, 4, & 5 Combined	43 (43%)	58 (29%)	26 (10%)	72 (32%)	39 (24%)	28%	97 (16%)

ESS (12 sessions, 4%) had the fewest teaching sessions and the lowest percentage of total sessions dedicated to teaching. The MSS (22 sessions, 11%), the PSA (20 sessions, 9%), and the SSS (14 sessions, 8%) were clustered between these extremes. As with the 2007 MSS/NCSA program, the teaching sessions fell into four categories: (1) teaching topics covered in multiple courses, (2) teaching particular skills, (3) teaching specific courses, and (4) pedagogical strategies. The topics covered in the NCSA, MSS, PSA, and SSS were quite similar to each other. However, the ESS stood out because five of the twelve teaching sessions at the ESS had titles that were generic. These included, "Pedagogy" (twice), "Classroom Practice and Teaching," "Pedagogy in Higher Education," and "Teaching Substantive Topics." The other associations tended to have not only more teaching sessions than the ESS but sessions that were more focused.

There were some unique approaches. The NCSA included a day-long high school teachers' workshop in the program. NCSA teaching sessions were arranged so that at least one teaching session was scheduled in every regular time slot on the program, allowing members whose primary interest is teaching to attend those sessions. The NCSA also presented the teaching sessions as a program, allowing graduate students who attended five teaching sessions the opportunity to earn an NCSA Future Faculty Program Certificate. This program was created in recognition that contributing to the professional socialization of graduate students is a valid and necessary function of regional associations. In both the call for papers and in the preliminary program, graduate students were encouraged to attend the annual meeting both to present their research and to earn a Future Faculty Certificate by simply attending a certain number of designated sessions and having the presiders initial a form. After the conference, graduate students who attended the appropriate sessions received a certificate certifying their completion of the NCSA Future Faculty Program.

Professional Development Sessions in the Regional Associations

Sessions emphasizing faculty professional development other than teaching, sessions focused on undergraduate or graduate students, and research sessions on higher education were less visible in the regional association programs than were teaching sessions.

The MSS had the most professional development sessions with sixteen, accounting for 8% of the total program. Professional development sessions accounted for only 3–5% of the programs of the other regional associations. Publishing research, balancing work and family, obtaining tenure, and concerns of women and minorities in higher education were the most common topics. None of the regional associations attempted to offer professional development as a systematic program feature of the annual meeting.

Sessions for Undergraduate Students

Sessions for undergraduate students averaged 5% of the regional association program sessions. Both the PSA and the SSS had 14 sessions for undergraduate students—8% of the ESS sessions and 6% of the PSA sessions. Both had many undergraduate paper, poster, and roundtable sessions. The MSS program included ten sessions for undergraduate students, including multiple paper and poster sessions. The ESS program

primarily consolidated undergraduates into three poster sessions. The NCSA included undergraduate papers in three roundtable sessions. The SSS took what to an outsider appears to be the most systematic approach. Of the 14 undergraduate sessions on the SSS program, 13 were in two time slots early on Saturday morning—the final day of the conference. This, in effect, places a mini-undergraduate research conference on the program of the SSS.

Sessions for Graduate Students

Because most graduate students participate in regular sessions at the regional associations' annual meetings, it is perhaps not too surprising that there were fewer sessions directed toward graduate students than undergraduate students. The regional association programs averaged only 2% of the program sessions being directed toward graduate students. The PSA had eleven sessions for graduate students. This was due in part to a practice of having research sessions set aside for those graduate students who do not wish to participate in sessions with faculty members. Eight of the eleven PSA graduate student sessions were of this type. More typically, graduate student sessions featured graduate paper competition winners, offered advice on surviving graduate school, and presented information on the academic job search process.

Higher Education Research Sessions

Finally, research sessions on higher education typically accounted for only a small portion (3%) of the program sessions of the regional associations. The PSA was the exception with 21 sessions—9% of the program. The theme of the 2007 PSA annual meeting was "Sociology and the Academy: Its Current and Prospective Position." However, even without the 6 special "presidential sessions" on higher education, there were an additional 15 sessions dedicated to sociological examinations of higher education. In contrast, the NCSA had no sessions on the topic in 2006 and the ESS had only one higher education session in 2007.

In total about 28% of the five major regional association programs are dedicated to teaching, professional development, undergraduate students, graduate students, and research on higher education. How does this compare to what goes on at meetings of the American Sociological Association (ASA)?

COMPARING THE REGIONAL ASSOCIATIONS WITH THE ASA

At the 2006 ASA annual meeting in Montreal, there were a total of 608 sessions on the program (see Table 2). Of these, 48 sessions, or 8%, were focused on teaching. This is two-thirds of the 12% average for the five major regional associations. But the NCSA is a statistical outlier with 30% of the 2006 program dedicated to teaching. If you compare the ASA to the other four regional associations, the ASA has a comparable percentage of teaching sessions to the PSA (9%) and SSS (8%). It is not far behind the MSS (11%) and doubles the ESS (4%).

In 2006 the ASA program featured 34 professional development sessions—6% of the total program. That is more than any of the regional associations except the MSS,

which dedicated 8% of the program to professional development. The regional associations, on average, dedicated a higher percentage of the program (5%) to sessions for undergraduates than did the ASA (1%). The ASA program had a similar percentage of sessions (1%) dedicated to graduate students to the regional associations (2%). Research on higher education did not receive much emphasis at the ASA meeting either, with only 1% of the program dedicated to the topic.

In total, the 2006 ASA annual meeting dedicated 16% of the program to teaching, professional development, undergraduates, graduate students, and research on higher education, in comparison to 28% of the program at the regional associations. Only the ESS dedicated a smaller portion of its program (10%) to these five areas. Perhaps it is logical for sociology's national association to have a stronger research emphasis in its program (84%) than the regional associations (ranging from 57% to 90%).

THE NCSA AND THE ASA: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

In order to consider change over time in the percentage of the NCSA and ASA programs dedicated to teaching, professional development, undergraduate students, graduate students, and research on higher education, I compared the 2006 NCSA program with the 1991 NCSA program of 15 years ago. I did not have easy access to the 1991 ASA program, so I compared the 2006 ASA program with the 1992 ASA program of 14 years ago. I discovered that although the number of sessions in the NCSA annual meeting has stayed about the same (near 100 sessions), the ASA has seen substantial growth from 377 program sessions in 1992 to 608 in 2006—a gain of 231 sessions! (See Table 3.)

Table 3. 1991 and 2006 North Central Sociological Association and 1992 and 2006 American Sociological Association Final Program Sessions by Type

Sessions	NCSA 1991	NCSA 2006	Change	ASA 1992	ASA 2006	Change
Total	104	99	-5	377	608	+231
1. Teaching	15 (14%)	30 (30%)	+15 (+16%)	17 (5%)	48 (8%)	+31 (+3%)
2. Professional Development	11 (11%)	5 (5%)	-6 (-6%)	28 (7%)	34 (6%)	+6 (-1%)
3. Undergraduate	5 (5%)	4 (4%)	-1 (-1%)	1 (.2%)	5 (.8%)	+4 (+.6%)
4. Graduate	0 (0%)	4 (4%)	+4	0	5 (1%)	+5
5. Research on Higher Education	4 (4%)	0 (0%)	-4	4 (1%)	5 (1%)	+1 (na)
1, 2, 3, 4, & 5 Combined	35 (34%)	43 (43%)	+8 (+9%)	50 (13%)	97 (16%)	+47 (+3%)

During this period the NCSA doubled the percentage of its program dedicated to teaching (15% to 30%) while the ASA increased from 5% to 8%. That is especially commendable given the overall increase in the number of program sessions at the ASA meeting. The real number of teaching-related sessions at the ASA went from 17 to 48, nearly a threefold increase!

However, commitment to professional development has decreased. The NCSA has seen the percentage of its program dedicated to professional development cut in half. As far as I am aware, this was not an intentional decision. The percentage of the ASA program declined somewhat from 7% to 6%—though the real number of sessions increased from 28 to 34.

The NCSA has maintained roughly the same number and percentage of sessions dedicated to undergraduates—from five to four (5% to 4%). The ASA has increased the number of sessions focused on undergraduates, but the percentage of the program is still less than 1%. In 1991, the NCSA had no sessions targeting graduate students and the ASA had none in 1992. In 2006, 4% of the NCSA program and 1% of the ASA program focused on graduate students.

The NCSA program featured research on higher education in about 4% of the 1991 program, but no sessions in 2006. The ASA held steady with about 1% of the program in each year dedicated to research on higher education.

LESSONS LEARNED

So now that we've taken this descriptive tour of the programs of the regional associations in American sociology as well as that of the ASA, what can we learn from one another? Are there best practices? Are there opportunities and threats to take into consideration? I think there are several lessons to learn.

The first pertains to the significant growth of the ASA program. This is further evidence that more sociologists are choosing to participate in the national ASA meeting. That is good news for the ASA and the discipline as a whole. I support sociologists participating in the ASA annual meeting. But given shrinking travel support in higher education, the increased participation in the ASA presents a challenge for regional associations. We have to work harder to attract and keep participants. What can regional associations offer to sociologists other than a shorter distance to travel to the meetings? What do we have to offer to sociologists at various stages of their careers?

Let me emphasize that I am not suggesting that we quit presenting research at regional association meetings. Research has been and will always be an important part of our meetings. The problem occurs when research is treated as if it is the only thing that matters at the meetings. So let's continue to do good research and share it with our colleagues for critique and feedback at regional associations. But we need to do other things as well.

What are the various regional associations doing well? How can we learn from one another? With regard to teaching, regional associations can learn from the NCSA. Organizing the program so that there is at least one teaching session in every time slot

makes a lot of sense. Inevitably, at any professional conference there will be a limited number of sessions that pertain to the research agenda of any individual sociologist. So what should we do with the rest of the day at the annual meetings? Focusing on improving teaching and learning is one good use of that time. Every regional association should work to have at least one teaching-related session in every time slot on the program.

I think the NCSA has also blazed some trails regarding teaching in a couple of other ways. First, the High School Teachers Workshop helps to build bridges between sociologists in higher education and those who teach sociology in high schools. If we want high school sociology courses to be truly sociological, we had better take the initiative to help those teachers develop effective courses.

Second, the NCSA, in response to the challenge former president Keith (2004) set forth, has sought to become more graduate student-friendly by organizing the teaching sessions on the program in such a way that graduate students can earn an NCSA Future Faculty Program Certificate. By taking steps to ensure that a teaching session is available in every time slot on the program, we can reward graduate students not only for presenting their research but for engaging in sessions that will help them be better teachers when we hire them as colleagues! The additional work to package what is already featured in the program in a fashion that will benefit graduate students is minimal. And when we are hiring new colleagues, we need to give applicants credit for seeking to develop themselves as teachers as well as researchers.

The regional associations have some good things in place with regard to teaching. But with the possible exception of the MSS, there is a lot of room for improvement with regard to professional development. If at the annual meeting of regional associations, we don't want sociologists to be "drive-by" participants who come in, present their papers, and leave, we need to offer benefits that will encourage them to stay and engage in the meeting and the organization. What might do that? Every regional association program could include professional development sessions such as "Surviving the First Years on the Job," "Balancing Work and Family in Higher Education," "Keys to Obtaining Promotion and Tenure," "Strategies for Effective Department Chairs," "Post-Tenure Review," "Benefits and Challenges for Sociologists in Administration," "Strategies for Successful Departmental Reviews," "Publishing in Scholarly Journals," and "Writing Effective Book Proposals." Perhaps these sessions could be organized in such a way as to allow faculty members to earn a Professional Development Program Certificate from the regional association.

Regional associations also need to take time to collaborate with community college faculty members when it comes to professional development. Community colleges are becoming the starting point for many students who will end up with a bachelor's degree from another institution. We need to seek to meet the needs of *and* to learn from community college faculty. How can we organize regional association meetings to give community college faculty a reason to attend? First, I think an organized emphasis on teaching helps. The first priority of virtually all community college faculty members is classroom teaching. How can we help them, as well as ourselves, become better teachers? Community college faculty may also be more likely to have participation in professional development activities as part of their job expectations.

Can we organize our professional development sessions in a way that makes documentation of professional development easier for faculty who are expected to engage in it, regardless of the type of institution at which they teach? Second, we should avoid being paternalistic toward community college faculty members. We need to be willing to learn from them. For example, community college faculty members are more likely to have invested time and energy in assessing and documenting the contributions of sociology to general education. We need to ensure that these colleagues feel welcome and respected within our regional associations so that we can benefit from each other. It will take a concerted, intentional effort to invite and involve these faculty members; since our associations have been focused so heavily on research in the past, many community college faculty members may not perceive the annual meeting program as having anything for them.

Regarding undergraduate students, I think the regional associations could all borrow a good idea from the SSS. In 2007 the SSS, in effect, created a mini-undergraduate research conference on the last morning of the annual meeting. Undergraduate students could attend the rest of the meeting, taking in research sessions and keynote speakers, and finish by presenting their own work. There are a couple of challenges here. First, there will be a need to make undergraduate student membership affordable. Many colleges and universities are emphasizing undergraduate participation in research and even providing some travel funding. If regional associations make participation both affordable and nonthreatening by having a mini-undergraduate conference within our annual meetings, we may be beneficiaries of this new emphasis in higher education. A second problem is finding faculty members willing to stick around for the last morning of the meeting to preside over and attend undergraduate paper sessions. Perhaps a good group to begin with is the regional association's teaching committee. Each teaching committee member could accept responsibility to chair one undergraduate research session as a part of his or her obligations as committee members. Alternatively, regional associations could create undergraduate committees to coordinate the miniconference within the meeting. Regardless, faculty members will have to step up and commit their time and energy to make this proposal work.

Graduate students' involvement in regional associations is unique. They are caught in a liminal stage between student and faculty member. However, in most ways regional associations treat graduate students more like faculty colleagues than like graduate students. But involving graduate students in the same way as faculty is not enough if we wish to entice them into joining regional associations and becoming long-term members. The aforementioned NCSA Future Faculty Program is one strategy for increasing graduate student involvement. Offering special sessions that include research only by graduate students, as does the PSA, may also be an effective way to allow graduate students the opportunity to present at a conference—especially for first-time presenters. But graduate students could also benefit by having special sessions directed to them each year. Some possible sessions for graduate students could be: "What I Wish Someone Had Told Me during My First Year in Graduate School," "Writing Effective Dissertation and Thesis Proposals," "What to Look for When Selecting an Advisor," "Negotiating the Academic Job Market," and even a session

on "How to Get More Involved in Your Regional Association: Opportunities for Graduate Students." These could be part of the Future Faculty Program or an additional benefit of the program for graduate students.

What about research on higher education? Perhaps this is my bias showing, but I think sociologists have a lot to offer by bringing the sociological imagination to our understanding of higher education. Most regional association members spend the majority of their waking hours in higher education institutions. We can take the tools of our discipline and help everyone understand why some students don't finish their degrees, why others don't survive even the first year of college, and how race, class, and gender affect outcomes in higher education. It is ironic that sociologists are so effective at bringing sociological insights to others' daily lives but are not always interested in turning a sociological eye upon their own world. The PSA is to be commended for making "Sociology and the Academy" the theme of its 2007 program. Perhaps other regional associations should follow its lead and occasionally make the institution where we live, higher education, the focus of our annual meeting.

THE ROAD AHEAD

If I may be so bold as to think that you believe some of these proposals are worth pursuing, where do we go from here? The next step is the hard part. It is up to the members of the NCSA and other regional associations to make changes happen. Regional associations are voluntary organizations. Things get done only because members want them done and are willing to work to see them accomplished.

Which of these initiatives grabs your attention? Which would you like to see happen? Step up and volunteer. Talk to members of the NCSA Council or the leadership of other regional associations. Talk to your NCSA presidents (past, present, and elect). Push to ensure that the NCSA evolves the way you want it to. If the regional association in American sociology is to survive and thrive, it must change and evolve. It must give sociologists from all types of institutions and at every point in their careers additional and better reasons to participate. Consider this your call to action.

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