

Report of the Committee on Regions for the Year ending June 30, 2008

The Committee on Regions met during the Society's November 2007 Annual Meeting and Student Research Conference in Orlando, Florida. The committee consisted of the six elected Board Directors who each represent a distinct Region by which Sigma Xi chapters are organized. Attending the meeting were Tim Ng (Chair; Mid-Atlantic), Zack Jacobson (Northeast), John Kelley (Northwest), Chris Kreipke (North Central, for Linda Meadows), Bill Klemm (Southwest) and John Knesel (Southeast). Also in attendance were Linda Meadows (Interim Executive Director), Roger Harris (Director, Membership & Chapters), and Kathy McLane (Manager, Chapter Services & Membership).

The meeting took place after the first Regional Caucus at the Annual Meeting, and the main topics of discussion stemmed from issues arising from within the caucuses. A summary of the discussions on major topics are include below:

Recruitment and Retention of Members

New members of Sigma Xi are often initiated while they are students, and many of them do not renew their membership after their first or second year. How can chapters stay in touch with their student members and help retain them as active members after they graduate? Suggestions included:

1. initiating them well before they graduate,
2. encouraging them to attend chapter activities,
3. emphasizing Grants-in-Aid of Research (GIAR) opportunities,
4. offering them mentorship activities,
5. involving them in chapter leadership and officer roles,
6. giving them the opportunity to organize a chapter event, and
7. following up with them several times a year to see how they are doing.

Postdoctoral students are another source of attrition in Sigma Xi, especially since they are at a stage of their career where they have meager resources and many demands upon them. Should postdocs have a membership dues rate equal to the student rate? What other ways can Sigma Xi demonstrate specific values of membership for our postdoctoral members? Sigma Xi could offer opportunities for career development to the postdocs, including career development programs, career training in areas such as grants writing and laboratory management, and sponsoring postdoc poster, employment, and networking sessions at the annual meeting. Sigma Xi could also host postdoc focus groups on a regular basis, and have electronic webspace for postdocs to post questions to which well-published and well-funded members could respond. In addition, Sigma Xi could fund postdoc fellows for residence at Sigma Xi or in agencies like the National Science Board, and could partner with federal agencies and the private sector to operate postdoctoral fellowship programs. It would be advantageous if Sigma Xi would find some way to partner with the National Postdoctoral Association.

The committee then moved on to the issue of retaining regular members. It was generally agreed that the best way to get lapsed members to renew is to contact them during the first year that they haven't renew. Often, members forget or postpone renewal due to financial limitations, and contact from a chapter officer during this period might encourage them to renew and be perceived as being helpful rather than being a nuisance. Other times, members may need a reason or motivation in addition to the American Scientist subscription to renew. In these cases, it might be helpful to emphasize the achievements of the Society, pointing out one or two notable things that may have occurred recently; Sigma Xi headquarters can be a useful source of scripts for this. While phone calls by other members or by Sigma Xi staff might be useful in encouraging lapsed members to renew, other avenues such as email or personal contact might be of equal or greater value. It may also helpful to make a really big deal and great ceremony about initiation into Sigma Xi, emphasizing the honor as well as continuing commitment to the Society's mission.

Sigma Xi's Identity and Role in Society

What should Sigma Xi's role be in society at large? Should it be known for some specific activity or program? It was generally felt that Sigma Xi should:

1. speak for individual scientists and engineers,
2. be an advocate for science, without lobbying,
3. be known for science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education,
4. be known as an advocate for postdocs,
5. have a role in science policy,
6. help with the public understanding of science, and
7. speak out for research funding and research policies that are less bureaucratic for scientists. Sigma Xi should also have a high profile project every year.

In addition, Sigma Xi should work to increase the awareness of and contribution to our Society by the general public. This includes sponsoring science cafes and science debates, and hosting regular meetings that may include science competitions and/or controversial issues in science. Chapters and members should also find ways to get middle school and high school teachers and students more involved in the affiliates program.

It was brought up that maybe some of Sigma Xi's identity problems might stem from its name, as some people

might mistake it for a "Greek fraternity." Do we need our "brand" to say more than just Sigma Xi? Perhaps the phrase "Scientific Research Society" should be more prominent and visible. Maybe we should stop using the name "Sigma Xi" and perhaps stop using the "key" as our logo.

It was also discussed that perhaps Sigma Xi is too "Americentric," even to the name of its magazine (i.e., *American Scientist*). While there wasn't much sentiment about changing the name of the magazine, it was felt that Sigma Xi needs to build up its international membership, and that there is enormous potential in the international sector.

Chapters and the Annual Meeting

Sigma Xi is unique among scientific societies in that it is chapter based. Originally just at academic institutions, chapters now represent a broad range of constituencies, including national laboratories, industry, and geographic regions. Is the chapter model still a good one for Sigma Xi?

The strength among the various chapters is very uneven. Some have officers who don't rotate, some don't have officers, some never have an activity other than a banquet, some never bring in new members, most never follow up with associate members regarding promotion to full member, some chapters don't do annual reports, some chapters are not in good standing, some chapters add a local surcharge to dues that makes members think membership is way too high, approval for membership is not a consistently applied standard across chapters, and many chapters don't communicate with their members, and many members don't even know their chapter exists. The "membership at large" category is growing so maybe chapters aren't as popular as they once were.

On the other hand, it is true that chapters give Sigma Xi a presence and visibility across the world, and this is essential. Most chapters bring in new members each year, and are very good about inducting students. Sigma Xi headquarters needs more people to support the chapters. With this support, the chapters could get stronger with activities like increasing recruitment and retention of members, having good local leadership, sponsoring significant activities, etc.

With regard to the Annual Meeting, it was recognized that about a third of the chapters are represented at each annual meeting. Should Sigma Xi hold an "annual" meeting every 2-3 years and try to bring more chapters together at the same time? The committee thought that people like to network, so every year would be preferable, especially if the annual meeting could be made more appealing so that participation increases. Some committee members thought only a third of the chapters would attend any given meeting anyway, regardless if it were held annually or every 2-3 years. There was some concern in the regions about the Annual Meeting generally being held in big cities or resort areas, and tending to be expensive for delegates.

With regard to elections, the current practice is that only chapter delegates attending the annual meeting can vote on Society business. Perhaps all members, or at least all chapters, can participate in voting if an electronic means of voting can be established. There were mixed feelings about this, since voting on regional and constituency issues usually take place only after considerable discussion in the caucuses. However, there seemed to be a greater sentiment towards have all members (or all chapters) voting electronically on major issues like the elections for President and Treasurer.

If the annual meeting takes place only every 2-3 years, regional meetings would be a great idea for the "off" years. However, they may be hard to organize and facilitate, particularly in certain regions where there is not a cluster of active chapters.

Society Finances

There was concern expressed in the Regional caucuses about the financial state of the Society, particularly with regard to declining membership and the costs of the Sigma Xi Center. Delegates didn't want to see increased dues, but were concerned that this would happen.