

# Report of the ASA Task Force on Membership

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## Executive Summary

In 2007 the American Sociological Association (ASA) had 14,757 members, the third highest membership year in the association's history. That auspicious year was followed by a decline in membership that continued largely unabated through the end of 2017, when the association had 11,544 members. In response to this 22% decline in membership, ASA Council established a task force to research the many possible internal and external reasons for the ASA's decline in membership and identify potential ways to mitigate those problems. The members of the task force were seated in August of 2017.<sup>1</sup> Over the past 24 months the task force has undertaken several empirical projects, including a multi-part external benchmarking study, a study of 11 years of administrative membership data that included over 45,000 cases, 5 small focus groups that informed the construction of a large-scale traditional survey which received over 2,500 responses, a wiki survey that received more than 40,000 votes, and 12 qualitative follow-up interviews.

The task force used an inductive, iterative approach to categorize and group the findings and develop an organizational framework that reflected the essential themes in the findings. The results suggested three key areas in which the association could productively improve its work. These categories are not mutually exclusive, but they do represent a way to articulate some of the most salient findings from the task force. The three key areas are: community, cost, and value. Each area is briefly summarized below, along with the associated task force recommendations.

Community. For many respondents, the ASA, and especially its sections, were places where they felt welcomed, where they could learn and grow, and where they had a sense of belonging. For many other respondents, however, there was little or no sense of belonging or connection associated with ASA as an organization—in other words, they felt a marked lack of community.

Recommendation #1. Formally establish two new types of organizational communities: professional communities and identity-based communities.

Recommendation #2. Provide tools and organizational structures for sections, communities, and their individual members to communicate with each other, volunteer, and become engaged with the association throughout the year.

Recommendation #3. Rethink the Annual Meeting and develop a variety of initiatives, both large and small, to create a more welcoming and beneficial experience for attendees. Once the new communities are established, appoint an Annual Meeting Redesign Committee to assess current practices, including how time and space is distributed across committees, sections, and communities and propose innovation as appropriate. As a short-term pilot test of a small initiative, in 2020 remove affiliation from Annual Meeting badges.

Cost. Issues related to cost echoed across the task force's data projects. Sixty-eight percent of survey respondents who were not members of ASA in 2018 listed cost as a barrier. An equal proportion of

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<sup>1</sup> The task force wishes to express its appreciation to Florencia Torche and Merilys Huhn, Stanford University, for their contributions to the analysis of administrative data. They also wish to thank Steve Ressler, CEO of Callyo, for his thoughtful comments on the early work of the task force. Deep appreciation and thanks are extended to the thousands of sociologists who participated in the task force's focus groups, pre-test, survey, and wiki survey, as well as to the hundreds of sociologists who volunteered for follow up interviews.

respondents did not have access to institutional funds to cover the cost of membership. Forty-four percent did not have access to institutional or grant funds to cover the cost of attending the Annual Meeting.

Recommendation #4. Undertake a comprehensive review of our membership dues and meeting registration fee structures to explore whether there are ways to redistribute revenue sources in the interest of increasing affordability for members who need it. For 2020, provide two temporary cost-relief initiatives: a) offer part-time contingent faculty a reduced membership fee (equivalent to other reduced fee categories including international associates and high school teachers) and a 25% promotional discount on 2020 Annual Meeting registration; b) offer one free section membership to all new members and former members who are returning after a lapse of five or more years.

Recommendation #5. Move to an anniversary-based membership year rather than a calendar-based membership year. This would ensure that all members would receive 12 months of benefits, irrespective of join date.

Recommendation #6. Increase the variety of cities where the Annual Meeting is held, considering a number of factors. Include factors that are directly salient to member decision making, such as the cost of the hotel rooms, transportation to and around the city, affordability of the attractions and outlets within the city, and the general appeal of the location to members, as well as factors that impact the financial success of the meeting but are less visible to members, such as the cost of conference facilities, catering, and audio visual support.

Value. While the cost of membership in ASA or attending the Annual Meeting is simply prohibitive for some, for others there is a calculation regarding whether benefits conferred are worth the investment. About half of the respondents to the task force's survey said that the cost of membership exceeded its value. Respondents indicated that value accrued through both direct and indirect channels. Direct value is conferred through professional development opportunities and participation at the Annual Meeting, for example. Indirect value is conferred through broader efforts to strengthen the discipline, such as outreach to the media and policymakers.

Recommendation #7. Increase professional development opportunities at the Annual Meeting and throughout the year.

Recommendation #8. Continue to expand public engagement efforts, including media outreach and outreach to policymakers.

Recommendation #9. Refine the Annual Meeting submission and review process to be more responsive to the needs and preferences of sociologists. Starting in 2020, push back the Annual Meeting submission deadline to the end of January. Explore the possibilities of moving to abstract-only submissions and/or using an anonymous review system.

Recommendation #10. Enhance and increase communications from ASA to members and provide opportunities for ASA members to provide ongoing feedback to ASA.

The results of the task force's work provide a clear picture of the factors behind ASA's membership decline. Although demographic trends mean that ASA may not return to its former peak membership numbers, the recommendations included in this report set the stage for lasting, structural change that will contribute to making ASA a more inclusive, affordable, and responsive organization. While some of the recommendations can be quickly implemented, others will take months or years to come to fruition. The report is intended to help ASA set priorities, focus energy and resources, strengthen operations, and help assure that all parts of the

association are working toward common goals. It also sets the stage for ongoing data collection and the establishment of benchmarks to help Council monitor and evaluate the success of the recommended initiatives and adjust as needed. In this sense, the report can function as a sociologically informed strategic plan for the association's efforts to improve the membership experience.

# Report of the ASA Task Force on Membership

## Introduction

In 2007, the American Sociological Association (ASA) had 14,757 members, the third highest membership year in the association's history. After that auspicious year, membership declined largely unabated through the end of 2017, when the association had 11,544 members. In response to this 22% decline in membership, ASA Council established a task force to research the many possible internal and external reasons for the ASA's decline in membership and identify potential ways to mitigate those problems. The members of the task force were seated in August of 2017.<sup>2</sup> Over the past 24 months the task force has undertaken several empirical projects, including a multi-part external benchmarking study, a study of 11 years of administrative membership data that included over 45,000 cases, 5 small focus groups that informed the construction of a large-scale traditional survey which received over 2,500 responses, a wiki survey that received more than 40,000 votes, and 12 qualitative follow-up interviews.

The results of the task force's work provide a clear picture of the factors behind ASA's membership decline. Although demographic trends mean that ASA may not return to its former peak membership numbers, the recommendations included in this report set the stage for lasting, structural change that will contribute to making ASA a more inclusive, affordable, and responsive organization. While some of the recommendations can be quickly implemented, others will take months or years to come to fruition. The challenges that ASA and its members face will not be responsive to superficial measures; they require a long-term commitment to fulfilling the ASA's mission now and into the future to serve sociologists in their work, advance sociology as a science and profession, and promote the contributions and use of sociology to society. The report is intended to help ASA set priorities, focus energy and resources, strengthen operations, and help assure that all parts of the association are working toward common goals. It also sets the stage for ongoing data collection and the establishment of benchmarks to help Council monitor and evaluate the success of the recommended initiatives and adjust as needed. In this sense, the report can function as a sociologically informed strategic plan for the association's efforts to improve the membership experience.

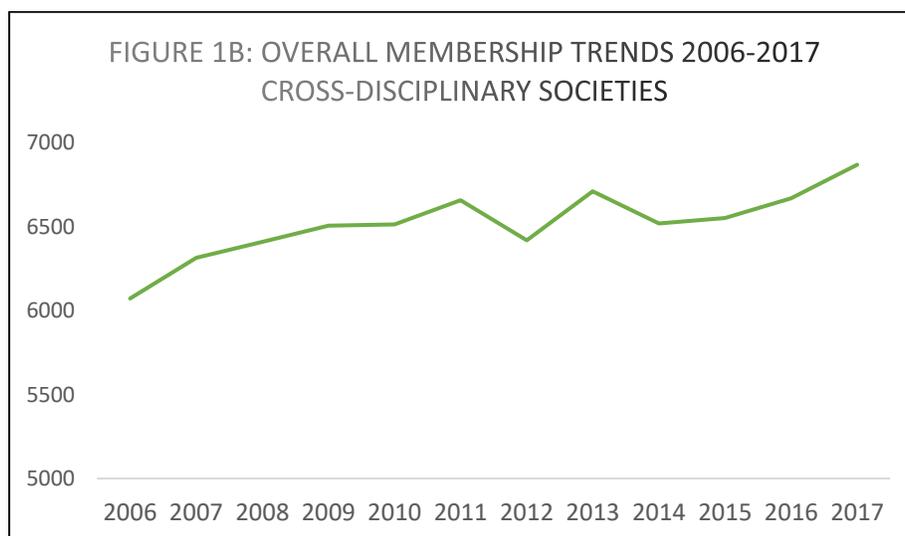
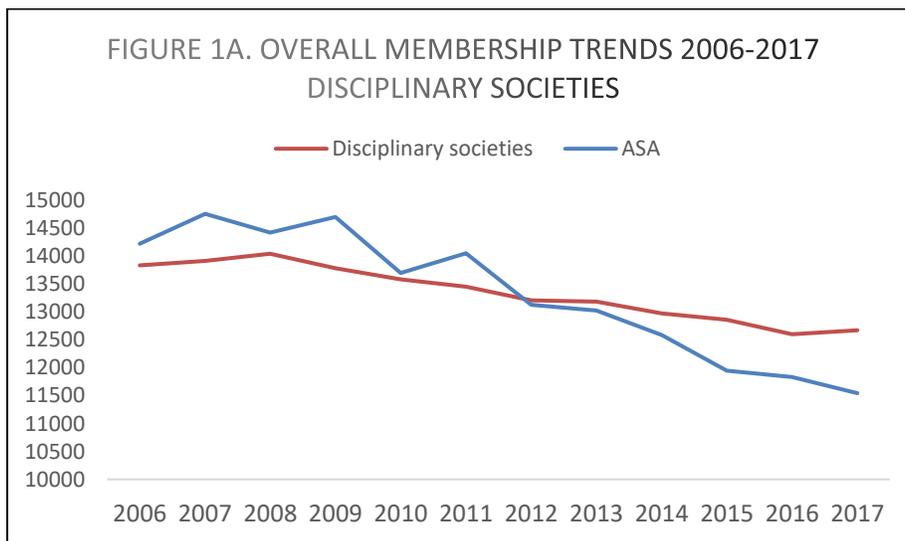
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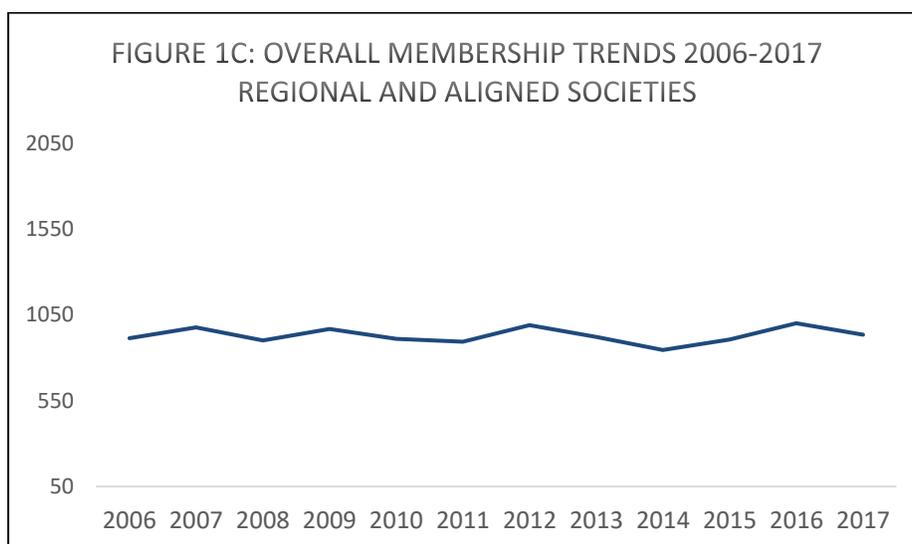
## Seeing the Larger Context

To understand whether ASA membership changes are unique or whether they reflect a common pattern of membership decline in other associations, ASA staff invited 34 scholarly associations to share data on membership for the years 2006 through 2017. We received responses from 22 associations: 11 disciplinary societies; 5 sociology-specific regional and aligned societies; and 6 cross-disciplinary societies with a topical focus that is of interest to sociologists.<sup>3</sup>

These comparative data show several patterns. First, on average, the disciplinary societies included in the analysis saw membership declines between 2006 and 2017. However, as shown in Figure 1a, since 2012 ASA's decline has been steeper. Unlike disciplinary societies, cross-disciplinary societies have experienced solid growth (Figure 1b), and membership in regional and aligned societies has largely held steady across the period (Figure 1c).



<sup>3</sup> Participating associations that agreed to be acknowledged by name in this report were: the American Political Science Association, the American Anthropological Association, the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, the Population Association of American, the Society for Research in Child Development, the Midwest Sociological Society, the North Central Sociological Association, and the Southern Sociological Society.



Trends in student membership across this period showed similar patterns. Namely, disciplinary associations on average experienced marked declines in student membership across the 12 years examined and cross-disciplinary associations saw a pattern of increasing student membership. In one change from the previous pattern, regional and aligned associations showed a 2% increase, on average, in student members across the 12 years.

### ASA Data Informing the Recommendations

The task force used three approaches to gain insights on the experiences and views of sociologists regarding the ASA. First, the task force analyzed administrative data for anyone who had been a member for at least one year between 2006 and 2016. With these data, the task force could explore patterns of membership duration and factors that put individuals at risk of dropping ASA membership once they joined. In addition, in January 2019, the task force fielded a traditional survey sent to 12,146 current and former ASA members. This survey included both closed- and open-ended questions. The response rate for the survey was 21 percent. Follow-up interviews were conducted with some of the survey participants as well. Finally, simultaneous with the launch of the traditional survey, the task force also launched an All Our Ideas Wiki Survey. This unique open access data collection mechanism was developed by Princeton sociologist Matthew Salganik. The task force’s wiki survey presented respondents with a series of choices between two ideas and asked, “Which do you think is better for making a more vibrant, effective American Sociological Association?” Respondents could also suggest their own ideas to add to the mix of choices. The wiki survey received almost 44,000 votes. The compiled results of all the votes provided a rank-ordered list of suggestions for ways ASA could improve.

More information on each of these data sources can be found in the appendix to this report.

### An Organizing Framework: Community, Cost, Value

The full scope of the task force’s empirical work spanned more than two years. To bring the results of all the analyses together, in early 2019 the task force returned to each set of results, considered their implications taken in aggregate, and thought through the range of possible actions the association could take in response. Using an inductive, iterative approach, the group worked to categorize and group the findings to create an organizational framework that reflects the essential themes. The results suggested three key areas in which the association could productively improve its work: community, cost, and value.

These categories are not mutually exclusive, but they do represent a way to articulate some of the most salient findings from the task force. The remainder of this report presents each area in turn, along with supporting data and corresponding recommendations.

## Community

Patricia Hill Collins noted in her 2010 Presidential Address that social groups routinely use community as a site of affirmation, identification, and political expression.<sup>4</sup> She also noted that the idea of community can provide a new way of understanding and working to overcome inequalities. For many current and former members who responded to the traditional survey, the ASA, and especially the sections, were places where they had a sense of belonging, where they connected with colleagues with whom they identified, felt welcomed, and could learn and grow. In short, they felt they had a supportive and meaningful community at ASA.

Respondents to the task force's survey were asked to pick their top 5 intangible benefits of membership from among a list of 10 possible responses. Three of the 4 options related to community were among those most frequently selected by respondents, including: "Supporting my professional identity" (51%), "Gaining access to professional networks" (46%), and "Connecting with like-minded colleagues" (40%). The fourth community-related option, "feeling supported in my work as a sociologist," was selected by 21% of respondents.

Open-ended comments reflecting this experience included:

*I liked being an ASA member because I was able to connect with many different people both in person at the conferences and through the journals.*

*[I value] interacting with sociologists who view sociology through an applied lens and who focus on interaction/networking/community building.*

*My section is extremely inclusive, supportive, with rigorous research that matches my identity as a scholar and is the highlight of the meetings for me.*

For many other respondents, however, there was little or no sense of belonging or connection associated with ASA as an organization—in other words, they felt a marked lack of community. More than half of the survey respondents (55%) were either neutral or disagreed with the statement "ASA is a welcoming organization." That single item was part of a series of questions regarding how welcoming ASA is to a variety of specific groups. Those items were combined into an 11-item index measuring perceptions of ASA's climate. Lower climate scores were associated with dissatisfaction with membership, decreased likelihood of recommending ASA to a colleague or student, and less interest in being involved with ASA.

Among respondents who were not members of ASA in 2018, 32% listed among their reasons for not joining "People like me don't seem to be valued at ASA." Open-ended comments reflected this sense of being devalued, disconnected, and outside the networks:

*I feel the ASA is an elitist organization... The same people and their mentees hold leadership positions and give all the presentations. I feel that ASA does not welcome those who are not in elite positions or aspiring for those positions.*

*The sections I would like to be involved with are fairly closed networks.*

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<sup>4</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. 2010. "The New Politics of Community." *American Sociological Review* 75(1):7-30.

According to the Survey of Earned Doctorates, 22% of recent PhDs in sociology were employed in practice settings in 2017. The Survey of Doctoral Recipients indicates that 25% of PhD sociologists at any career level work in practice settings. Yet only 10% of ASA members for whom we have employment data reported being employed in practice settings. One respondent who was employed in a practice setting spoke directly about feeling devalued and failing to find opportunities to connect with professional peers through ASA.

*I came to ASA to remain connected to the discipline after switching from an academic career track to an applied one. I realized how little our discipline values people like me, from direct treatment to lack of opportunities to connect with and learn from other applied sociologists.*

The task force's analysis of ASA administrative data revealed that being a member of a section reduced the likelihood of discontinuing ASA membership by 60%. Sections may help build a sense of community in a variety of ways: by providing a smaller, more manageable professional reference group; by offering more accessible opportunities for leadership and involvement—at least for some members of the section; and by creating a channel for on-going communication and connection outside of the Annual Meeting through listservs and newsletters. One survey respondent explained:

*I have found most of my opportunities through the sections including... leadership opportunities, presentations, and networking.*

Among section members, 54% of respondents selected “connecting with like-minded colleagues” as one of the top five intangible benefits of section membership. In contrast, when asked about the benefits of ASA membership, just 40% selected “connecting with like-minded colleagues.” The value of specific section activities, such as mentorship, was also noted in open ended comments.

*I value the active role senior scholars in my section take in mentoring.*

*The mentor dinner [hosted by my section] is most important, generates support for upcoming faculty and grad students. A network building event that fosters a high level of involvement and satisfaction.*

While 71% of respondents reported being a member of at least one section, the remaining 29% had not been a member of any section during their most recent year of membership. This suggests that sections, while a powerful source of community and connection for some, are not being used as a resource by all members.

Compared to White members, African American/Black and Latino members were significantly more likely to drop their ASA memberships. Similarly, respondents from under-represented minority groups overall rated the climate of ASA as significantly less welcoming than White respondents.

*I don't see ASA as the source for intellectual community, support, or mentoring. I see membership as a professional obligation. When I can afford it, I join and attend meetings. (African American/Black respondent)*

*ASA is more friendly to White men and this is apparent in social settings. Instances of everyday discrimination and male domination are abundant. (Latino respondent)*

Data specifically about the Annual Meeting revealed that for some people, the Annual Meeting provided a space for creating and reconnecting with their community. Thanks to the discount on registration provided to ASA members, it was unsurprising that attending the Annual Meeting increased the chances that an individual would become a member that year. What was surprising, however, was that attending the meeting in any one year increased the chances that someone would be a member of ASA for up to four years afterward.

In survey data, the second most frequently selected reason for attending the Annual Meeting was “reconnecting with old friends and/or making new ones.” But finding one’s way at the Annual Meeting can be difficult and many respondents ended up feeling “lonely in the crowd”. This experience was reported by between 20-25% of students, sociologists in practice settings, tenure-track assistant professors, and non-tenure track faculty, compared to 10% of tenure track full professors and 16% of associate professors. When considering institution type, faculty in BA-granting institutions were the mostly likely to report feeling lonely in the crowd (28%), followed by those in AA-granting institutions (27%). One survey respondent commented:

*It took years to get the hang of the conferences. They are not welcoming to new, young, minority or first-generation folks – they are overwhelming and if you don’t have a professor to introduce you to people it is hard to make connections especially since a lot of more experienced people are really siloed in their world.*

A focus group respondent who recently finished graduate school and started a new job made a similar observation.

The ASA [Annual Meeting] is the big scary conference. It’s the intimidating one. All the big players are there... I’m at a teaching institution [so I don’t go].

The overriding question is how can ASA help more people find community within the organization? One of the positive findings in the survey data was that more than one-third of respondents (36%) said that they would like to be more involved with the association; this clearly represents a wealth of untapped interest. However, only 24% of respondents felt that they could be successful in pursuing a leadership position. Having a sense of community is closely tied to being able to contribute meaningfully to that community. One respondent captured the heart of the issue, and pointed to potential solutions in this open-ended comment:

*I strongly encourage the task force to develop and propose meaningful ways for more members to participate in the organization. This will 1) strengthen the discipline by making use of its enormous pool of creative talent, 2) reduce member alienation or apathy, 3) ensure that the organization actually represents the discipline.*

While the survey was primarily used to collect respondents’ evaluation of ASA as it is, or has been in the past, the goal of the wiki survey was to collect ideas for improving ASA in the future. It turned out that the views of the respondent above reflected a widely held view. The #1 ranked idea for making “a more vibrant and effective ASA” was “create an ASA that makes faculty from every type of institutions from across the country feel welcomed and valued.” Other ideas similarly highlighted the need for a more inclusive ASA, including “ensure that editorial teams at ASA journals reflect the diversity of our membership and the scholarship we produce,” “create programs and events to build bridges with sociologists and other social scientists/institutions in countries around the world,” and “create solid partnerships with sociologists at a community college level.”

#### Recommendations related to community

##### **Recommendation #1. Formally establish two new types of organizational communities: professional communities and identity-based communities.**

We currently have a very successful structure for research-focused intellectual communities, which we call sections. What we need to establish are formal communities for people in shared professional contexts and in shared identity groups that can also provide opportunities for engagement, leadership, connection,

networking, and professional development. While a few sector- and identity-based groups exist, they are organized and managed in disparate ways, which has not proven to be a model for growth and development.

These new types of communities could include a process for establishing elected leadership and resources such as Annual Meeting space and designated listservs. Professional communities might include, for example, high school teachers, community college faculty, contingent faculty, sociologists working in practice settings, students, and retired sociologists. Identity-based communities might include, for example, Indigenous Peoples/Native Nations, sociologists with disabilities, African American/Black, Latinx, Asian, first generation, and LGBTQ sociologists.

ASA represents an intellectually broad discipline and serves constituencies that include faculty members employed in the full range of institution types, sociologists in practice settings, and high school teachers. Moreover, the ASA membership includes members from many different backgrounds. This diversity is a source of creativity and strength for the discipline. However, at the individual level it can lead to experiences of isolation and a sense of not belonging. The new communities could provide organized, structured contexts for sociologists with similar experiences and backgrounds to connect with and support each other. They would provide a mechanism for more people to create meaningful professional and personal connections at the Annual Meeting. They could also provide mentoring opportunities that would connect early career members with established sociologists with similar backgrounds who could speak to their experiences and the unique challenges they face.

If Council approves Recommendation #1, a detailed policy proposal addressing questions regarding the relationship between sections and communities, the types of resources to be offered, the criteria for formation, and related issues will be presented for Council vote in March 2020.

***Recommendation #2. Provide tools and organizational structures for sections, communities, and their individual members to communicate with each other, volunteer, and become engaged with the association throughout the year.***

Finding ways for more ASA members to connect with each other and engage throughout the year may serve to expand members' sense of the importance of belonging to ASA. Moreover, benchmarking studies of association trends have shown that membership engagement is positively correlated with membership retention.<sup>5</sup> Many sections are currently involved in effective strategies for creating connection among members. Building on that success and sharing best practices with other sections, and with the new communities described in Recommendation #1, could help those practices become more widely diffused and more likely to be available to the full range of ASA members. Best practices could be shared in meetings of section and community leaders at the Annual Meeting and in expanded online resources for section and community leaders that detail effective strategies and practices. In addition, ASA could develop new volunteer groups with specific charges, such as calling new members to welcome them.

***Recommendation #3. Rethink the Annual Meeting and develop a variety of initiatives, both large and small, to create a more welcoming and beneficial experience for attendees. Once the new communities are established, appoint an Annual Meeting Redesign Committee to realistically assess current practices, including how time and space is distributed across committees, sections, and communities and propose***

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<sup>5</sup> Rossell, Tony, Adina Wasserman, Matt Kerr. 2018. Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report. Marketing General Incorporated. <http://www.marketinggeneral.com/knowledge-bank/reports/>

**innovations as appropriate. As a short-term pilot test of a small initiative, in 2020 remove affiliation from Annual Meeting badges.**

If Council approves the new communities, these new groups should be encouraged and empowered to create Annual Meeting events that will provide a broad range of opportunities for attendees to connect and be welcomed. These might include mentoring sessions, workshops, discussant-led roundtables, happy hours and organized dinner groups at local restaurants.

The Annual Meeting Program Redesign Committee can explore other possibilities which might include: making first names very large on badges, adding expert discussants to roundtables, introducing new presentation formats, having informal gatherings around shared topical interests (possibly organized by graduate students), and establishing a meeting-mentor matching program to help interested first-time attendees connect with someone who has more experience with the meetings.

## Cost

The second set of recommendations are related to cost. Findings across the task force's empirical analyses suggest that cost has played a critical role in ASA's membership decline. Among survey respondents who were not members in 2018, 68% listed cost among their top 5 reasons for not renewing. For some sociologists, this may be related to the cost of membership in real dollars, but the evidence suggests that for many, it may be more closely related to changes in the professional development expenses employers will cover.

Between 2007 and 2017, inflation adjusted faculty salaries in sociology essentially remained flat. Meanwhile, state funding for higher education declined sharply after 2008, and remains well below the levels found in the pre-2008 recession period, leaving many sociologists without institutional support for membership and meeting travel. Among all survey respondents, only 31% had access to institutional or grant funds to cover the cost of membership. When asked how their access to funding to cover membership has changed over the past five years, 22% said that it had decreased. Access to funding to defray the costs of attending the Annual Meeting was also limited or non-existent for many survey respondents. Forty-four percent did not have access to institutional or grant funds to cover the cost of attending the Annual Meeting. It is noteworthy that this is not just a problem for sociologists working in higher education. Among those employed in practice settings, 68% of respondents had no access to funding to attend the Annual Meeting.

As discussed above, the decline in membership for the 12 discipline-specific societies for which we had data began in 2008. This coincided with the beginning of the Great Recession and the sharp declines in state funding for higher education. In 2012, however, ASA's decline became steeper than the decline seen for the other 11 societies; in this same year, a revised dues structure began to take effect. While the new dues structure was more progressive than the one it replaced and was passed by a wide margin in a member vote, there were vocal and prominent critics at the time. Still, based on exponential hazard rate analysis of membership discontinuation, a year-over-year increase in dues actually reduced the chances of dropping membership slightly among regular members. Among associate members and students, it had no statistically significant effect. These relationships aggregate a pricing effect where increases in dues depress membership with an income effect where higher income groups exhibit less price sensitivity. Overall, the higher dues do not appear to explain declining membership. In other words, based on ASA's administrative data, it appears that non-financial elements of the restructuring and the process leading to it may have been associated with the increasing rate of decline in membership, rather than purely the changes in the cost of joining the association per se.

The critical role of cost in membership decisions was apparent in the open-ended survey responses.

*Decision to not renew was financial – with no increases in salary at institution and policy to not cover dues, I couldn't afford to keep up the membership.*

*Honestly, the combined cost of membership, annual conference meeting, and registration is tough for a person who has to support a whole family.*

*Being a member of ASA is expensive... it is an extremely stressful and costly association for those of us who are low-income, who are grad students, who might be racial and/or sexual minorities, and who may come from a low income or working-class background. I also can rarely afford to attend the meetings as they usually take place in expensive cities.*

Among the top 15 ideas in the wiki survey results, five related directly to the cost of membership and the Annual Meeting. Ideas for addressing the cost of membership included: “One free section membership per member” (ranked 10<sup>th</sup>). Ideas for addressing the cost of the Annual Meeting included: “offer scaled registration fees according to income” (ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>), “Offer reduced Annual Meeting registration fees for adjunct faculty” (ranked 6<sup>th</sup>), “further discount on lodging at the Annual Meeting for graduate students and low-income members” (ranked 7<sup>th</sup>), and “Hold the Annual Meeting in more affordable cities” (ranked 11<sup>th</sup>).

The wiki survey idea related to reducing Annual Meeting costs for adjunct faculty indirectly speaks to the role that the rise of the contingent workforce may be playing on ASA's declining membership. In colleges and universities nationwide, the proportion of faculty in non-tenure track positions has reached 61% in four-year institutions and 84% at two-year institutions.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to gauge the impact of these changes within specific disciplines due to highly variable definitions of contingent faculty status, combined with national survey instruments that do not include an item asking about discipline.

Open-ended comments from respondents with contingent employment emphasize the role cost played in their membership and Annual Meeting decisions. For example:

*I appreciated the access to the Job Bank and journal but am unable to participate further (such as attending the annual conference) since it's too expensive for me given my tenuous employment status.*

#### Recommendations related to cost

**Recommendation #4. Undertake a comprehensive review of our membership dues and meeting registration fee structures to explore whether there are ways to redistribute revenue sources in the interest of increasing affordability for members who need it. For 2020, provide two temporary cost-relief initiatives: a) offer part-time contingent faculty a reduced membership fee (equivalent to other reduced fee categories including international associates and high school teachers) and a 25% promotional discount on 2020 Annual Meeting registration; b) offer one free section membership to all new members and former members who are returning after a lapse of five or more years.**

The full financial analysis that must underlie any proposal for restructuring membership dues and registration fees was beyond the charge of this task force. The task force therefore recommends that this comprehensive review be undertaken as a subsequent step and consideration of a broad range of issues be included, such as: in addition to income, what are the factors affecting affordability and can they be incorporated into the model? Does it make sense to continue using a combined progressive scale (income-based or otherwise) in conjunction with categories for membership? What are the implications of shifting to a progressive scale for Annual Meeting registration? Would it be beneficial to swap our discount benefit such that meeting attendees

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/asa\\_tf\\_on\\_contingent\\_faculty\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/asa_tf_on_contingent_faculty_final_report.pdf)

get a discount on membership rather than members getting a discount on meeting registration? Given the finding that sections are associated with membership retention, and that 30% of members belong to no sections, could we redistribute dues/registration income in such a way that we could afford to offer a free section with ASA membership? Would it be beneficial to create an optional mechanism for joining the association through a departmental purchase?

**Recommendation #5. Move to an anniversary-based membership year rather than a calendar-based membership year. This would ensure that all members would receive 12 months of benefits, irrespective of join date.**

Over the past three years, more than 20% of ASA's members have joined after March 30<sup>th</sup>, meaning they received nine months or less of value for the price of their membership. In 2018, approximately 1,500 sociologists, or 14% of the membership, joined the ASA on June 1<sup>st</sup> or later, thus receiving six months or less of benefit for their membership dollars. For these members, the effective cost of membership will be reduced by changing to an anniversary-based membership year; they will receive a full 12 months of benefit for their dollars regardless of their join date.

If this recommendation is accepted by Council, it will require a change to the association bylaws that currently stipulate a January 1 start date for membership. Proposed changes to the bylaws must be included on a ballot and approved by a majority of the membership before they can take effect.

**Recommendation #6. Increase the variety of cities where the Annual Meeting is held, considering a number of factors. Include factors that are directly salient to member decision making, such as the cost of the hotel rooms, transportation to and around the city, affordability of the attractions and outlets within the city, and the general appeal of the location to members, as well as factors that impact the financial success of the meeting but are less visible to members, such as the cost of conference facilities, catering, and audio visual support.**

Making the Annual Meeting more affordable for members who do not have access to institutional or grant funding will be important moving forward. Broadening the range of cities considered will allow us to explore more affordable options, which we anticipate would lead to an increasing range of sociologists who attend at least periodically. Given the finding that attending the Annual Meeting reduces the risk of dropping ASA membership for up to four years, this could lead to increasing membership overall.

## Value

The third set of recommendations is about value. For the purposes of this report, value refers to the importance, worth, or usefulness of membership in the ASA. When asked, "Relative to what you paid in membership dues, how would you rate the value you received from your ASA membership?" 50% of the survey respondents said that the value was less than the cost of membership. For the task force, understanding how to increase the value of membership for the full range of sociologists was critical, and the analyses suggested a variety of feasible options.

Providing a professionally rich Annual Meeting emerged as a key source of value for sociologists. The single most frequently selected reason for attending the Annual Meeting was "learning about the newest research in my specific area of interest" (53% of respondents). "Getting feedback and new ideas for my research projects" was the third most frequently mentioned motivator (44%). Open-ended comments provide additional insight on the Annual Meeting as a source of value:

*The 2018 conference was fantastic, I learned so much, and have successfully used teaching strategies gained from the teaching sessions.*

*[Attending] the Annual Meeting... was the only chance I had to collaborate with folks who had the same research interests. Attending ASA was more developmental for my thesis than my entire committee!*

But 57% of the respondents to the survey had not attended an Annual Meeting in the last three years. The two largest non-cost related barriers to attending the Annual Meeting were the requirement to submit a full paper (41%) and the early January submission date (36%).

*...I don't submit papers to ASA because of the requirement that it would be a FULL paper that is done by early January. That is not feasible – if I have a paper that is fully ready I'll submit it to a journal not a conference. Also, January is such an early deadline compared to how late in the year the conference is – why would I have a full paper ready 7-8 months before a conference?*

Findings from the wiki survey echo this point. The #5 ranked suggestion on the wiki survey was “Only require an extended abstract for Annual Meeting submissions.” The 21<sup>st</sup> ranked suggestion was “Use blind review for Annual Meeting submissions—it’s more democratic and avoids insider games,” and the 24<sup>th</sup> ranked suggestion was “Move the paper deadline back 1-2 weeks, to mid-January.”

Individual professional development both at the Annual Meeting, and beyond it, emerged as a desired member benefit in the task force’s data. More than 60% of respondents thought that ASA should expand its efforts to provide professional development opportunities outside of the Annual Meeting. When asked to select the top five intangible benefits of membership they currently received and valued, just 25% of respondents selected “gaining access to professional development opportunities.” The gap between the two may reflect an untapped need and a way to provide members greater value.

The wiki survey results also spoke to the importance of professional development, with 6 out of the top 30 ideas focusing on this topic. “Develop pipelines for sociology PhDs to have good careers outside of academia” was the #8 ranked idea. “Provide more resources for non-academic sociologists generally and on non-academic careers” was #20. Increasing professional development opportunities targeted to sociologists in practice settings and students aspiring for similar positions could improve the cost/value equation for this group. Four additional ideas related to professional development included: “Provide online opportunities for members to learn cutting-edge research methods,” “Launch more career resources and job opportunities,” “Offer more resources to support adjuncts,” and “Provide more opportunities for feedback on research.”

Expanding public engagement was another approach to increasing value that emerged in the wiki survey. Five of the top-30 ideas were related to this topic. They included: “take steps to increase the influence of sociological research in the policy realm,” “focus on increasing the public’s view of the value of a sociology bachelor’s degree,” “collaborate with other associations to create events for journalists to learn about social science research and policy-relevant findings,” “better match making between policy makers and non-profits that need help and sociologists with skills to offer,” and “create programs to build bridges between sociologists and non-profit organizations in their communities.”

ASA Council approved a policy for taking public positions under two circumstances: when there is clear and compelling consensus in the sociological literature that points to a position, and when an issue relates to the ability of sociologists to teach, do research, and engage in practice. This policy, in conjunction with the tenant of the ASA’s mission to “promote the contributions and use of sociology to society,” delineates the space for

ASA's public engagement work. ASA is quite active in this arena, and works to build member capacity in this regard. For example, we routinely send out press releases about new research, and we work with members on how best to engage with the media. We go to Capitol Hill for policy advocacy efforts, and we just launched the Sociology Action Network which seeks to connect volunteer sociologists with non-profit organizations that can benefit from sociological expertise. This work is clearly valued by members and should continue to be prioritized.

*I value what the association does in terms of public statements and increasing the visibility of sociology as an important and relevant discipline.*

#### Recommendations related to value

##### **Recommendation #7. Increase professional development opportunities at the Annual Meeting and throughout the year.**

These opportunities should be in support of both individual sociologists and academic departments to better support the professional needs of people currently in, and aspiring to, the full range of employment contexts. Empowering and encouraging the sections, as well as the newly formed communities, to become vibrant sources of professional development activities will help assure that there will be offerings responsive to the specific needs of sociologists with varying employment conditions, identities, personal experiences, and intellectual interests. Expanding the use of the successful mentoring events some sections current employ, professional development workshops, webinars, symposia, online forums, and videos are all modalities that should be explored.

##### **Recommendation #8. Continue to expand public engagement efforts, including media outreach and outreach to policymakers.**

These efforts have been expanding in recent years and we recommend continuing to strengthen and develop this work.

##### **Recommendation #9. Refine the Annual Meeting submission and review process to be more responsive to the needs and preferences of sociologists. Starting in 2020, push back the Annual Meeting submission deadline to the end of January. Explore the possibilities of moving to abstract-only submissions and/or using an anonymous review system.**

One of the top 30 ideas on the wiki survey was moving the paper deadline back a couple of weeks. This would not only allow more time for people to develop their submissions, but also remove the stress of completing submissions during the holiday vacation period when many people are balancing work and family obligations even more than usual. The idea of requiring only an extended abstract for submissions was very attractive to the sociologists who participated in the wiki survey and it would certainly make the submission process much easier. But there could be several unintended consequences of making this change that the task force recommends exploring before moving forward with this as a recommendation. For example, would ASA receive a much larger number of submissions with a switch to abstracts? Given limited space, that would result in a lower acceptance rate. How would members feel about that trade-off? The idea of an anonymous review process was also among the top 30 ideas in the wiki survey. It could be that combining extended abstracts with anonymous review will reduce the burden of submitting, increase the sense of fairness, and make a possible reduction in acceptance rates palatable to the membership.

##### **Recommendation #10. Enhance and increase communications from ASA to members and provide opportunities for ASA members to provide ongoing feedback to ASA.**

In open-ended responses to the task force's survey, many people said that they were sure there were benefits associated with ASA membership, but they weren't sure what they were or how to access them. Developing new benefits will be important to improving value, but equally important will be communicating those benefits to members through tailored messaging. Not only does ASA need to communicate more effectively *to* members, it also needs to welcome and foster more communication *from* members to counteract the sense that ASA as an organization is not listening and to provide a basis for ongoing evaluation of the changes recommended in this report to see which areas are showing signs of improvement and which need further attention. A thoughtfully designed post-conference survey could be one mechanism for collecting this type of feedback. Fielding a bi-annual or tri-annual member survey might be another useful approach.

## Conclusion

This report provides reason for optimism. We now have a good understanding of many of the problems underlying ASA's membership decline. Armed with that knowledge, the taskforce has been able to identify a variety of specific, feasible steps the association can take over the next several years to address these problems. One respondent to the task force's survey commented, "the very idea of ASA seeking input from a broad range of current and former members begins to address my concern about ASA being open and welcoming." It is the hope of the members of this task force that the recommendations included in this report will help ASA remain a positive force for the discipline today and in the future.

## Appendix: ASA Task Force on Membership Data Sources

The task force collected and analyzed data on ASA members from a variety of sources including: existing administrative membership data; data from five focus groups; data from a survey of current and former ASA members; data from follow up interviews to that survey; and an open access All Our Ideas wiki survey.

### Existing ASA Administrative Data

ASA staff created an anonymized datafile that merged membership data, Annual Meeting registration, and sociodemographic characteristics for over 40,000 individuals who were ASA members or attended the Annual Meeting at any time between 2006 and 2016. Taskforce members used these data to conduct event history analysis to examine: individual membership patterns over the 11-year period; characteristics of people making different membership choices; how meeting attendance and membership choices are interrelated; characteristics affecting Annual Meeting attendance; characteristics affecting membership, including job changes, job types, and sociodemographic characteristics; and section membership.

### Focus Groups, Pre-test, Survey and Follow Up Interviews

In January of 2019, the task force fielded a survey of current and former ASA members in order to find out how well ASA was meeting sociologists' needs and in what ways it could improve. The task force decided on a stratified sampling frame based on patterns of membership and Annual Meeting attendance. The sampling frame was organized into four strata: one-year members; 2 to 5-year members who were members only in years they attended the meeting; 2 to 5-year members who were members in years they did not attend the meeting; and those who were members six or seven years of the seven-year timeframe (loyalists). The original survey sampling frame was constructed in spring 2018 and consisted of people who were members for at least one year between 2011 and 2017; this frame was used for the focus groups and pretest in 2018. The sampling frame used for the full survey in January 2019 was slightly different in that it consisted of members and former members from 2012 to 2018.

Focus groups: To inform survey construction, the task force held a series of virtual focus groups in June 2018. Current and former members in different strata and institution types were invited to participate. A total of 12 respondents participated in five focus groups led by taskforce members. The results were used to inform survey construction.

Pretest: In fall 2018, a random sample of 200 current and former members was drawn from the original sampling frame. The pretest sample was analyzed to ensure members with a diversity of characteristics were included. There were thirty people in the sample without valid email addresses. Thirty-five recipients completed the survey and another three partially completed it, for a response rate of 19%. The Survey Gizmo platform was used to construct and administer the survey.

Analysis of pretest data focused on response patterns, effectiveness of reminder emails, the amount of time it took to respond to the survey overall and to individual items, whether and at what point people dropped out of taking the survey, and comments about the instrument. Based on this analysis, the task force made revisions to the survey and finalized decisions about survey administration.

Survey: To construct the final sampling frame, individuals selected for the pretest sample and those who were last members in 2011 were removed and 2018 membership data was added to the file. The final sample included people who were members for at least one year between 2012 and 2018. This file included 44,901

cases. Half of these were randomly selected and removed to be used for a survey being conducted by another ASA task force, resulting in a file with 22,445 cases. From that list, we selected all cases that met the strata criteria:

1. Members for only 1 year between 2012 and 2018 (n=4821)
2. Members for 2 to 5 years between 2012 and 2018 who joined only when attending the Annual Meeting (n=788)
3. Members for 2 to 5 years between 2012 and 2018 who joined even when not attending the Annual Meeting (n=4921)
4. Members for 6 or 7 years between 2012 and 2018 (n=2940)

This resulted in a contact list with 13,470 cases. About 1,324 of these contacts were removed, mostly due to missing email addresses in the membership database. The survey launched January 10, 2019. Weekly reminder emails were sent until the survey closed on February 11. Taskforce members and the current ASA president encouraged participation by writing reminder messages explaining the importance of the work of the taskforce.

The survey was sent to 12,146 recipients, and 241 emails bounced. We received 2,526 usable survey responses. The response rate was 20.8 percent. Non-response analysis showed that one-year only respondents were underrepresented in the analytical sample and respondents who were “loyalists” were overrepresented. Current members were also overrepresented. As a result, the data were weighted on 2018 membership and three categories of membership history (1-year membership, 2 to 5 years membership, and loyalists).

**Table 1: Sample Demographics**

	Unweighted		Weighted	
Current employment status (all respondents)				
Employed full time	1670	66.6%	1641	65.4%
Employed part time	155	6.2%	176	7.0%
Not employed	54	2.2%	59	2.4%
Student	385	15.3%	420	16.8%
Retired	245	9.8%	211	8.4%
Employment sector (all respondents)				
Four-year institution offering sociology PhD	886	43.6%	781	39.2%
Four-year institution offering sociology MA	201	9.9%	200	10.0%
Four-year institution offering sociology BA	404	19.9%	372	18.7%
Four-year institution offering other sociology degree	105	5.2%	114	5.7%
Two-year college	103	5.1%	117	5.9%
Elementary/secondary school	26	1.3%	37	1.9%
Government (federal, state, local)	80	3.9%	98	4.9%
Not-for-profit organization	89	4.4%	109	5.5%
For-profit company	39	1.9%	46	2.3%
Self-employed or independent consultant	43	2.1%	53	2.6%
Other	55	2.7%	65	3.3%
Current or most recent position (academic respondents)				
Instructor/lecturer/adjunct	143	8.0%	154	9.2%
Assistant professor	364	20.4%	331	19.8%
Associate professor	361	20.2%	340	13.4%
Full professor	653	36.6%	554	33.1%
Postdoctoral fellow or other fellowship	67	3.8%	61	3.6%

Research position	62	3.5%	76	4.5%
Administrative position	59	3.3%	70	4.2%
Other	77	4.3%	86	5.2%
Current position is tenured/tenure-track (academic respondents)	1228	75.7%	1081	71.1%
Works at an institution outside the U.S. (academic respondents)	278	12.8%	312	14.9%
Gender				
Female	1389	56.5%	1431	58.4%
Male	1026	41.7%	973	39.7%
Transgender, gender queer, different identity	21	0.9%	24	1.0%
Multiple selected	23	0.9%	22	0.9%
Identify as a sexual minority or gender non-conforming (including but not limited to: gay, lesbian, bisexual, two-spirited, polyamorous, transgender, gender nonbinary)	300	13.3%	307	13.3%
Race/ethnicity				
African American, Black American, Black	153	6.4%	178	7.4%
Asian/Asian American	165	6.9%	175	7.3%
Hispanic/Latino(a)	130	5.4%	137	5.7%
Native American, American Indian, Alaskan Native	5	0.2%	4	0.2%
White	1738	72.4%	1668	69.6%
Different race	88	3.7%	108	4.5%
Multiple selected	120	5.0%	127	5.3%
Has a disability	188	7.8%	199	8.0%
Mean year of birth	1970		1972	
Income				
Under \$30,000	465	19.3%	522	21.5%
\$30,000-\$39,000	133	5.5%	148	6.1%
\$40,000-\$54,999	191	7.9%	201	8.3%
\$55,000-\$69,999	300	12.4%	316	13.1%
\$70,000-\$84,999	342	14.2%	346	14.3%
\$85,000-\$99,999	259	10.7%	232	9.6%
\$100,000-\$124,999	303	12.5%	287	11.9%
\$125,000-\$149,999	155	6.4%	141	5.8%
\$150,000 and over	267	11.1%	229	9.4%
First generation	974	39.3%	1015	40.8%
ASA member in 2018	1863	74.4%	1378	55.1%
Section member during most recent membership year	1975	84.3%	1775	71.3%
Attended Annual Meeting in the last 3 years	1350	54.0%	1049	42.1%
Strata:				
1-year members	417	16.5%	851	33.7%
2 to 5-year members, only when attending meeting	162	6.4%	170	6.7%
2 to 5-year members, not only when attending meeting	802	31.7%	905	35.8%
Loyalist, 6 of 7 years	290	11.5%	152	6.0%
Loyalist, all 7 years	855	33.8%	449	17.8%

Post-survey interviews: The survey asked respondents to indicate if they would be interested in participating in a follow-up interview with a task force member. Over 36 percent (n=917) expressed interest. Volunteers were divided into groups based on employment sector and type of institution: four-year doctoral institution, four-year non-doctoral institution, two-year institution, and non-academic/practice setting. Four volunteers in each

group were selected based on diversifying characteristics of gender, race, membership status (current member or not), and strata.

Taskforce members developed a protocol that asked respondents to talk about the issues emerging from the quantitative analysis, including cost, value, and community, and to get feedback on how ASA should respond to some of its biggest challenges. Interviewers prepared memos compiling the themes that emerged from these interviews and quotations that helped provide context for some of the quantitative findings.

### All Our Ideas Wiki Survey

The task force members were clear that the traditional survey instrument focused on measuring current and former members' experiences with and views of the ASA as it currently exists. They also were interested in gathering ideas about how to improve ASA in the future. Additionally, the task force wanted sociologists who did not receive the survey to have an opportunity for involvement. This was achieved with an All Our Ideas Wiki Survey.

All Our Ideas ([www.allourideas.org](http://www.allourideas.org)) is a free, online research tool developed by sociologist Matthew Salganik and a group of collaborators at Princeton University that allows people to create their own pairwise wiki survey. Pairwise wiki surveys consist of a single question or prompt with many possible answers. Respondents are presented with a randomly selected pair of answers and asked to vote for their preferred response. They can view pairs of answers and vote as many, or as few times, as they want. Additionally, respondents have the option to contribute a new answer for inclusion in future pairings, adding a collaborative dimension. Data collected from multiple pairwise comparisons are analyzed to determine relative rankings of each answer across the entire set.

The ASA wiki survey went public on January 10, 2019. It used the following prompt: "Which do you think is better for making a more vibrant, effective American Sociological Association?" The wiki survey was seeded with 27 ideas. An additional 70 ideas were added based on participant submissions. Idea submissions were moderated. Ideas were rejected when they duplicated existing ideas in the wiki survey, when they were comments rather than ideas, and when the idea was not feasible (e.g., offer free membership to all sociologists).

Respondents were directed to the wiki survey in two ways. First, invitations to participate were sent on social media (Twitter & Facebook) and ASA's monthly newsletter (Member News and Notes). Additionally, at the end of the traditional survey, respondents were automatically redirected to the wiki survey. The wiki survey received over 43,821 votes in 1,259 unique sessions. Most (63%) of these came from respondents who reached the wiki via the survey redirect. The mean number of votes per session was 34.8, while the median number of votes was 22. Ninety percent of sessions had 75 or fewer votes. Two sessions were outliers with 659 votes and 500 votes respectively; they were removed from analysis.

All Our Ideas assigns each idea a score based on the number of votes received. Those scores are then used to create a ranked list of ideas. Table 1 shows the ranking of the top 30 ideas based on the total number of votes.

**Table 2: Top 30 Ideas from ASA Wiki Survey**

Ranking	Idea Text
1	Create an ASA that makes faculty from every type of institution from across the country feel welcome and valued.
2	Offer scaled registration fees according to income.
3	Start initiatives to advocate for better pay and benefits for non-tenure track sociologists in academia.
4	Take steps to increase the influence of sociological research in the policy realm.
5	Only require an extended abstract for Annual Meeting submissions.
6	Offer reduced Annual Meeting registration fees for adjunct faculty.
7	Further discount on lodging at the Annual Meeting for graduate students and low-income members.
8	Develop pipelines for Sociology PhDs to have good careers outside academia.
9	Focus on increasing the public's view of the value of a sociology bachelor's degree.
10	One free section membership per member.
11	Hold the Annual Meeting in more affordable cities.
12	Create programs and events to build bridges with sociologists and other social scientists/institutions in other countries around the world.
13	Ensure that editorial teams at ASA journals reflect the diversity of our membership and the scholarship we produce.
14	Collaborate with other associations to create events for journalists to learn about social science research and policy-relevant findings.
15	Better matchmaking between policy makers and non-profits that need help and sociologists with skills to offer.
16	Reduce the cost of membership, even if it means reducing benefits.
17	Create programs to build bridges between sociologists and non-profit organizations in their communities.
18	Provide online opportunities for members to learn cutting-edge research methods.
19	Offer more resources to support adjuncts.
20	Provide more resources for non-academic sociologists generally and on non-academic careers.
21	Use blind review for Annual Meeting submissions--it's more democratic and avoids insider games.
22	Launch more career resources and job opportunities.
23	Reduce the cost of membership, even if it means cutting programs.
24	Move the paper deadline back 1-2 weeks, to mid-January.
25	Support methodological, theoretical and topical diversity.
26	Address sexual harassment and other types of abuses of power in our discipline.
27	Provide more opportunities for feedback on research.
28	Create solid partnerships with sociologists at a community college level.
29	More focus on applied work at the community and national levels.
30	Promote respectful, productive debates around competing/contentious ideas.

Note: Because the wiki survey ranking algorithm is based on percentage of wins, an idea with few pairings can end up with an artificially high ranking. Two ideas that were added late in the data collection period appeared in fewer than 15 pairings. They are not reported in the table. Those ideas were: “provide brief training to new section officers when they first take office (3 pairings) and “address undergraduate studies issues (e.g., retention, competition with other majors, scaffolding courses)” (13 pairings). All ideas in the table appeared in at least 326 pairings and 20 of the top 30 ideas appeared in 1100 or more.