

Scholarship Development Committee, Midwest Sociological Society
2016 Annual Report

The Scholarship Development Committee met on 24 March 2016 during the joint annual meetings of the MSS and NCSA in Chicago.

Members present: Erik Larson (chair), Tiffany Davis, Fetene Gebrewold, Peter Hart-Brinson, Lisa Kort-Butler, Jynette Larshus
Apologies: Robert Wazienski

Research Awards

Based on its research concerning the effectiveness of previous research grants, the MSS Research Grants opened this year to both members of the MSS with a Ph.D. and graduate student members. The call for proposals emphasized the desire to fund proposals likely to have high impact. MSS members submitted a larger number of research proposals this year relative to recent years.

To promote research among both members who have a Ph.D. and graduate student members while also retaining some degree of flexibility, the committee has dedicated pools of funds for research proposals from the two categories of members (40% of the total for each pool) and a shared pool (the remaining 20%) for years in which there are a large number of compelling proposals from one of the two pools.

The evaluation procedures include both absolute and relative standards of merit to judge proposals. Each member of the committee scored each proposal on three criteria: sociological merit, quality of research plan, and budget justification. The chair compiled individual members' ratings and provided the committee with separate lists of proposals submitted by the two categories of members. To facilitate discussion, these lists sorted proposals in two ways: by sociological merit and by quality of research plan.

The committee used these scores as the starting point to compare proposals to one another and used budget justification ratings and comments to ensure that MSS funds are being used efficiently. In awarding funding, the committee considered the goals of the program to fund high-impact proposals, selecting some proposals that were both earlier stage projects and others at more advanced stages.

MSS members submitted applications requesting, in the aggregate, about three-and-a-half times the funds available for distribution. The committee seeks to be good stewards of MSS funds by maximizing the impact of its funding decisions. By doing so, the committee selected six projects to support. The aggregate level of support was \$14,000 (the full amount allocated).

The committee selected the following proposals for funding:

- Jacqueline Henke, Purdue University, "The Incarcerated Workers Movement: Incarcerated and Free Activism in the New Information Age." \$2,100 (Graduate Student)

- Tracey LaPierre, University of Kansas “Grandparent Caregivers: Where Biological and Legal Relationships Collide.” \$2,500 (Ph.D.)
- Laurie Linhart, Des Moines Area Community College, “Persistence to Program Completion at a Community College: An Ethnographic Analysis.” \$2,500 (Ph.D.)
- Jacob Lipsman, University of Kansas, “Environmental Risk versus Economic Dependence: Ideology and the Politics of Regulation among a Vulnerable Community in Southern Louisiana.” \$2,500 (Ph.D.)
- Adam Mayer, Colorado State University, “Policy Actors’ Opportunity and Threat Trade-offs in a Fracking Boom: The Role of Economic Dependence, Market Fundamentalism, and Social Movement Mobilization.” \$2,500 (Ph.D.)
- Gwendolyn Y. Purifoye, Kent State University at Stark, “Violent Consequences: The Making of Black Men’s Vulnerabilities through Public Transit.” \$1,900 (Ph.D.)

The committee has worked with the Executive Office to develop a Grant Recipient Agreement. As part of this agreement, grant recipients submit a report of activities. During the past year, the Executive Director and committee chair decided to move the report submission date to precede the annual meeting, allowing for these reports to be circulated among committee members. During the meeting, the committee briefly discussed the reports, finding them helpful and instructive in evaluating research proposals.

Two grant recipients from the past cycle (Dai and McCormick) reported no longer needing grant funding and have agreed to return grant funds to the Executive Office. (The total returned is approximately \$2,000. We note that our efforts in recent years to structure the grant program to avoid grants being considered taxable income likely facilitated the MSS’s ability to receive the full amount of these funds.)

Other Committee Activity

Implementation of the MSS Strategic Plan

The committee’s work primarily contributes to expanding opportunity for professional development (Priority E). In expanding the funds for research awards and making these awards available to graduate student members, the committee has helped widen the range of opportunities based on practice context.

The committee further discussed each of the priorities of the strategic plan in relation to its work, noting two primary means of connection: (a) some priorities serve as guides to the committee as it completes its work and (b) some priorities indirectly benefit from the scholarly activities that the research supported by the grants. The committee takes into consideration expanding the diversity of its own membership and acting in a manner that supports the MSS’s financial plan. It also seeks to select research that will enhance the vitality and utility of the annual meetings and enhance the status of MSS publications.

The committee discussed Priority F (Expand Awareness of Sociological Knowledge and Its Usefulness in Public Dialogue) as it relates to the criteria used in assessing research proposals. The committee determined that adding an additional criterion related to this point would not sufficiently advance the priority. It further noted that the potential contribution of research to public dialogue already informs evaluation of proposals’ sociological merit.

The chair shared the committee's discussion about the strategic plan in the Long Range Planning/Committee Chairs meeting. A small group breakout session during this meeting raised the issue that the strategic plan could better emphasize the status of the profession in the region. As part of this discussion, an idea emerged that there may be a need for research about professional issues relevant to sociologists in the region. In contrast to the American Sociological Association, the MSS does not have full-time research staff. The possibility of a grant program to have MSS members conduct this type of research emerged as an attractive possibility. Subsequently and separately, some MSS members approached the chair and shared a similar suggestion. The chair shared the content of these ideas with committee members who then deliberated over email in advance of finalizing the committee report.

Work Proposed for the Coming Year

As the status of the newsletter is resolved, the committee will continue to work with the newsletter editor to profile previous research grant recipients, using reports submitted by these recipients as one source of information.

In addition, the committee will work with the incoming executive officer in an effort to continue receiving submissions in an efficient manner.

The committee's report also includes a proposal about research on professional issues. If the Executive Committee moves forward with this proposal, the committee will work to help implement the proposal in ways that the Executive Committee and Executive Director deem appropriate.

Recommendation to the MSS Board and Budget Request

Based on this report and the priorities outlined in the MSS Strategic Plan, the committee offers the following two sets of recommendations:

Research Grants

1. MSS Research Grants should continue to be open to graduate student members given the history of productive use of these funds. As a whole, the committee found that the quality of proposals this year was quite strong.
2. The committee found the dedicated pools and shared pool approach effective and proposes to continue the practice in the current allocation (40% each for graduate student members and members with a Ph.D. with the remaining 20% to the shared pool). The committee emphasizes that this approach resulted in highly rated proposals being first compared to each other within category-of-membership pools and then highly rated but not initially selected proposals being compared across pools. These multiple comparisons facilitated productive, focused conversation about the absolute and relative merits of the research proposals.
3. The committee recommends funding the Research Grant program at a maximum of \$18,750 per year. Funding at this level would enable \$7,500 to be allocated for each exclusive category-of-membership pool. The committee will continue to operate with a philosophy of being wise stewards of MSS funds, meaning that it will not simply award

funds for the sake of allocating all funds (either within category or in the total budget). Rather, it will do so only if it has concluded that these funds will make a meaningful difference for a meritorious research project.

Research on Professional Issues in the Region

In response to suggestions that the MSS provide research on professional issues in the region, the Scholarship Development Committee recommends the following:

1. The MSS should fund research on professional issues and the status of the profession in the region. This research should not duplicate efforts of the American Sociological Association, which provides valuable information about professional issues and the status of the profession. Rather, this research should have a distinctly regional focus to assist in protecting the interests of the profession and MSS members. We anticipate such research may include such topics as demonstrating the value of sociology to the region, tracking trends in participation of departments and sociologists in the region in MSS, and documenting other significant developments of importance to sociologists in the Midwest.
2. Because research on professional issues will have a strong applied component that might not result in publications typically considered as scholarship, such research could be compensated. In reaching this conclusion, the committee acknowledges that the research will, as a result, be somewhat more expensive. The committee recommends that the Executive Committee establish a maximum stipend amount while allowing sufficient funding to cover direct research expenses.
3. The committee recommends that the Executive Committee establish priority areas for research on professional issues and the status of the profession. These priorities should guide applicants in developing proposals that meet the needs of the MSS and its members while not duplicating the work of the ASA. The priorities should guide members' research proposals, but not foreclose members proposing research on professional issues outside of these priorities.
4. Members should submit proposals to conduct research on professional issues or the status of profession on a competitive basis to the MSS. The Scholarship Development Committee will review these proposals. The committee acknowledges that such review, in addition to its review of MSS Research Grant proposals, would require additional time for review. Such review could happen either with an extended time at the Annual Meeting or outside the context of the Annual Meeting.
5. Research on professional issues should move beyond identifying problems facing the profession and emphasize ways to address these issues. Proposals should have a well-grounded, innovative research question designed to reveal what we as sociologists have to offer our students and our states and what the MSS as a professional association can do to advance the status of the discipline and profession in the region.
6. Scholars who complete research on professional issues should be allowed to use the underlying research for their own scholarly publications, subject to reasonable limitations.
7. Research on professional issues should be funded separately from the MSS Research Grants. If the funds allocated for professional issues and status of profession research are

greater than the funds needed for high-quality research that meets the goals of the program, these funds will revert to the MSS.

8. If the recommendation is approved by the Executive Committee, the Scholarship Development Committee will work with the Executive Director and Executive Committee to develop calls for proposals.

Other Matters

The committee welcomed three new members this year, to replace one scheduled and two unscheduled vacancies. The committee notes that one of its members—Bob Wazienski—has completed his term of service and thanks him for his consistent participation in committee activities. With the chair and five continuing members, the committee will need to find one replacement member during the coming year.