

RECRUITING AND MAINTAINING STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

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The American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, founded in 1909, is the comprehensive professional association for family and consumer sciences professionals. The group's membership is comprised of different sections and divisions (based on areas of practice and interest) as well as categories. One portion of the Association's membership, the student portion, is both a section and a membership category. In this way, it is unique among other sections, divisions, and categories within AAFCS.

Another distinguishing feature of the Preprofessional/Graduate Student section (P/GS) is the demographics of its membership. While the majority of members in AAFCS are between the ages of 50 to 59 years (AAFCS "Annual Activities and Accomplishments Report", 2003), the members of the P/GS section are most typically in the age range of traditional undergraduate and graduate students, 18 to 29 years of age.

While AAFCS has recognized recruitment and retention of younger members as key to the survival of the association, it also recognizes the failure to do so as an ongoing challenge. In order to ensure the perpetuity of AAFCS and the family and consumer sciences profession, the Association leadership continues to address several tough questions:

- How can students be recruited?
- What do students and new professionals desire in a professional association?
- What will it take to get students and new professionals to maintain membership in the Association?
- How does a professional association go about growing its future leaders?

In this paper, we will examine the association, discuss some of the challenges it faces and offer thoughts and suggestions in response to these questions.

History

The American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, formerly known as the American Home Economics Association (AHEA), was founded in 1909 at the Lake Placid Conference, to serve as the professional association for Home Economics and related fields. The association supports the Family and Consumer Sciences profession as

it provides leadership in: improving individual, family and community well-being; impacting the development, delivery and evaluation of consumer goods and services; influencing the creation of policy; and shaping societal change, thereby enhancing the quality of life for individuals, families and communities (AAFCS “Association History”, 2003).

Vision, Mission, and Core Values

The American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences is recognized as the comprehensive and integrative source of knowledge and the primary voice focusing on family, individual and community well-being.

The mission of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences is to affect the optimal well-being of families and individuals by:

- empowering members to act on continuing and emerging concerns;
- focusing the expertise of members for action on critical issues;
- assuming leadership among organizations with mutual purposes.

The American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences values:

- families as the fundamental social unit.
- research as a base for new and expanding knowledge, innovation, creativity and application of research to solve problems of individuals and families.
- holistic, interdisciplinary, integrative and preventative perspectives in addressing the issues of individuals and families as consumers.
- diversity, equality and human rights.
- both global and community perspectives when addressing issues of individuals and families as consumers.
- reciprocal relationships between people and their environment which affect the quality of life.
- the forging of partnerships and collaborations with others who share our values and purposes.
- life long learning.
- a healthy global environment which positively impacts the human condition.
- the profession as a force in shaping public policy.

(AAFCS “Vision, Mission, and Core Values”, 2003.)

Purpose

The purpose of AAFCS is to improve the quality and standards of individual and family life through programs that educate, influence public policy, disseminate information and publish research findings.

Challenges

Like many associations, the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences faces challenges. As membership declines, the Association finds itself in a position of financial decline as well. We must develop strategies for recruiting and retaining members—particularly student members and new professionals, as they have potential for longevity within the Association.

Preprofessionals and new professionals are able to contribute an innovative perspective to the organizational culture. This innovativeness is not solely a result of their age. Anyone new to a group is not familiar with “the way things are done”. Therefore, they are more likely to offer ideas and suggestions that deviate from the organizational norm. Young people, in particular, are more inclined to challenge the status quo and refuse to accept tradition as a solid reason for doing things a certain way (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, and Calvert, 2000)

In an organization attempting to recruit more students and new professionals as members, there is also concern that too few of those members are participating in governance. Whether this lack of engagement is due to lack of opportunity, lack of know-how, or lack of initiative is debatable. Involving and empowering youth in the work of the association will provide them with a sense of ownership in AAFCS. By combining the experience of veteran members with the innovation of newer members, AAFCS could very well give itself the surge it needs to move in a more productive direction and more effectively serve its entire membership (Camino, 2001; Camino and Zeldin, 2002; Zeldin, et al., 2000).

Preprofessional/Graduate Student Section

P/GS is both a membership section and a membership category. The members of the P/GS are students in a wide variety of family and consumer sciences fields. Members are enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate program, and they hail from across the United States and around the world. They also have a wide variety of background in organizational involvement. Many may come from FCCLA (Family, Career and Community Leaders of America), FFA, or 4-H backgrounds or bring organizational and leadership experience from outside the profession. Some members may have no previous experience with organizational leadership.

The purpose of the P/GS is to provide family and consumer sciences students with opportunities to network, explore careers, gain leadership experience, and develop as young professionals. P/GS is the only membership unit with direct representation on the

national board of directors. While other sections and divisions are represented by liaisons, the P/GS chair has a seat on the board.

P/GS is not an easily definable group. Although they are part of a professional association, P/GS is not considered to be a preprofessional association, nor are members considered to be “full-fledged” active members. Although membership is comprised of students, P/GS is not considered to be a student organization. Consequently, they walk a fine line between the two.

The Challenges of Student Leadership

The Preprofessional/Graduate Student section has a high rate of turnover both in membership and leadership. This is inherent in the group, as members are students and individuals are who constantly enter and graduate from academic programs. Although this turnover is expected, it poses many challenges for the P/GS.

The lack of continuity in the P/GS often means that students are “re-inventing the wheel”, so to speak. From year to year and location to location, the roles and expectations of student members will vary. Unless students are privy to the experience of veteran P/GS members and/or professional members (as advisors), they will often find themselves dealing with the same challenges each year. It seems that, as soon as students have a grasp on what needs to be done and an idea of how to do it, they graduate. This leaves other student members to begin the cycle anew.

Some of the challenges faced repeatedly by the student members of AAFCS are:

- **Disconnected Membership**

Students are “moving targets”. Their addresses and other contact information are in constant flux. Settling on a method and frequency of communication which will satisfy their needs is important. However, breakdowns in the chosen communication chain(s) are frequent.

- **Lack of Validation and Structure**

Some colleges, universities, and affiliates have a system in place for the formation of student “chapters” and for involvement of students in the work of the Association at their given level, while others do not. The systems vary across the country. This suggests that expectations and definitions are not consistent. Also, student membership and involvement is somewhat sporadic and dependent on whether or not they feel a sense of belonging and purpose within the Association. Additionally, since students do not enjoy the same status as professional members, at times they can feel like “token” participants on boards, committees, and task forces.

- **No Opportunity for Training and/or Officer Transitioning**

Typically, students who enter leadership positions have not been members of AAFCS for a long time. After all, their time as a student is brief. So a rise to

leadership may be quick and lacks prerequisite experience. For this reason, unless officers are properly trained and advised, they will be unclear about their responsibilities—leading to frustration and ineffective functioning.

- **Complete National Officer Turn-Over on an Annual Basis**

While some officers may serve for more than one year, most do not. At the national level, until recently, P/GS national officers were not allowed to serve more than one term. Therefore, the officer team was completely new each year. They lacked continuity and guidance—leading to the “re-inventing” mentioned earlier. Speaking from experience, they felt adrift on the AAFCS sea and uncertain as to how they were supposed to proceed once elected.

Although there is no guaranteed key to resolving the P/GS challenges, there are many tools that would help. Among them:

- Resource Development
- Professional Mentorship (in areas of family and consumer sciences practice)
- Association Mentorship (in terms of organizational culture)
- Organized Student Chapters
- Leadership Training
- Improved Recruitment Strategies
- Specific Goal Setting/Planning
- Communication and Networking

Using the ISOTURE leadership development process suggestions for AAFCS in their efforts to improve recruitment and retention in relation to student members would include:

- **IDENTIFICATION:** Recruiting student members and encouraging them to seek leadership positions.
- **SELECTION:** Despite need for members and leaders, avoid the “Warm and Breathing” method.
- **ORIENTATION:** Assist students in becoming familiar with organizational culture.
- **TRAINING:** Provide adequate leadership training and transitioning for officer positions.
- **UTILIZATION:** Encourage students to promote their personal talents and interests so that volunteer/task fit can be accomplished.

- **RECOGNITION:** Recognize students for their service and accomplishments— and also recognize (legitimize) their membership.
- **EVALUATION:** Involve as many students as possible in continual evaluation of progress, and encourage them to share ideas.

(Texas Cooperative Extension, 2003.)

Currently, each of these concepts are implemented, to a greater or lesser degree. From our experience, we have determined that the key isn't wholly in implementation but in the continuity and consistency of implementation. Furthermore, we suggest that the implementation must occur at the greater, rather than the lesser, degree.

Some progress made to date includes:

- **Chair-Elect Position Introduced**

In 1998, the first national P/GS Chair-Elect was elected to the student board. This meant that future Chairs would have at least one previous year of experience with national P/GS leadership. It was also determined that national P/GS officers could seek additional terms of office, provided they met candidacy requirements.

- **Officer Training/Transitioning**

Time is now set aside, at the Annual Convention, for the officers to be trained and to transition with their predecessors. While this time is brief, it is much more than was provided in the past. For future years, we are considering longer training times with more intensive discussion. Current section, division, committee, and task force practices indicate that training could take place as part of existing governance sessions.

- **Information and Forms**

In an attempt to strengthen communication networks, keep track of student resources, and provide information to students more effectively, P/GS has created contact sheets and other useful forms. We have also gained access to our membership database electronically.

- **Handbook Revisions**

The P/GS handbook was recently revised to be more reflective of current practices and expectations.

- **National Consultant**

A volunteer consultant is in place to serve as an advisor and resource for P/GS at the national level. Even though student leadership may change, this person will be with the group on a more continuous basis—and is therefore able to assist the officers with projects, communication, and continued progress.

- **Leadership Training at Annual Convention**

At the 2000 Annual Convention in Providence, RI a P/GS preconference was held to provide intensive leadership training for student members. At the 2001 and 2002 Annual Conventions in Dallas, TX, and Washington, D.C., respectively, similar sessions were offered within the context of the meeting.

- **Electronic Newsletter**

In previous years, the P/GS has sent out mailings to the affiliates for which there was a record of a P/GS affiliate chair. P/GS chairs at the affiliate level were then expected to pass this information along to the college and university chapters within their respective states. Ultimately, this process failed quite frequently—and many students did not receive necessary information in a timely manner. In 2001, the officers began *“In the Know”*, an electronic newsletter which is sent out periodically by the AAFCS P/GS leaders using the membership database on file at headquarters. We anticipate that this will be a more effective way of reaching the membership.

- **National Chair Visits to Affiliates**

The 2001-02 national P/GS chair, Jenny Stone (Iowa State University) spent the spring 2002 semester visiting AAFCS affiliates in order to recruit, train, and advise student members as well as encouraging professional members to mentor student members and include them in the operations of the Association.

- **Chapter Development Guidelines** (in progress)

Some of the current national officers, along with P/GS members from various affiliates, have been charged with the development of Chapter Guidelines. This resource will give students examples of consistency in structure and to help those who desire guidance for their membership. The anticipated completion date for this resource is spring, 2004. This will allow the resource to be shared at the 2004 AAFCS Annual Convention in San Diego, CA.

Additional ideas that are being considered for future work include:

- Electronic/Video Recruitment Tools
- Leadership Resource Kits
- Advisor Training
- Student Participation in Governance Sessions
- Collaboration with Sections/Divisions
- Specific Mentoring Programs
- Interactive Web-based Services
- Modified Election Procedures

- And the list goes on!

Whatever direction is chosen for the future of the P/GS section, the critical factor in reaching these goals is encouraging professional members to provide guidance and encouraging student members to take initiative. The success of the P/GS is up to all AAFCS members—and, ultimately, will determine the future success and longevity of the Association.

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