Organizational Satisfaction And Participation: Findings from a Study Of ACE Members

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Organizations which serve information professionals, such as Agricultural Communicators in Education, must continue to respond to the needs of members through relevant programs and professional opportunities. The study reported here examines satisfaction and participation within the organization. Overall, the study found broad-based member satisfaction. But while there is widespread support, there are segments of the membership which need attention. Findings also identify organizational areas which can be improved, particularly in the conduct of the Critique and Awards Program and in meeting the expectations of members involved in Special Interest Groups (SIG). Specific questions that may have organizational policy implications are raised.

The study's finding that member participation positively is related to overall satisfaction with ACE is encouraging. One important goal for ACE, then, would be to encourage increased participation. And, because newer members tend to be the most dissatisfied with ACE, emphasis should be placed on immediately getting them more involved in ACE activities.

In 1982, Frederick Williams noted that the communication revolution is based on a premise of change, which, in turn, is reflected in an explosion in communication technologies—computers, satellites, tapes, disks, microprocessors, and new telephone and radio services. He went on to conclude that these technologies change the nature of our human environment.

While most attention has been focused on the changing nature of the information environment for the information user, much less attention has been focused on the changing nature of information occupations, particularly those involved in the production and distribution of information to the various end users. If professional organizations which serve these information workers are going to survive and prosper, they too, must change to better meet member needs.

These were the motivations, at least in part, which prompted the Long-Range Planning Committee of ACE, in cooperation with the ACE Board of Directors, to initiate a study of members in 1987-88. Members of the Long-Range Planning Committee assisted in conceptualizing the study. It was conducted by the Department of Communication at Cornell University.

All members who had paid their dues by early January 1988 were surveyed. The primary purpose of the study was to provide information to the ACE Board of Directors and the Long-Range Planning Committee to assist in making policy recommendations. Among the questions the study addressed were the following:

1. To what extent are members satisfied with ACE as a professional organization?
2. Are the Special Interest Groups (SIGs) increasing ACE's ability to meet the needs of members? To what extent are the SIGs meeting member expectations?
3. How do members view the *Quarterly*? Are the proposed policy changes supported?
4. How active are members in the organization? Are there ways members can be encouraged to be more active?
5. To what extent are new members satisfied with ACE?
6. How do members compare ACE with other professional organizations?

Obviously, all of these questions can't be answered in one membership study. This report is an attempt to begin addressing the important issues which are on the members' agenda. Findings related to the *Quarterly* were reported earlier (Scherer, 1988).

Method

Of the 602 ACE members who received the mailed questionnaire in early 1988, 305 or 50.6% responded. The questionnaire was a 12-page booklet design suggested by Dillman (1978). The questionnaire included 30 questions and 147 response items. Similar questionnaires have received up to 79% response with public samples. However, because of budget limitations, individual follow-up mailings to nonrespondents were not made, possibly contributing to the study's lower response rate.
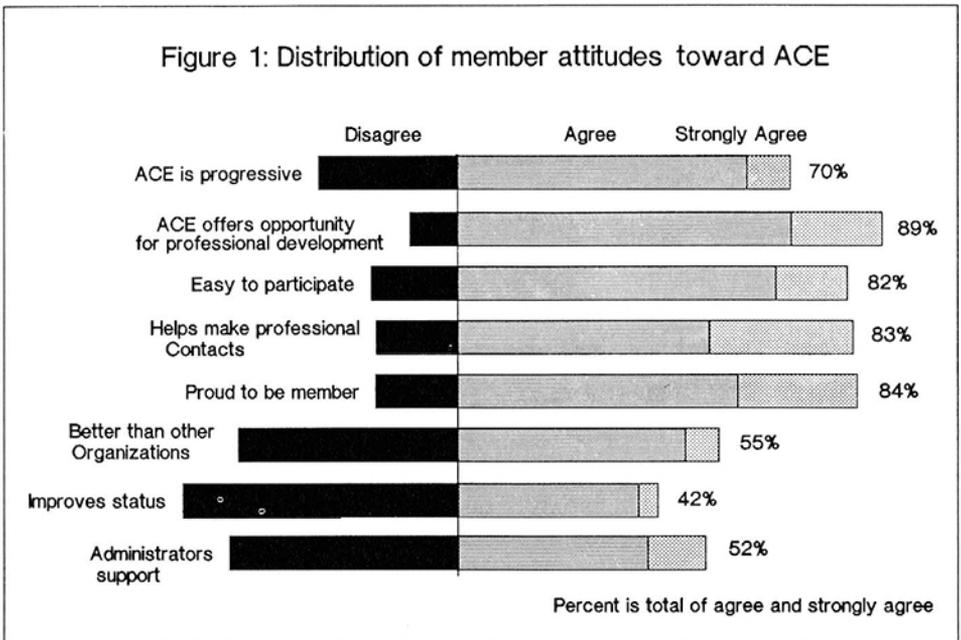
Of those responding, 37% reported that they hold professional positions, 22% said they have tenure track positions, 19% are in government service positions, and 22% hold some other type of position. Twenty-five percent of those responding said that they have major administrative responsibilities, 18% work primarily with publications, 11% are newswriters and 9% are in some area of broadcasting. Nearly half of the respondents said that they have mixed positions with more than one type of assignment.

Member Attitudes

Overall, there is a general feeling of satisfaction (69%) among members about ACE as a professional organization. Eighty-eight percent say that they would encourage others to join ACE if they were asked. Figure 1 shows that members believe that ACE is progressive (70%), that ACE offers opportunities for professional development (89%), that it is easy to participate in ACE (82%), and that ACE helps them make professional contacts (83%). Most say they are proud to be an ACE member (84%). Of some concern, however, are the lower ratings given to three items: ACE is better than other organizations

(55% believe it is), that membership in ACE improves one's status (only 42% believe it does), and, that administrators support ACE participation (only 52% believe they do).

Figure 1: Distribution of member attitudes toward ACE

Attitude	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
ACE is progressive				70%
ACE offers opportunity for professional development				89%
Easy to participate				82%
Helps make professional Contacts				83%
Proud to be member				84%
Better than other Organizations				55%
Improves status				42%
Administrators support				52%

Percent is total of agree and strongly agree
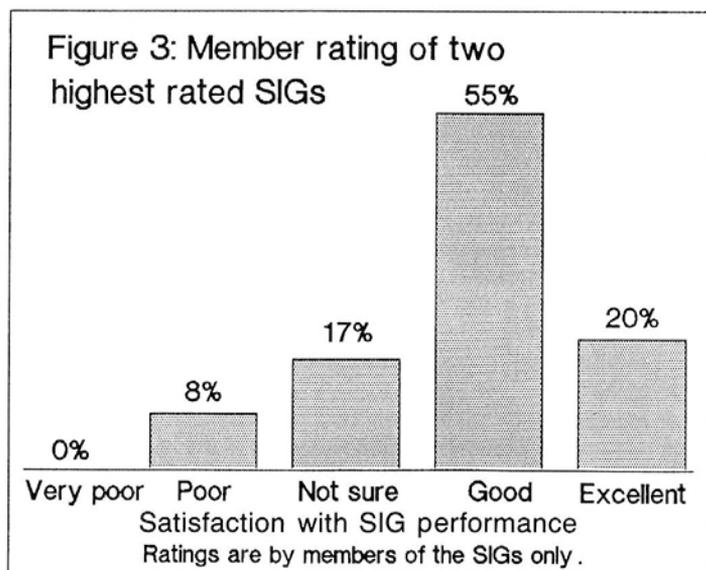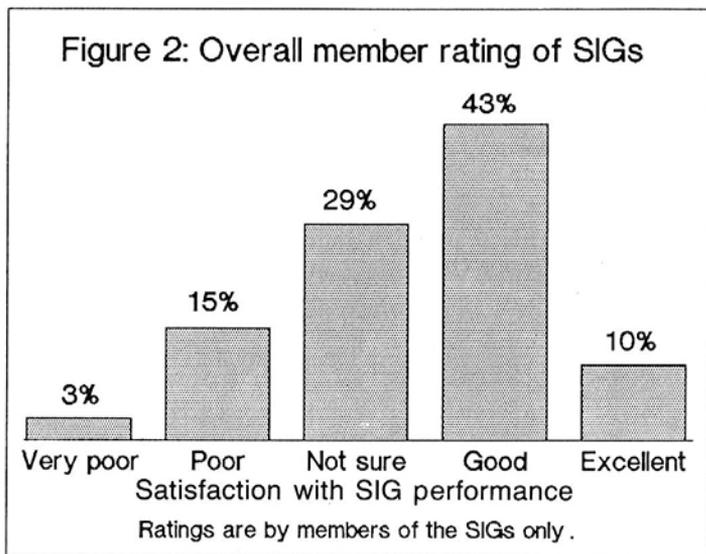
Special Interest Groups

One of the major changes in the structure of ACE in the past 20 years has been the development of the Special Interest Groups. These groups, initiated in 1983, established a structure for ACE members with similar interests to meet, discuss issues, and, more recently, take an active role in the planning of the international and regional meetings. By the end of 1987, there were 13 authorized SIG groups varying greatly in their activities. Some were producing their own newsletter and holding regular meetings while others only had infrequent activities.
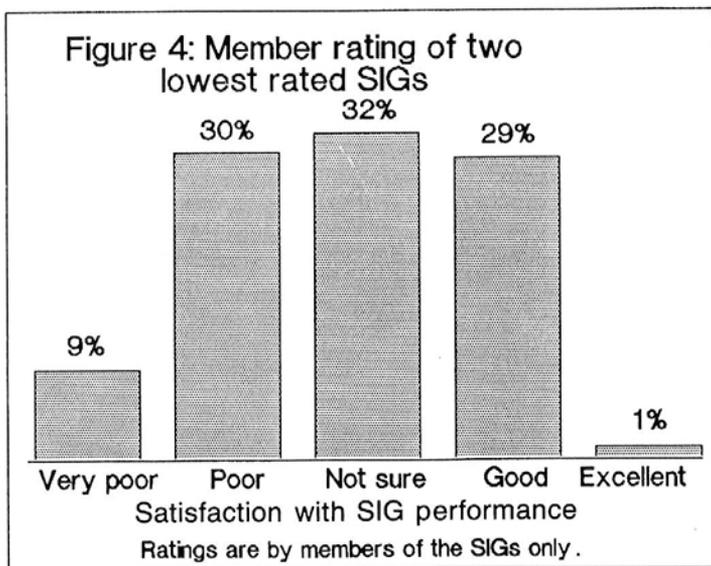
Overall, a majority (75%) of members support the idea of SIGs. However, 40% of members express some concern that SIGs may fragment the organization. Of particular interest is member evaluation of the performance of the SIGs they belong to: between 30 and 70% of the members give their SIGs a low performance rating. On the average, only 10% of members rated their SIGs' performance as "excellent" (see Figure 2) with an average of 43% giving the SIGs to which they belong a "good" rating. The two highest rated SIGs received an "excellent" rating from only 20% of their members (Figure 3) while the two lowest rated SIGs received an "excellent" rating from only 1% of their members (Figure 4).

What this suggests is that Special Interest Groups, while supported by members, may not be meeting their expectations. While we have no basis for comparison, it is clear that performance of some Special Interest Groups is far below member expectations.

Member Participation and Satisfaction

Approximately one-third of ACE members report low participation in the organization's activities. In the membership study, participation was measured by the frequency in which respondents did the following: attended annual and regional meetings; entered the Critique and Awards Program; gave a presentation at a regional or annual meeting; submitted an article to the *Quarterly* or served as an editor; served on a regional or international committee; served as an officer; or participated in other ways such as serving as state representation.

Figure 2: Overall member rating of SIGs

Rating	Percentage
Very poor	3%
Poor	15%
Not sure	29%
Good	43%
Excellent	10%

Satisfaction with SIG performance

Ratings are by members of the SIGs only.

Figure 3: Member rating of two highest rated SIGs

Rating	Percentage
Very poor	0%
Poor	8%
Not sure	17%
Good	55%
Excellent	20%

Satisfaction with SIG performance

Ratings are by members of the SIGs only.

Figure 4: Member rating of two lowest rated SIGs

9% Very poor | 30% Poor | 32% Not sure | 29% Good | 1% Excellent

Satisfaction with SIG performance

Ratings are by members of the SIGs only.

Perhaps the most important issue, however, is determining a member profile which delineates who among ACE members participates in organizational programs and activities and what impact this participation has on satisfaction with the organization. Figure 5 shows that participation in ACE is positively related to satisfaction with ACE. In other words, the more a member participates in ACE programs and activities, the higher his or her satisfaction is with the organization. (See Figure 5)

The most significant relationships between participation and member satisfaction with ACE were attending an annual meeting, giving a presentation at a regional or annual meeting, serving on a regional or international committee or serving as an officer. Correlations between these factors and satisfaction were highly significant. Not significantly correlated with satisfaction were participation with the *Quarterly* and entry in the Critique and Awards Program. There is, in fact, a weak negative relationship between entry in the C & A Program and satisfaction with ACE. This suggests that the more a member has entered the C & A Program, the more dissatisfied they tend to be with ACE as an organization.

Those members who participate the least also tend to be newer members, and they are consistently more negative about ACE on a number of factors: They believe the SIGs aren't very useful; that annual and regional meetings don't offer much in particular, and that ACE doesn't offer much in general. Yet this group also indicates that they are interested in getting more involved in ACE, but often aren't sure how to do that.

Critique and Awards Program

Seventy-eight percent of ACE members say that they have entered the C & A Program and 55% have entered at least once in the past 6 years. Sixty-five percent believe the C & A Program helps raise professional standards and provides peer recognition. However, 23% of those entering say they are either very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the C & A judging, 20% were neutral and 44.8% were satisfied or very satisfied.

Thirty-two percent of members who had entered the C & A Program report that they had never won a superior rating, and 4% report that they had won a superior rating 10 or more times. More than one-third report that they have won a superior rating 1 to 3 times. Contrary to what might be expected, however, satisfaction with the C & A Program is not related to winning a superior rating. Frequency of entering the C & A Program, however, is positively related to satisfaction with judging, one might suspect that those most dissatisfied with the judging don't enter again while those who feel the judging was fair, even if they didn't win a superior award, do tend to enter again.

Expectations vs. Delivery

Members were asked to indicate what they expected from the organization, and to what extent ACE delivered on those expectations. In reply to issues of expectation vs. delivery, members felt that as an organization, ACE is fairly successful in doing some things, but not successful in doing others. ACE is successful, members say, in providing the following opportunities:
1. Talking with other professionals (91% agree). Newer members, however, generally disagree with this.
2. Sharing ideas with other ACE members (88%).
3. Hearing other ACE members give presentations (90%).
4. Recognizing outstanding contributions to the profession (76%).
5. Contributing to the profession (70%).
6. Hearing non-ACE professionals (68%).

Members say that ACE is less successful in:
1. Providing opportunities to develop leadership skills (50% agree ACE does provide opportunities).
2. Providing an opportunity to keep up-to-date with the "cutting edge" of the field. Only 41% agreed that ACE does this.

Table 1: Correlations Between Overall Satisfaction with ACE, Length of Membership and What Members Say ACE Provides.

ACE provides opportunity to...	Overall satisfaction	Length of membership
Develop professionally	.4481**	.1390
Talk with professionals	.1625*	.1748*
Stay on "cutting-edge"	.4699*	.2412**
Share ideas with others	.1705*	.1275
Develop leadership skills	.3811**	.1408
Be recognized by peers	.2473**	.1021
Contribute to profession	.3417**	.1885*
Hear ACE professionals	.1824*	.1897*
Hear non-ACE professionals	.3719**	.2625**

Based on responses from 312 ACE members.
*Significant at $p < .01$.
**Significant at $p < .001$.

Also of importance are the relationships between member beliefs and their overall satisfaction with ACE as a professional organization. Table 1 shows that overall satisfaction is significantly correlated with all of the professional development factors, most strongly with opportunities to: (a) develop pro-

fessionally, (b) to stay on the "cutting edge", (c) develop leadership skills, and (d) to hear non-ACE professionals.

Thus, overall satisfaction with ACE appears to be tied closely with perceptions of whether or not ACE is delivering on these four premises. The strongest relationship with satisfaction is with belief that ACE is on the "cutting edge" and only 41% of members believe it is.

Figure 5: Relationship of member satisfaction with participation in the organization
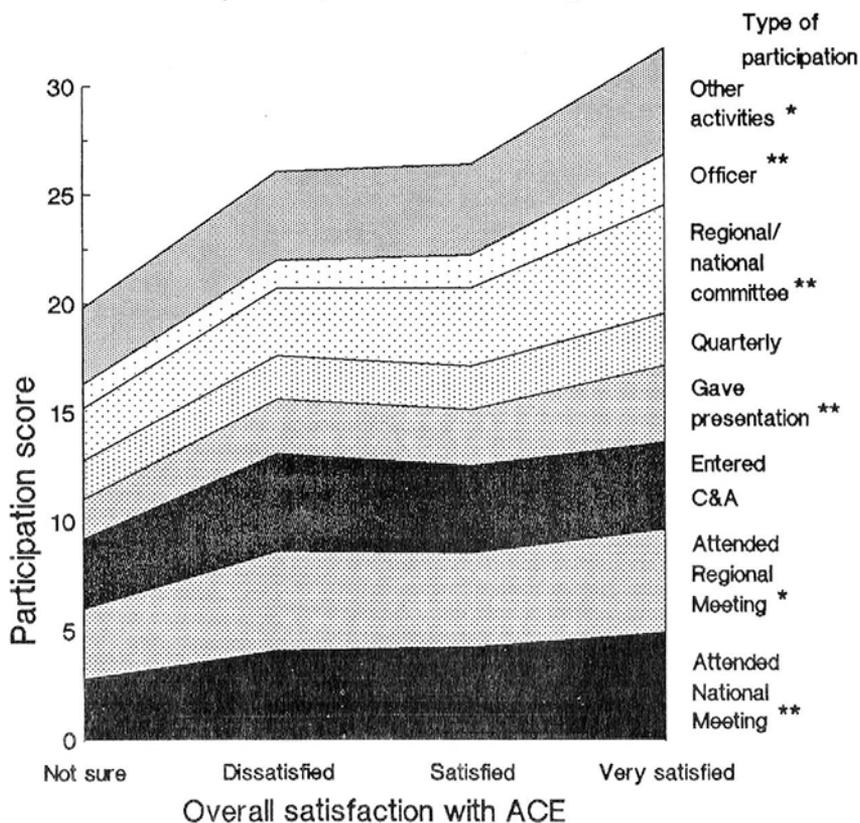
* Correlation with Overall satisfaction is sig at p<.01.
** Correlation with overall satisfaction is sig. at p<.001.

The issue of "cutting edge" appears to be a critical one for ACE with only 41% of members believing ACE is, in fact, on the "cutting edge" of the profession. That belief is positively related to a belief that ACE is "worth the dues" (r=.3029, p<.001). In other words, members who believe ACE is worth

the dues also believe ACE is on the "cutting edge." However, those members who belong to another professional organization, which they judge to be better than ACE, are more likely to say that ACE is not on the "cutting edge" ($r = .3375$, $p<.001$). Can these members help more clearly identify what is needed to put ACE on the "cutting edge"?

Table 1 also shows correlations between these factors and length of membership in ACE. Longer-time members are more likely to believe that ACE provides an opportunity to stay on the "cutting-edge" of the field than are newer members. Longer-time members are more likely to say that ACE provides an opportunity to hear non-ACE professionals than are newer members. Three other factors—opportunities to talk with professionals, contribute to the profession and to hear ACE professionals—also were significantly correlated with length of membership, although at a lower level. What these correlations suggest is that newer members believe that ACE is not as successful in delivering on these factors compared with longer-term members.

Conclusions and Implications

There is no doubt that the majority of ACE members believe in and are clear about the mission of ACE as an organization of professional communicators. Their attitudes toward ACE are generally very favorable and they take pride in the organization. Most express interest in getting more involved in ACE programs and activities.

There are, however, several critical program areas which can hamper the attainment of organizational goals, particularly those that pertain to the professional development of members. In reviewing these, it may be helpful to focus on some specific areas: The Critique and Awards Program, Special Interest Groups, and overall member participation in the organization.

Most members believe that the Critique and Awards Program can raise professional standards, and that it may help members gain recognition. Member participation is high, and thus, the potential is great if the C & A Program is managed to the satisfaction of members. However, only 39% express satisfaction with the program, particularly with the judging. What is it in the process or conduct of the Critique and Awards Program that generates this very low level of satisfaction among members? If the members are not award of the process, how could it be more effectively communicated?

The Special Interest Groups, members say, are beneficial and worthwhile. They believe that SIGs are an excellent way of getting members involved, and some have found that the SIGs make it easier for them to participate. Many members, however, are ambivalent about the way SIGs are presently structured. They like the idea behind the SIGs, but seem to have questions about how best to organize them. This is reflected in the generally low ratings SIGs are given.

Is there a need to reformat the SIGs? What do members expect from them? Are SIGs really addressing members' needs? Is there something about the structure of the Special Interest Groups which limits usefulness to members? Are there changes which can be made to encourage Special Interest Group

leaders to focus more on member needs? Can members be encouraged to participate more in the Special Interest Groups and thereby guide SIG activities to better meet member needs?

The formation of ACE Special Interest Groups and the Critique and Awards Program is perceived to have been based, to some extent, on the premise that this would help members keep up with the "cutting-edge" of the communication field. If these two programs are meant to be opportunities to further ACE's goal in this respect, then it may be difficult—based on this survey—to view them as fulfilling this goal. Only 41% of members believe that the organization is providing the opportunity to keep up with the "cutting edge" of their disciplines. The question remains: What mechanisms can be used to move ACE to this "edge" and provide members with opportunities for professional development?

The study's finding that member participation is related positively, to overall satisfaction with ACE is encouraging. While it is impossible to establish causality, it is logical to assume that members who are more involved in the organization also will be more satisfied. If, in fact, participation causes satisfaction (and not the other way around), then it is clear that one important goal for ACE is to increase member participation. And, because newer members tend to be the most dissatisfied with ACE, emphasis should be placed on getting them involved in organizational activities early.

References

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