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The Society for Social Work and Research: Successes and Future Challenges

By the time you read this, my term will have expired as president of the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR). After taking a two-issue hiatus from editorial writing because I did not have much to say, the editor encouraged me to write this closing editorial, suggesting that I begin by summarizing SSWR successes during my presidency. I will do so, but only after emphasizing that the credit for these accomplishments goes to quite a few SSWR volunteers; the successes are the society's accomplishments, not mine. The SSWR is succeeding not because of any particular office holder but because it is a great idea whose time has come. Throughout the history of social work, the contributions of social work researchers have not been adequately valued by the profession as a whole. This lack of appreciation and underutilization of research continues today, and this may at least in part explain why so many social work researchers are participating in the society and are eager to work hard to make the society succeed.

Perhaps the most notable sign of our success is our annual conference. The size of the conference has increased in each of the 4 years in which the conference has been held, as reflected by growth in abstract submissions, attendance, faculty recruitment by search committees, and exhibit booths. Our 2000 conference in Charleston this past January attracted more than 600 participants, a 20% increase from the 1999 attendance. This happened despite a severe winter storm that caused flight cancellations and airport closures that kept about 100 people from attending. Without the storm, we would have had more than 700 participants—almost triple the number of participants at our first conference.

Reflecting on my term as SSWR president, there are many good memories. One is writing these editorials. Thanks to all of you for reading them and for the positive feedback I have received despite my efforts to be outspoken and provocative and to eschew political correctness. Another good memory is of our 1999 conference in Austin, which was virtually flawless and was cited by many as the best conference they ever attended. Thanks to Dean Barbara White and all of the faculty and staff of the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work for volunteering so much time and resources to help make that conference so successful.



I also want to thank Frank Raymond, dean of the University of South Carolina College of Social Work, which was our host school for our successful conference in Charleston this past January. The society contracted with Frank's program to coordinate the conference. The degree of success of the conference reflects Frank's willingness, and that of his faculty and staff, to go beyond contractual expectations in dealing with expected tasks and unforeseen obstacles. The most difficult unforeseen obstacle we encountered was the NAACP call for economic sanctions to protest the Confederate battle flag flying over the South Carolina capital building. The society board strongly supports the sanctions. Had the sanctions been called for before we signed a contract to hold our conference in Charleston, we never would have considered South Carolina as a site for the conference. Had we learned of the sanctions in time to do so, we would have moved the conference to a different state.

When we learned of the sanctions, we asked Frank to seek guidance from the South Carolina NAACP with regard to what we should do. In response, we were informed that the NAACP understood our dilemma and stated that groups with signed contracts need not cancel their conferences or try to move them to different places. Consequently, our board decided to hold our conference as planned. However, this was an agonizing decision, and we have tried to make all SSWR members aware of our support of the economic sanctions. In addition, I invited several individuals to serve on an ad hoc presidential committee to advise the board on possible actions we could take while in Charleston to support the sanctions. The members of the committee were James Herbert Williams (chair), Paula Allen-Meares, Larry E. Davis, Mark Fraser, Ruth McRoy, David Miller, and Sherri Seyfried. We are indebted to the committee for submitting a long list of excellent alternative possible actions for our board to consider, and our board developed some tentative plans based on the options we selected. Next, I discussed our tentative plans with Dwight James, the executive director of the South Carolina branches of the NAACP. Mr. James supported our plans and expressed appreciation for them. Ultimately, we were able to implement most of the options we selected and wish that we had been able to do more. We took the following actions at the conference:

1. We issued a press release on a resolution to the governor of South Carolina, unanimously passed by our board, which includes the following statement: "that the [Society] shall NOT hold any future meeting . . . in the state of South Carolina until such time that the Confederate Battle Flag is removed from positions of sovereignty in the state of South Carolina."
2. We urged conference participants to sign a petition to the governor of South Carolina, which includes the following statement: "We, the undersigned non-

residents of South Carolina, vow NOT to visit the state of South Carolina again for any purpose whatsoever—not for vacations, professional meetings or any other reason—until such time that the Confederate Battle Flag is removed from positions of sovereignty in the state of South Carolina.” After the conference ended, we submitted the petition to the governor.

3. We offered a free conference exhibit booth to the NAACP, and they accepted our offer.
4. The NAACP is developing a data bank of information on individuals who cancel vacations planned for South Carolina. We asked all conference participants who were planning such vacations to cancel them and let the NAACP know about the cancellations for their data bank.
5. A featured speaker at our conference banquet was the Reverend Joseph Darby, vice president of the South Carolina Conference of Branches of the NAACP and chairman of the South Carolina Coalition of Black Church Leaders. Reverend Darby delivered an informative and stirring talk about the issue of the Confederate battle flag and received a standing ovation.

Shortly before the Charleston conference took place, we learned of the possibility that a boycott of Georgia might be called in the future in protest of having a symbol of the confederacy on its state flag. (According to news media coverage, the Georgia situation was not nearly as egregious as the South Carolina situation because in South Carolina the battle flag was separate from the state flag.) This posed another agonizing problem for the society; we were already contractually obligated to hold our January 2001 conference in Atlanta. At our board meeting on the eve of our conference in Charleston, we decided that if the Georgia boycott was called, we would change the site of our 2001 conference even if it meant incurring a huge financial penalty. This decision was announced at the conference banquet.

We were informed by a representative of the groups considering the Georgia boycott that they would decide whether to call for the boycott after they negotiated with Georgia legislators during March of this year. At the end of March, I made several follow-up calls to find out where things stood and was informed by several representatives of the Georgia NAACP that there were absolutely no plans whatsoever to call for the Georgia boycott. In fact, they were quite adamant about that. Hearing that, the society board decided unanimously to proceed with the conference as originally planned in Atlanta for next January.

Although our annual conference may be the most obvious sign of the society’s success, it is not the only one. As the society grows, so do its benefits. One benefit is the increase in research journals offering subscription discounts to Society members. Another benefit is our Web site. Our Web site is attracting many visitors and continues to improve. I have recently established an ad hoc committee to propose additional Web site improvements, and that

committee is already working hard and coming up with some great ideas, such as increased links to relevant research sites and databases. The committee is also conducting a survey of society members to obtain reactions to its ideas and suggestions for additional ways the site can be of value to members. The committee is being chaired by Gary Holden. Other members are Wally Gingrich, Dan Herman, Joanne Levine, and David Patterson.

The society's growth enables us to provide significant support to the legislative campaign being waged to establish a National Center for Social Work Research. Succeeding in that campaign is perhaps the most important challenge we currently face. I am happy to report that progress continues to be made in it as additional representatives are expressing support for the legislation. If we all pitch in to influence our representatives and senators in the U.S. Congress, perhaps the legislation will be enacted before we hold our 2002 conference, which is tentatively planned to be held in a city yet to be determined on the west coast. If the legislation is enacted before then, we can celebrate at that conference.

Although the campaign for the National Center legislation may be by far the most important challenge currently facing the society, it is not the only one. One challenge that concerns me is that we be vigilant in preventing our success from spoiling our mission, our distinctively high scientific standards, and the quality of our annual conference. For example, as the word has spread about the growing stature of the society and about the attendance at and the excellence of our conferences, more people seem to be attending our conference primarily to recruit prospective faculty members or to be recruited. I hear that some members of recruitment committees are spending most of their conference time holed up in hotel suites interviewing prospective recruits. These recruitment activities compete with attendance at conference sessions. Some long-time society members who serve on faculty search committees are beginning to complain that their schools are requiring that they spend so much time interviewing that they no longer are able to attend conference sessions like they used to. Not everyone shares my concern about this development. One newly elected society board member, for example, welcomes it, in part because it helps doctoral students seeking faculty positions. Maybe he is correct. I guess it is a question of priorities. I suspect the new board of the society will be debating this issue. If you feel strongly about it, perhaps you should express your view in an e-mail message addressed to all board members.

Another of my concerns is also connected to a potential byproduct of the society's growth. I worry that more and more future society members may not share our passion for rigorous research and scholarly excellence. Perhaps they will join just because they think being a member of the society will

enhance their image among their colleagues or will improve their networking with other programs. I worry that if this happens our annual conference will increasingly resemble certain other conferences where schmoozing and networking take priority over session attendance. I worry that if the society's leaders focus too much on growing the society, too many scientifically marginal papers will be accepted for our conferences to maximize conference attendance and revenues. Some authors of these papers may join the society only because their papers are accepted. Consequently, accepting scientifically marginal papers may exacerbate any future trend toward an increasing proportion of society members who care much more about ideological commitments or career advancement aspirations than about scientific rigor. Because the society is governed democratically, my ultimate worry is that it may evolve into a clone of social work organizations that give lip service to research and scholarly excellence but whose real priorities have much more to do with organizational maintenance and the ideological and political commitments favored by most of their members.

In expressing these concerns, I am not advocating elitism. I think the society should continue to be governed democratically. I am merely advocating the following: (a) the maintenance of high standards in accepting conference papers (and thus increasing the likelihood that the vast majority of voting society members will have a strong commitment to the society's mission and high scientific standards), (b) that the board continue to examine options to discourage practices that compete with conference session attendance, and (c) that the board be vigilant in not getting so caught up with growth that it loses sight of our mission (and of the ways in which excessively rapid growth can threaten our mission).

However, as the comedian Dennis Miller likes to say in his monologues, that is just my opinion; I could be wrong. For the sake of the society and its mission, which I cherish, I hope I am wrong. One reason for optimism is the capable leadership that the society will have for at least the next 4 years. For the next 2 years, that leadership will be provided by Nancy Hooyman, our current president elect, who will have become president by the time you read this. For the subsequent 2 years, the presidential leadership will be provided by Paula Allen-Mearns, after she serves 2 years on our board as president elect. Welcome Nancy and Paula!

I want to close by thanking the board members who served under my watch for doing so much to achieve the society's recent successes. I will just mention their primary roles; their contributions went far beyond what I will mention here. Mark Fraser, our outgoing vice president, chaired our awards program, expanded it, and made it more responsive to membership requests for more diversity. Miriam Potocky-Tripodi coordinated our 1998 con-

ference and our mentoring program, on top of her extensive additional duties as secretary treasurer. Angelica Thevos chaired our 2000 conference. Kevin Corcoran coordinated our efforts to attract conference exhibitors. Tony Tripodi coordinated our 2000 election. Deborah Padgett agreed to chair our abstract review process for 2001. Janet Williams, society founder, secured grants to provide our snazzy conference bags. I also want to thank Dan Herman, editor of our newsletter. Dan was not a board member, but he worked as hard as most board members and did great work on every issue of the newsletter. We are indebted to him for it. We also are indebted to the volunteers whom I thanked earlier in this editorial and to the many society members whom I have thanked in previous editorials for serving on our annual conference planning committees, abstract review committees, and research awards committees. If Nancy and Paula are as fortunate as I have been with regard to the commitment and competence of their board members and other society volunteers, then the outlook for the society for the near future looks great.

—Allen Rubin
*Past President, Society for
Social Work and Research*