

RSA's New Diversity Committee's Survey on Diversity in RSA Symposia Submissions

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RSA's Diversity Committee had its kickoff meeting in 2015 and was established as a standing committee by RSA's Board of Directors in 2016. The Diversity Committee is now working to finalize its mission statement, but one broad goal is to address the representation of racial/ethnic minorities and women both within the RSA membership and at RSA's annual meeting.

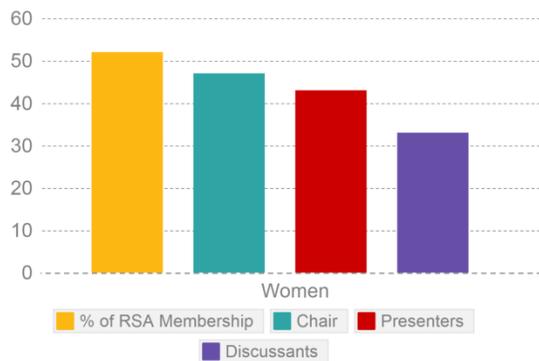
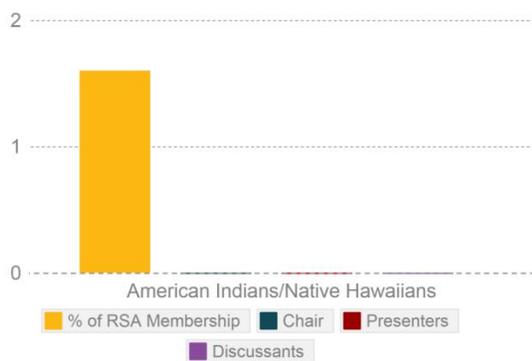
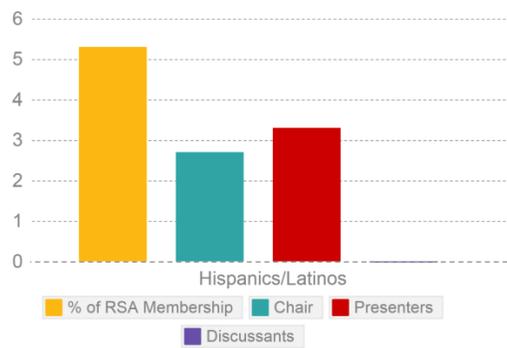
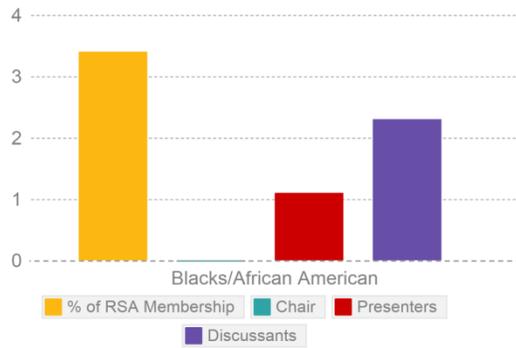
One of the Diversity Committee's first activities was to implement a survey of symposia submitted for RSA's 2016 conference in New Orleans. We aimed to assess the representation of racial/ethnic minorities, women, and junior investigators in symposium proposals as Chairs, Presenters, and Discussants. A secondary aim was to assess RSA members' perceptions about the representation of these groups in RSA symposia. In the fall of 2015, those submitting symposia via the online system were asked to complete an optional survey on diversity. Potential respondents were directed to a separate online survey where they reported on the demographic characteristics of participants in their symposia. No personally identifying information was collected. About 60% (46/77) of those submitting proposals completed the survey. Data on racial/ethnic representation within symposia were compared to benchmark data from a 2010 survey of RSA's membership with N=537 (and a 29% response rate); data on gender were compared to 2016 statistics for the entire RSA membership. While not all symposium presenters are RSA members, the RSA membership constitutes a reasonable point of comparison.

Results of our 2015 survey reveal substantial under-representation of Blacks/African Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, and American Indians/Native Hawaiians in submitted symposium roles compared to the RSA membership as a whole. Women were also under-represented among Discussants.

Blacks/African Americans constitute about 3.4% of RSA's membership, but were not represented at all among the Chairs and made up only 1.1% of Presenters and 2.3% of Discussants. Similarly, Hispanics/Latinos constitute about 5.3% of RSA's membership, but represented only 2.7% of Chairs, 3.3% of Presenters, and none of the Discussants. American Indians/Native Hawaiians comprised 1.6% of RSA's membership in 2010 but were not represented in any symposium roles. Representation of Whites in RSA symposia was slightly below their representation in the RSA membership across symposium roles (for example, Whites comprised 78% of Presenters, compared to 86% of the membership); Asian American representation was greater than that for the RSA membership (for example, this group comprised 12% of Presenters but 8.3% of the membership). Whereas women make up about 52% of RSA's membership, they constituted only 33% of Discussants (but 47% of all Chairs and 43% of all Presenters).¹

Conversely, findings revealed reasonably high participation from junior investigators across symposium roles. NIH New/Early Stage Investigators made up 30% of all Chairs, 50% of all Presenters, and 13% of all Discussants in our survey pertaining to the 2016 meeting.

¹ In RSA's internal analysis of accepted 2016 symposia (which examines gender only, based on assessment of names), women were estimated to comprise 39% of Discussants, 49% of Chairs, and 47% of Presenters.



Findings highlight a striking pipeline problem in symposium submissions that may result in unequal, and lesser, representation of racial/ethnic minorities and (to some extent) women in RSA’s annual meeting. The reasons for this imbalance are unknown. The pipeline problem is likely to be reflected in the final RSA meeting program because the large majority of symposium submissions are routinely accepted. For example, 90% of symposium submissions to RSA’s 2016 conference were accepted.

Findings for racial/ethnic disparities are particularly concerning because Blacks/African Americans and Latinos/Hispanics are also severely under-represented in both RSA’s membership and science and engineering as a whole, compared to the US population. The most recent US Census data show that Blacks/African Americans comprise 13%, and Latinos/Hispanics 18%, of the entire US population. These figures highlight the significant gap between the US populations of Blacks/African Americans and Latinos/Hispanics and their representation within the RSA membership. Notably, the RSA membership profile directly reflects that of the science and engineering field: National Science Foundation data suggest that only about 3.2% and 3.8% of all PhD’s in these areas are awarded to Blacks/African Americans and Latinos/Hispanics, respectively (National Science Foundation & National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2015). RSA’s limitations in the diversity of its membership thus mirror the challenges to science in the US broadly.²

These issues in representation bear directly on the quality of our science because adequate representation of population subgroups is key to ensuring that the research questions, designs, and

²About 7% of the RSA membership is comprised of international members. Thus, the RSA membership may not be expected to precisely duplicate the US population.

conclusions that we produce appropriately capitalize on the wide expertise and knowledge base of the entire population—and that our research findings are *broadly* relevant to public health rather than narrowly focused on subgroups that have already been heavily studied. In short, good science must address the health of the entire population, and adequate representation of the entire population among our researchers is needed to achieve that.

RSA members can help to address the documented pipeline problem by spreading information about representation issues within RSA’s annual meeting and by cultivating symposia that incorporate under-represented minorities and women as Chairs, Presenters, and Discussants. Results of our 2015 survey suggest some misperceptions about representation within RSA symposia. For example, 25% of respondents agreed that racial/ethnic minorities are adequately represented as Chairs and Presenters in RSA symposia; 29% were neutral and only 47% disagreed. In open-ended comments, one respondent recognized that “women and racial minorities are woefully under-represented,” but another commented that “women and junior investigators are adequately represented, minorities are not,” and a third said, “I see diversity in all areas of [the] RSA meeting.” RSA members may not be aware of representation issues within RSA’s program because data on this topic have been lacking. It will be important for researchers to consciously consider the demographic make-up of their symposia in order to create more balance in RSA’s schedule.

RSA members can also help immediately by completing their online profiles, including questions on research area, race/ethnicity, and gender. These recently added questions are optional, but will help RSA to continue to monitor representation. To update your profile, please login and select “update profile” at: <https://www.xcdsystem.com/rsoa/member>.

Meanwhile, the Diversity Committee is planning concerted efforts to address representation in the scientific program and in the society more broadly. The Diversity Committee is considering several strategies to increase the representation of under-represented groups within RSA’s program and membership, such as outreach activities, travel awards, and a skills workshop implemented in collaboration with the Education Committee to assist junior investigators with submitting symposia. The Committee also plans to collect new data on RSA symposia as well as poster presentations. It is hoped that these efforts will translate into continuing dialogue and greater diversity within RSA. Our survey’s findings for high involvement of junior investigators in RSA symposia suggest success on the part of the research community in stimulating the participation of this group, and may bode well for efforts to involve other subgroups key to our scientific development.

Questions about or comments on this article? Please email Dr. Alyssa Brooks at alyssa524@gmail.com.

Reference

National Science Foundation, & National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (2015). Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering: 2015. Data Tables [Accessed: 2016-08-23. Archived by <https://wayback.archive-it.org/5902/20160210205436/http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2015/nsf15311/tables.cfm>, Arlington, VA.