

A Profile of the Rural Sociological Society at the Turn of the Century: Additional Insights

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A membership survey was conducted during the late spring and early summer of 1999 to collect information on RSS members' attitudes toward and opinions regarding Society directions, levels of participation in RSS activities, affiliations with other professional associations and general sociodemographics. The survey procedures and a majority of the findings were described in a previous issue of *The Rural Sociologist* (see Theodori and Luloff, 2000). This paper complements our earlier report by summarizing the remaining items on the questionnaire.

RSS PUBLICATIONS

Members were asked to respond to several statements about the publications *Rural Sociology* and *The Rural Sociologist*. Respondents were also asked to provide responses to statements about RSS publications in general and whether or not they would be willing to serve as a referee for manuscripts submitted to *Rural Sociology* in a language other than English.

Rural Sociology

The majority of members either agreed or strongly agreed that *Rural Sociology* is an important journal for publishing sociological work on rural society (90%) and should include policy-oriented analyses and commentaries (69%). Approximately four in 10 (41%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that *Rural Sociology* is too narrowly focused, while approximately 80% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that *Rural Sociology* should be exclusively an online journal. About one-third of the members (34%) either agreed or strongly agreed that *Rural Sociology* should devote more articles to the concerns and needs of nonacademic readers, while another one-third (32%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Most respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the articles published in *Rural Sociology* have application for their professional work (65%), stimulated their interests in substantive issues (60%) and have a strong theoretical grounding (53%). Three in 10 individuals (30%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the articles in *Rural Sociology* stimulated their interests in new methodological approaches. Approximately four in 10 (41%) either disagreed or

strongly disagreed that the articles were too methodologically narrow in scope, while roughly 48% either agreed or strongly agreed that the same articles were methodologically rigorous. Approximately 59% and 54%, respectively, either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the articles published in *Rural Sociology* were too theoretically oriented and had little applicability to their professional needs.

The Rural Sociologist

Approximately 72% of the members either agreed or strongly agreed that more articles discussing critical social issues were needed in *The Rural Sociologist*. Nearly six in 10 (59%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that *The Rural Sociologist* should be published only on the web page.

RSS Publications in General

For RSS publications in general, slightly more than one half of the members (52%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the Rural Studies Series provides a critical service to the Society. About six in 10 (61%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the Rural Studies Series must be continued even if individual books may occasionally lose money. Forty-two percent either agreed or strongly agreed that the range and types of publications met their needs and interests, while 36% either agreed or strongly agreed that there is a need for a third, policy-oriented journal to address rural policy issues.

Referee Manuscripts Submitted in a Language Other Than English

Members were asked if they would be willing to referee papers submitted to *Rural Sociology*, which were written in a language other than English. Approximately 21% (70 of 333) said that they would. Sixty-four of these individuals listed at least one non-English language. About 55% said that they would referee papers in Spanish. Approximately 20% said they would referee papers in French, and 11% said they would referee papers in Portuguese. Other languages cited included Chinese (9%), Japanese (5%), German (5%), Swedish (3%), Arabic (3%), Italian (3%), Dutch (2%), and Urdu (2%).

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RSS ENDOWMENT FUNDS

Respondents were asked to express their opinions about the RSS Endowment Funds. Specifically, they were asked to rate each use of the RSS Endowment Funds using a scale of one to five, where five meant a high degree of importance and one meant a low degree of importance. Inspection of the percentages for each item indicated that the activity viewed with the highest degree of importance was the need to support student or minority members' attendance at annual meetings (43%). The next two activities viewed with a high degree of importance were grants for student thesis/dissertation research (38%) and grants for innovative teaching efforts (21%). Less than one respondent in 10 (9%) felt that the use of RSS Endowment Funds to support RSS standing committee activities was highly important.

Members were also asked to indicate their preferences for the conduct of solicitations for the RSS Endowment Funds. While slightly more than one-half supported earmarked solicitations for specific activities by RSS Council (55%) and those earmarked for specific activities by donors (51%), almost 61% opposed a \$5 increase in annual dues.

RSS ANNUAL MEETINGS AND MEETING WITH THE ASA

There has been a continuing dialogue among RSS Councils about when and where to hold RSS annual meetings. Historically, the annual meetings have been held in August. In the past, the RSS tried to meet in the same region as the ASA at about the same time. However, this was not always possible. Five years ago the RSS Council decided to alternate its meeting sites – it would meet every other year with the ASA and in the alternate years meet anywhere else. A series of questions on this survey addressed general issues associated with the RSS annual meetings. Respondents were first asked to indicate their opinions on eight general statements concerning the annual RSS meetings. The majority either agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements: Whether the RSS holds its meetings in proximity to ASA does not affect my decision about attending the RSS meetings (70%); whether the RSS holds its meetings in proximity to ASA does not affect my decision about attending the ASA meetings (68%); I attend RSS meetings to renew acquaintances and for the fellowship (62%); I always find intellectual stimulation at the RSS meetings (60%); and distance to the site of the RSS meetings is an important factor in whether or not I attend (53%). One-half of the members indicated that it didn't matter if all of the events at the RSS meetings were held within the same

hotel. Approximately one in four (26%) noted that the cost of lodging and food at RSS meetings was more important than the cost of getting to the meetings. Lastly, nearly two in three (63%) indicated that they would attend RSS annual meetings regardless of costs.

Members were then asked to indicate their preference for when (month and time of month) the RSS should hold its annual meetings. Nearly seven of 10 (173 of 251) indicated a preference for August. Approximately 9% would prefer that the meetings were held in July. Another 7% indicated a preference for June, while nearly 4% mentioned May. Of those members who reported August as their first preference, about 68% (110 of 163) mentioned that they would like to hold the meetings before the 10th of August. About one in four (24%) reported that they would like to hold the meetings between the 11th and 20th of August, while the remaining 8% reported that they would like to hold the meetings between the 21st and the end of the month.

Next, members were asked whether or not they were in favor of continuing to meet every other year with the ASA. More than three in four (76%, 234 of 307) indicated that they were, while approximately one in five (roughly 19%, n = 58) reported that they were not. About 5% (n = 15) were uncertain. Members were also asked to indicate whether or not they had attended RSS and/or ASA meetings between the years 1994 and 1998. As shown in Table 1, attendance at RSS annual meetings ranged from a low of about 30% (in 1994 and 1996) to a high of about 38% (1995). Attendance at ASA meetings ranged from a low of about 6% (1994) to a high of about 20% (1995). Approximately one in 12 respondents (8%, 28 of 325) attended each of the five RSS meetings between 1994 and 1998. Nearly 10% (n = 32) attended four of the five meetings, while roughly 13% (n = 41) attended three of them. Another 13% (n = 42) attended two meetings, and one in five respondents (20%, n = 64) attended one meeting. Slightly more than one-third of the respondents (roughly 36%, n = 118) did not attend even one RSS meeting during the period 1994 to 1998 and only 2% (6 of 313) attended each of the five ASA meetings during the same time span. Twice that many attended four of the ASA meetings (4%, n = 12). A similar number (4%, n = 11) attended three ASA meetings, about 8% (n = 26) attended two, and roughly one in eight respondents (12%, n = 38) attended one. Nearly 70% (n = 220) did not attend any ASA meetings between the years 1994 and 1998.

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Table 1

Attendance at RSS and ASA Meetings (percentages)

<u>Year</u>	<u>RSS Meeting Location</u>	<u>Percent Attended</u>	<u>ASA Meeting Location</u>	<u>Percent Attended</u>
1994	Portland	30	Los Angeles	6
1995	Washington, DC	38	Washington, DC	20
1996	Des Moines	30	Chicago	8
1997	Toronto	35	Toronto	18
1998	Portland	34	San Francisco	12

SUMMARY

The data presented here show that while the majority of societal members feel that *Rural Sociology* is important for publishing work on rural society, stimulates their interests in substantive issues, and should include policy-oriented analyses and commentaries, there is far less support for making the journal solely an online publication. Members are less sure about whether the journal is too narrowly focused or whether it needs to devote more articles to the concerns of nonacademic readers. They are also ambivalent about whether or not it stimulates their interests in new methodological approaches. A similar pattern emerged for responses about *The Rural Sociologist*. Most members believe that it should contain more articles discussing critical social issues and should not be distributed only electronically. While it is not clear if the membership is satisfied with the range and types of official publications, most respondents are not quite sure if they are ready to endorse a third, policy-oriented journal.

The findings also reveal that members generally believe the Endowment Funds should be used to support student or minority attendance at annual meetings, graduate student research grants and innovative teaching efforts. Most are less supportive of the use of Endowment Funds for standing committee activities. Lastly, the survey revealed that only a small number of members actively participate in the RSS meetings, and a remarkably smaller number actually attend the ASA meetings. While the decision to link the two meetings on alternative years is supported by the vast majority of members, their support is not matched with their actions. It appears that the linkage has not resulted in a very high participation rate in either meeting.

Reference:

Theodori, Gene L., and A.E. Luloff. 2000. A Profile of the Rural Sociological Society at the Turn of the Century. *The Rural Sociologist* 20(1): 4-7.



Dan Kemmis, Director of the University of Montana - Missoula, Center for the Rocky Mountain West, was the RSS Plenary Speaker in Washington, D.C. He discussed the role of rural sociology in higher education.