1993 ARVO Questionnaire Results

In the summer of 1991, the ARVO Board of Trustees initiated a long-range strategic planning process for the Association. As the strategic plan was developed, it became clear that more information was needed regarding the views of our membership. To gather input from ARVO members, a questionnaire was prepared and mailed early in the spring of 1993. The results are summarized here with mention of initiatives planned by the Board of Trustees that relate to some of the issues that were addressed.

Questionnaire Respondents

Of the 8,052 questionnaires that were sent, 3,480 (43%) were returned. The respondents were a fair representation of the ARVO membership and its various subgroups. As shown in the Table, the fraction of questionnaire respondents who identified with each of ARVO's 13 Scientific Sections correlated with the fraction of total ARVO members in each Section according to the Association’s roster. Approximately 27% of our total members and 24% of our questionnaire respondents are student members. Thirty percent of our members have mailing addresses outside the U.S., and 36% of our respondents indicated that they are not U.S. citizens. The comparison between the membership roster and questionnaire respondents for proportion of non-U.S. members cannot be made directly because some U.S. citizens live outside the U.S., and many who hold citizenship in other countries reside within the U.S. The questionnaire response illustrates the international nature of ARVO’s membership, with large numbers of returns from Europe (492), the Americas outside the U.S. (165), and Japan (149).

Our members are largely white (76%), male (76%), and between the ages of 30 and 50 (70%). Although 4% of respondents preferred not to respond to the question about ethnicity, it is clear that the number of minority members is disappointingly small. Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indian/Alaskan natives combined comprise only 3% of our members. Encouraging women and minorities to pursue the sciences is a problem that extends well beyond ARVO. Nonetheless, the Board of Trustees has appointed a Women and Minorities Committee to examine ways in which the Association can help these groups to be successful in vision research. A workshop on time management, aimed primarily at women but open to all ARVO members, is planned for the 1994 meeting. The workshop will consider ways to successfully juggle the home and workplace responsibilities that we all have.

ARVO’s regular (non-student) members are approximately half physicians and half Ph.D.s, and responses to the questionnaire were roughly evenly divided between clinicians (43%) and non-clinicians (47%). The breakdown by Scientific Section is illustrated in the Table. (The remaining regular members are primarily administrators or educators at varying levels, or they are employed in industry in varying capacities.) Among questionnaire respondents, 58% have extramural research support, 70% from federal and 46% from private sources (some reported support from both.)

Annual Meeting

Because staging the Annual Meeting in Sarasota is one of the primary functions of ARVO, several of the queries on the questionnaire concerned the site and programming of the meeting. Most respondents (91%) had attended at least one Sarasota meeting. The majority (67%) of those who had not attended the meeting were new members who planned to attend at the next opportunity. Less than 1% of respondents were dissuaded from attending the Annual Meeting because of abstract rejection, and students were no more likely than regular members to cite abstract rejection as the reason for not attending. The leadership of ARVO has been concerned for some time that abstract rejection was impacting the number of members who could attend the meeting and was disproportionately affecting student members. These concerns may be unwarranted. The questionnaire results are supported by data reported at the 1993 Section Business Meetings indicating that the growth in meeting attendance in recent years correlates with the number of abstracts submitted, not with the number accepted.

When queried whether ARVO's Annual Meeting would be the first choice if only one research meeting per year could be attended, 69% said “yes,” indicating that ARVO’s meeting is popular among the self-selected group of respondents. Remaining respondents said “don’t know” (12%) or listed more than 50 other association or specialty meetings as their first choice. The question stressed research meetings to encourage members who are clinicians to indicate a meeting aside from the American Academy of Ophthalmology Meeting, which is not primarily devoted to dissemination of research findings. Nonetheless, a fairly large number...
of respondents (53) indicated the Academy meeting as their first choice. Other association meetings chosen by a large number of ARVO members included meetings held by the Society for Neuroscience (132), FASEB (36), and the American Society for Cell Biology (34).

It was apparent from the responses to subsequent questions that one of the major reasons for the popularity of ARVO’s Annual Meeting is the meeting location. Despite the well-known deficiencies of Sarasota as a convention site, 82% of respondents listed Sarasota as a “positive feature” of the Annual Meeting. Responses to other questions, however, suggested that the majority of respondents would consider attending the meeting elsewhere—depending upon the location. When asked whether the Annual Meeting should be moved to a site with better convention facilities, a majority (64%) responded either “yes” (12%) or “depends upon the new location” (52%). The response to this question varied among Scientific Sections as shown in the Table. Sections with a primarily clinical membership (e.g., Glaucoma or Retina) appeared less likely to consider a new meeting site than Sections dominated by basic scientists (e.g., Biochemistry/Molecular Biology, Lens, or Retinal Cell Biology). The issue of Sarasota as a convention site has generated much dialogue for many years, and it is a topic that will not go away. The Association membership and the number of meeting attendees has grown steadily for years, whereas the available meeting space in Sarasota has not kept pace. The Board of Trustees continues to evaluate other sites for the Annual Meeting to identify a location that has both a convention center with adequate nearby housing and the beach resort atmosphere of Sarasota that our members have come to expect.

For years, the Annual Meeting has consisted primarily of presentations selected from submitted abstracts. In a question regarding other types of programming for the meeting, 61% percent of respondents indicated that more symposia and/or workshops should be incorporated. Symposia were defined as sessions comprised of a combination of invited and submitted papers, and workshops were described as educational sessions (to instruct members on research methods, for example). Of those who favored the addition of symposia and/or workshops, 47% indicated that both types of sessions should be added; symposia alone were preferred with a two-to-one margin over workshops alone. Because of the difficulties in scheduling even the existing types of sessions, members were asked when during the meeting this new type of programming should be accommodated. They were given five options that could be ranked. The two options that received the most first- and second-place rankings were “replace some platform sessions” (875 votes) and...
Those options receiving the largest number of checks were “more review articles” (1,454 checks) and Investigative Ophthalmology & Visual Science, ARVO’s journal, while recognizing that a journal in which they have not previously published and to get readers accustomed to looking in a different place for research in their interest area. The Trustees are monitoring progress toward a broader representation of ARVO’s members’ research interests in ARVO’s journal, while recognizing that a journal that publishes 25 to 30 papers per month cannot fully satisfy an organization with more than 8,500 members. Under the new Editor-in-Chief, IOVS is also reducing its publication time and adding review articles, two changes strongly favored by questionnaire respondents.

**Other Issues**

**Scientific Sections.** A few queries on the questionnaire concerned the organizational structure of ARVO and the participation of the membership in its governance. Fifteen percent of respondents indicated that they always attend the business meetings of their Scientific Sections held during the Annual Meeting, but half of the respondents indicated that they rarely
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(28%) or never (21%) attend. Attendance at business meetings varied among Sections (see Table). A majority of respondents indicated that the “Scientific Section” structure of ARVO was adequate for purposes of nominating a Trustee (62%) and for electing abstract reviewers (73%). Questions regarding the Scientific Sections had a high percentage of “don’t know” responses, as high as 30%. This is perhaps to be expected because the functions of the Sections may be unclear to the half of respondents who infrequently attend their Section Business Meetings. (However, there was a curious inconsistency: Of those who indicated that they did not know their Scientific Section, 33% said they regularly attended their business meeting.)

Educational Materials. Many questionnaire respondents (32%) have participated in school or community outreach programs to educate the public regarding eye research, and 51% indicated that they would use a resource package explaining the benefits of eye research if one were available. In response to this level of interest, ARVO is now embarking on the development of such materials. Watch for information in future ARVO newsletters.

Student Members. There were more than 300 written responses to the question asking whether ARVO could provide any specific assistance for members who are in training (predocs, postdocs, residents, fellows). Most of the comments could be roughly grouped into three major areas: monetary support, career guidance, and educational programs. There were more than 50 requests for increased travel fellowships for the Annual Meeting. ARVO actively seeks support for travel for junior investigators although the available funds remain inadequate; for the 1993 meeting, 92 fellowships were awarded, 32 more than in the previous year. Several respondents requested cost reductions or waivers for students for registration, membership dues, or the journal. Unfortunately, student fees are already below ARVO’s cost so further reductions are unlikely. In the areas of career guidance and education, there were many excellent suggestions that the Trustees will consider in formulating future initiatives. Requests for an instructional program on grant preparation were numerous; a workshop on this topic is planned for the 1994 meeting.

International Members. International members residing outside the U.S. comprise the fastest growing segment of ARVO’s membership. The questionnaire represented the first time ARVO has asked this group about its needs, and 265 members responded. The comments were too numerous and varied to be discussed here, but it is clear that, as one member put it, it is time that ARVO considers itself an international organization based in the U.S. rather than a U.S. organization with foreign members. Members residing outside the U.S. have distinct problems with travel support, housing assistance, research funding within and outside the U.S., communication by mail and other means, and representation in ARVO’s governing bodies. The Association has perhaps been slow in recognizing the difficulties faced by non-U.S. members. Some of the problems may be easily remedied, but others will take more time and greater interaction between ARVO members inside and outside the U.S.

Summary

Although the questionnaire was relatively short, it yielded considerable information about ARVO’s members and their views. Many changes have already been initiated in response to input from the questionnaire. The Board of Trustees invites you to continue to communicate your suggestions and criticisms (and compliments) to the ARVO Central Office.

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