

## FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN REGIONAL PSYCHOLOGY CONFERENCES<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—Faculty responded to a survey regarding submission guidelines and decision-making processes to regional psychology conferences for undergraduate students. Respondents' mean age was 52.2 yr. ( $SD=10.8$ ), mean years of teaching experience was 22.5 ( $SD=10.7$ ), and 49.7% were women. Analyses indicated that students should know submission guidelines and evaluative criteria prior to submission, but may not. Results are presented to provide feedback for faculty about the conference submission process.

An important experience for psychology undergraduates is hands-on exposure to the research process, as affirmed by the recommendations of the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major*,<sup>2</sup> “Students will understand and apply basic research methods in psychology, including research design, data analysis, and interpretation” (pp. 9-10). Application of research methods is an important learning outcome for students and occurs in several settings, such as courses (Research Methods, Experimental Design) and individual effort (Research Assistantship, Internship, Senior Thesis). Good science requires that psychologists share research findings within the discipline, which may be done by attending regional conferences and participating in poster sessions and oral presentation sessions.

Undergraduate students' participation in professional conference activities also serves as an avenue of distinction for students competing for admission to graduate school. In fact, after GPA, GRE, and letters of recommendation, research experience yielding a journal publication or presentation at a professional meeting is important in such decisions (Keith-Spiegel, 1991; Landrum, Jeglum, & Cashin, 1994; Norcross, Kohout, & Wicherski, 2005). Given the importance of research experience for undergraduate psychology majors, faculty need to make clear the process by which students can gain access to regional psychology conferences.

The literature is clear about the beneficial effects of participation by undergraduate students in conferences (Carsrud, 1980; Tryon, 1985) and their accessing such activities (Murphy & Mosher-Ashley, 1999; Page, Abramson,

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<sup>2</sup>American Psychological Association. (2007) *APA guidelines for the undergraduate psychology major*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from [www.apa.org/ed/resources.html](http://www.apa.org/ed/resources.html).

& Jacobs-Lawson, 2004). There are numerous opportunities in the USA for students to participate in regional conferences, hosted by the New England Psychological Association, Eastern Psychological Association, Southeastern Psychological Association, Midwestern Psychological Association, Southwestern Psychological Association, Rocky Mountain Psychological Association, and the Western Psychological Association. However, there appear to be no published guidelines or evaluative criteria for acceptance or rejection of submissions.

To understand better how students may have beneficial experiences, a study was conducted in the USA of APA Division Two (Society for the Teaching of Psychology) members to judge several issues, namely, whether (1) faculty perceive the conference submission process for undergraduate students to be vague; (2) faculty generally agree on criteria by which submissions are accepted for a conference; and (3) faculty differ on overall objectives of undergraduates' participation, that is, to advance science or to provide a learning experience. The goal of this study was to begin systematic study of faculty attitudes about undergraduates' participation in regional psychology conferences and to understand the evaluative criteria they apply when reviewing students' submissions.

#### METHOD

Five hundred members of Division Two of the American Psychological Association were randomly sampled. Two surveys were returned with incorrect addresses, yielding a sample frame of 498 possible participants. There were 185 participants (response rate = 37.1%) who ranged in age from 29 to 84 years ( $M = 52.2$ ,  $SD = 10.8$ ). From those who reported their sex, 49.7% were women ( $n = 73$ ). The mean years of teaching experience were 22.5 ( $SD = 10.7$ ).

Original survey questions for the present study were developed based on a review of the literature, consultation with content experts, and personal conference experiences. There were 23 statements for which a 5-point Likert-type scale used anchors of 1: Strongly disagree and 5: Strongly agree, six statements for which a 4-point Likert-type scale used anchors of 0: Not at all important and 3: Extremely important, and seven demographic items. Respondents indicated that 72.7% of the 185 respondents had reviewed students' paper submissions for regional conferences and 54.6% had rejected a submission.

The survey was mailed to participants via first-class mail, including a cover letter and a self-addressed business-reply envelope. Participants were asked to complete the survey within one month.

#### RESULTS

Results are divided into four areas of guidelines for submissions, accep-

tance of submissions, rejection of submissions, and the relationship with demographic items. Percent agreement reflects the percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed.

#### *Undergraduate Student Guidelines for Submission*

Faculty members (94.8%) agreed that a conference's evaluation standards should be made available to students prior to the submission deadline, yet 47.9% indicated that regional conferences do not have clear guidelines for these submissions. Regarding conference procedures, 88.1% agreed that students' submissions should first be approved by a sponsoring faculty member, and 79.7% agreed that students and faculty should follow the same submission guidelines. However, only 49.7% of faculty indicated that evaluation criteria for students' oral presentations should differ from their poster presentations.

Faculty respondents (41.6%) agreed that only faculty should review undergraduate students' submissions, 33.2% indicated that graduate students should review undergraduate student submissions, and 14.1% agreed that undergraduates should review other undergraduates' submissions. Concerning the overall purpose of conferences for students, 76.6% of respondents agreed that for students, conferences should serve primarily as a learning experience, and 39.1% agreed that conferences should serve primarily as a place for undergraduates to present scientific findings.

#### *Acceptance of Undergraduate Students' Submissions*

A series of questions were asked about evaluation criteria on which acceptance is based. Respondents agreed (89.4%) that students' submissions should be accepted to conferences based on explicit evaluation standards. Of the respondents, 45.4% agreed that standards for students and faculty for acceptance to regional conferences should be the same, and 10.0% agreed that the evaluation standards should be based on students' year in school, namely, freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior. For acceptance, 61.2% of respondents agreed that a data-based study should be preferred over a literature review, 45.7% agreed that an original study should be accepted over a replication, and 23.7% agreed that students' submissions should be accepted if students followed all directions provided.

#### *Rejection of Undergraduate Students' Submissions*

Regarding rejection of submissions, 96.0% agreed that poor writing in the submission was a suitable reason, 91.8% agreed lateness of a submission was an appropriate reason for rejection, and 87.3% agreed there should be set criteria for rejection. All other reasons for rejection, e.g., short or long submission, nonsignificant results, small sample, number of students as authors, and submission on a topical area already overloaded with submissions, received no more than 22% agreement by faculty.

Specific sections of a typical research paper and their relative importance in the decision to reject a submission were also queried. Faculty responded to these items using anchors of 0: Not at all important, 1: Slightly important, 2: Moderately important, and 3: Extremely important. Important sections of a paper considered were, in order, method ( $M=2.5$ ,  $SD=0.6$ ), results ( $M=2.4$ ,  $SD=0.6$ ), discussion ( $M=2.2$ ,  $SD=0.6$ ), introduction ( $M=2.2$ ,  $SD=0.6$ ), abstract ( $M=1.9$ ,  $SD=0.8$ ), and tables ( $M=1.4$ ,  $SD=0.8$ ). Taken together, reasons for rejection and the relative importance of a paper's subsections should be equally important for students' and faculty's submissions.

#### *Relation of Faculty Characteristics in Conference Decision Process*

To evaluate what influence experience might have on the decision process, survey responses were correlated with response to "How many years have you been teaching?" There was only one significant but small correlation for agreement on the item "The number of student authors is reason to reject a student's submission" with experience ( $r_{159} = .19$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The difference between respondents who had served as reviewers of students' paper submissions and those who had not was examined as well. On the item "Student and faculty standards should be the same for acceptance to regional conferences," reviewers agreed significantly more ( $M=3.2$ ,  $SD=1.3$ ) than nonreviewers ( $M=2.4$ ,  $SD=1.2$ ;  $t_{166} = -3.39$ ,  $p < .005$ ). Also, on the item "Students and faculty should have to follow the same guidelines to submit to a conference," reviewers agreed significantly more ( $M=4.1$ ,  $SD=0.9$ ) than nonreviewers ( $M=3.6$ ,  $SD=1.2$ ;  $t_{165} = -2.47$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

#### DISCUSSION

In this sample, there appears to be an inconsistency between standards to be made available to students for regional conference submissions and those now available. Of respondents, nearly 95% agreed or strongly agreed that a conference's evaluation standards be made available to students prior to the deadline, yet about 48% indicated regional conferences do not follow this recommendation. Without published evaluation criteria, it is not clear how students and faculty sponsors know what is important. More than 75% of respondents agreed that the purpose of conference participation for undergraduates is primarily students' learning, and given the clear finding that conference participation is thought to be good for students (Carsrud, 1980; Tryon, 1985), organizers need to provide explicit submission guidelines and evaluative criteria for students. In the event of a rejection, students would benefit from an explanation of the rejection decision so that the conference submission experience can be, at the very least, a learning experience for the student.

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