Who is Leading the Field in 2020?: AAIDD Students and Early Career Professionals

Jill M. Crane[1], Heather J. Williamson[2,3], Sheida K. Raley[4,5], Mayumi Hagiwara[5], Chung

eun Lee[6], and Susan M. Havercamp[1]

[1]Ohio State University Nisonger Center

[2]Center for Health Equity Research, Northern Arizona University

[3]Department of Occupational Therapy, Northern Arizona University

[4]Department of Special Education, University of Kansas

[5]Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities, University of Kansas

[6]General Pediatrics, Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Author Note

1. ORCID accounts: Jill M. Crane 0000-0003-3952-7048

   Sheida K. Raley 0000-0001-8422-1916

   Chung eun Lee 0000-0001-8360-5985

   Susan M. Havercamp 0000-0002-8764-7987

   Mayumi Hagiwara 0000-0001-5134-5867

2. We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

3. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Susan M. Havercamp, The

   Ohio State University Nisonger Center, 371L McCampbell Hall, 1581 Dodd

   Drive, Columbus, OH 43210. E-mail: susan.havercamp@osumc.edu.

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Abstract

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) has been a leader in the field of IDD since its founding in 1876. Today, student and early career professionals make up approximately 8.5% of the organization, with their engagement supported by the Student and Early Career Professional Interest Network (SECP). An article by Havercamp et al. (2003), "Who will lead the field beyond 2020?" recommended organizational changes that have been largely addressed in the years following by SECP. The present research replicates Havercamp et al.'s (2003) original survey of the organization's student and early career professionals, and results support the effectiveness of SECP as a welcoming platform from which students and early career professionals can establish themselves in the organization.

Keywords: intellectual and developmental disabilities; graduate and professional students; early career professionals; professional organizations; interest network

Who is Leading the Field in 2020?: AAIDD Students and Early Career Professionals

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) is the largest interdisciplinary professional organization on intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and has been since 1876. AAIDD has adapted to changes in the IDD field over time to provide professional training, publications, and a community of professionals committed to improving the lives of people with IDD and their families. Recognizing the ongoing need to recruit new professional members to maintain the vitality and relevance of AAIDD and to serve the field, Havercamp et al. (2003) conducted a survey of AAIDD (AAMR at that time) student members in 2000. They found that membership was "graying," with substantially more Lifetime Members of AAIDD (with more than 30 years of membership) than student members and student membership declining with a 28% drop in student members in a single year. In 2000, only 3% of AAIDD's membership were students (Havercamp, et al., 2003).

In an article published in IDD entitled, *Who will lead the field beyond 2020?*, Havercamp et al. (2003) described a survey conducted in 2000 of AAIDD student members about how they learned about the Association, whether they felt welcomed, and what they value most about AAIDD membership. Of the 28% of students who responded, most had learned about AAIDD through a faculty mentor (37%), an employer (22%), or through AAIDD journals (18%). The majority of students (66%) reported feeling welcome in the Association; however, 31% added that the AAIDD dues were not reasonably priced for students. Respondents had a lot to say about the value of AAIDD to their professional development, citing conference attendance, journal articles, and mentoring programs as the most important. Although 100% of respondents reported that conference attendance was important to career development, fewer than half (45%) had ever attended an AAIDD conference due to financial barriers. Students offered many suggestions for

making AAIDD and conference attendance more accessible and beneficial for students. These suggestions included offering scholarships or other cost-saving options, providing opportunities for students to engage with AAIDD leaders, and allowing students to assume leadership roles themselves.

Coincident with the publication of the Havercamp et al. (2003) survey, an ad hoc committee of AAIDD was established to promote Students and Early Career Professionals (SECP). The overall goal of the SECP Interest Network is to "enhance the educational and professional knowledge of students and early career professionals working in the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities and to promote their representation and involvement within AAIDD" (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2020). SECP has become a vibrant organization, establishing teams on social media, scholarships, and membership. To support comprehensive social media activities, the SECP Interest Network has established a social media team (comprised of 4-5 SECP members) that organizes an annual webinar, in collaboration with AAIDD emerging leaders in the IDD field in several ways. First, individual welcome messages are sent to new AAIDD student members via email to explain the purpose of SECP and invite them to join the monthly Zoom SECP meetings. Second,the SECP Interest Network advertises SECP activities and AAIDD activities (e.g., upcoming webinars, annual conference activities, "Hot Release Research Corner") through social media. The SECP social media team has developed a presence on a variety of platforms including Twitter, Facebook, a Medium blog, and a YouTube page.

Third, the SECP has also worked to establish engagement opportunities at the annual AAIDD conference. During the monthly SECP meetings, members discuss the logistics and planning of SECP hosted conference events. The SECP works with leadership of other Interest

Networks to coordinate student scholarships awarded to those who submit exceptional research presentations. Student scholarships are recognized at the SECP hosted luncheon, with Interest Network leaders also attending when possible to recognize the winner(s) on behalf of their Interest Network. The SECP hosts a business and social meeting in which feedback is received on priorities for the next year. In order to encourage attendance and participation at the business meeting, food and drinks are provided and a raffle is held with prizes donated by AAIDD and other Interest Network leaders. Finally, for the past five years, the SECP Interest Network has co-hosted a pre-conference research colloquium with the Research Interest Network to provide AAIDD SECP members with an opportunity to present their research and network with leading IDD researchers and policymakers. Specifically, colloquium presenters have the opportunity to share findings from a research study (e.g., literature review, small-scale project) via an approximately six minute presentation and receive feedback from experts in the IDD field as well as their SECP peers. SECP colloquium presenter candidates submit a research proposal to present at the pre-conference and the SECP leadership team (comprised of the two co-chairs and secretary) select approximately eight presenters each year. In the selection process, the SECP leadership team has been intentional to select proposals from a diverse group of students and early career professionals as well as those who represent an international perspective. To support SECP member attendance at the pre-conference session, AAIDD has funded the event space and facilitated sponsorships from other universities to support attendance. Attendees rated their enjoyment of the pre-conference an average score of 95 on a 100-point scale and the degree to which they liked the format of the presentations an average score of 94. Additionally, seven respondents indicated they would like to present at the 2020 SECP research colloquium and provided their contact information to be notified when the call for proposals was available.

Currently, students and early career professionals comprise approximately 8.5% of AAIDD's membership. Thanks to SECP efforts, students have many more opportunities at AAIDD compared to when the Havercamp et al (2003) study was conducted. This study was designed as a partial replication of the 2003 study to learn about what students value from AAIDD membership today.

Methods

This research was approved by first and last authors' university Institutional Review Board.

Participants

The participant pool for the survey consisted of members of AAIDD currently receiving a student discount on their AAIDD membership, and/or who made their email address available to the SECP Interest Network. Students were defined as those currently enrolled in an academic program and early career professionals were defined as having been in the field 10 years or less.

Materials

The survey created and distributed as part of Havercamp et al.'s (2003) call to action was adapted for use in the present research. Minor alterations were made to update the survey: CD-ROMs were replaced with Webinars. As many of the suggestions to make AAIDD and its annual conference more student-friendly had already been implemented by the SECP Interest Network, "More" was added prior to these items (e.g. "More student scholarships," "More social events to meet a mentor/senior people in AAIDD," etc.).

Procedure

AAIDD's Membership and Communications Manager sent recruitment email messages to members who received a student discount when paying AAIDD membership fees and/or to members of AAIDD's SECP Interest Network. Although messages were sent with the return

address of the first author, names and email addresses of members were not disclosed to the

authors. Participants gave their consent to participate in the survey and were encouraged to

contact research staff with any questions, comments, or concerns about the survey. Two

reminder emails were sent approximately two and four weeks after the original email.

Participants were not required to answer every item on the survey.

Results

Thirty-two students and early career professionals responded to the survey. Participants

were 27 females, four males, and one person who identified themselves as genderfluid; their

average age was 37.2 (Range = 21-58, SD = 9.3). Because participants were allowed to skip

items, the number of participants responding to each item ranged from 24 to 32 (mode = 27)

Many of the characteristics of AAIDD's student and early career professional

membership were stable from 2003 to 2019, including the high proportion of female members,

average age of members (early to mid-30s), and average length of membership (approximately

two years, with a large minority having joined less than a year ago). More than half of

respondents (57%) indicated that they had learned about AAIDD through a professor; 13%

discovered AAIDD through the Internet, and 10% through a conference. See Table 1 for a

comparison of demographic information from 2000 and 2019. Although race and ethnicity

identity was not asked in 2003, and is not asked of AAIDD members, the student and early

career professionals who responded to this survey were largely White/European American, with

approximately 10% identifying as Asian American or Other.

What Other Organizations do Students and Early Career Professionals in AAIDD Belong to?

It is clear that the areas of study and practice among students and early career professionals are far more diverse than they were in 2000. Whereas in 2000 there were a large majority of students in the fields of psychology, special education, nursing, and social work, in 2019 there were seven new areas of study named by students (including family and disabilities studies), with a stronger public health presence. Membership in multiple IDD organizations has also grown among student and early career professional survey respondents, with 11 new organizations named in addition to continued student membership in organizations mentioned in 2000. Newly named organizations reflect the diversified interests and areas of study of AAIDD in 2019; see Table 2 for a presentation of the previous and new memberships.

How Welcome Do Students Feel at AAIDD?

In 2000, 22% of student and early career professional survey respondents strongly agreed and 44% agreed that AAIDD made them feel welcome as part of the organization. In 2019, 55% strongly agreed and 35% agreed with this statement. However, 10% of 2019 respondents reported neutral feelings about whether AAIDD is welcoming to them. This suggests that while AAIDD has continued to recruit and retain students, and implemented new methods for doing so (e.g., research colloquium, scholarships), not all students and early career professional members feel they have been reached.

What Products and Services Do SECP Find Most Useful to Their Training?

In 2000, 80% of students members ranked AAIDD journal articles as most useful, followed by mentoring programs (58%) and books and lectures (46% each). In 2019, 79% found benefit in conferences, 76% in journal articles, followed by webinars (52%) and workshops (48%). With half of survey respondents indicating that webinars would be just as, if not more,

useful than workshops, these results lend considerable support to an increased turn towards internet resources.

Is It Important to SECP to Attend AAIDD Conferences?

Seventy-three percent of respondents reported that they had attended an AAIDD conference and 63% had presented. This is a dramatic increase from 2000, when 45% of respondents reported attending an AAIDD conference. Top reasons that students gave for attending the annual meeting in 2000 were learning about the field, meeting IDD professionals, and meeting researchers. In 2019 the following similar, but somewhat more sophisticated, reasons were given: to network future job opportunities, to attend presentations and learn about the field of IDD, to meet other IDD researchers, and to gain experience presenting papers or posters.

What Can AAIDD Do for Students and Early Career Professionals?

When asked to indicate what could be done to make AAIDD more friendly to students and early career professionals, the top suggestions in 2000 and 2019 were consistent. Students and early career professionals then and now appear to have primarily financial concerns that keep them from feeling welcome to attend the conference, with lower registration fees, more scholarships to cover the cost of attendance, cheaper hotel accommodations, and adding the option of volunteering to reduce or cover the cost of registration being the most frequently chosen responses. Respondents also suggested more opportunities to network with senior members of AAIDD (63%). This was valued even more than the creation of new events to bring students and early career professionals together (33%). See Table 3 for percentages of respondents selecting each option.

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Discussion

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Newly developed social media outlets have increasingly been used among academic and research organizations, including those in the field of IDD. Some have the express purpose of more effectively engaging with student members. For example, the Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD, n.d.) places a large emphasis on video content and social media (through outlets including Twitter and Facebook) and created a social media focused position in 2006, who are now referred to as the Emerging Leader Interns. Similarly, the Council for Exceptional Children leverages a Twitter account with 12,000 followers, and the Arc of the United States has an even larger following of 21,000 (Council for Exceptional Children, 2020; The Arc of the United States, 2020). To this end, the SECP Interest Network has recently set an annual goal to establish a relationship with AUCD Emerging Leaders Network to support future collaborations across dual members, including the possibility of jointly hosting a webinar for AUCD Emerging Leaders and AAIDD SECP members about AAIDD leadership opportunities and activities. The success of organizations' social media efforts have been variable, however, and AAIDD can look to their own and other organizations' prior campaigns to gain further understanding into what kinds of social media posts attract the attention of students and early career professionals in the field of IDD.

SECP Interest Network is currently developing a liaison position to actively collaborate with other AAIDD Interest Networks. Interested SECP members will be matched with their assigned Interest Network to serve in their Liaison role. The main activities of the SECP Interest Network Liaisons will be to attend their matched Interest Network meetings and promote collaboration across the SECP and other Interest Networks in activities. This program launches July 2020.

Given that membership requires paying dues to AAIDD, the financial concerns emphasized by survey respondents (both in 2000 and in 2019) suggests that financial barriers may prevent AAIDD membership and participation of many students and early career professionals. It may be helpful for AAIDD leaders to consider strategies to reduce the financial burden of AAIDD for future leaders of the field.

Suggestions for Increasing Student and Early Career Professional Membership and Participation in AAIDD

The efforts of the SECP Interest Network and AAIDD to make AAIDD more welcoming and accessible to its students and early career members has enhanced the AAIDD experience for these future leaders. We found students and early career professionals calling for more representation, more opportunities for engagement, and more AAIDD leadership activities outside the SECP. Based on this feedback, we offer suggestions to increase the membership and engagement of students and early career professionals in AAIDD.

- Past and current SECP members have taken leadership roles in other Interest Networks and the AAIDD Board of Directors. It is likely that the activities and leadership opportunities available through the SECP prepared them for leadership roles and also helped them expand the professional network within the AAIDD and beyond. Strengthening the pipeline between the SECP and other AAIDD related activities is key to recruit and maintain the strong AAIDD leadership.

- Increase use of e-conferencing technologies to host webinars for the sharing of research among students and early career professionals and more senior members of AAIDD. Many webinars do not include chat functions, and encouraging students and early career

professionals to offer their comments and questions could add to the mentorship aspect of belonging to a large organization that many students and early career professionals seek.

- For the annual conference, our responses suggest that students and early career professionals would attend in increased numbers if offered reduced registration fees, hotel accommodations, and opportunities to connect prior to the conference to arrange for room- and ridesharing.

- Acknowledge the broad interests of students and early career professionals by offering webinars, workshops, etc. on medicine, public health, and family studies.

- Continue to recognize student and early career scholarship through awards, dedicated poster and presentation sessions, and networking opportunities.

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Table 1

Respondent Demographics in 2000 and 2019

	2000 (N = 59)	2019 (N=32)
Age (average, range)	33 (21-62)	37.2 (21-58)[b]
Gender	73% female	84% female,
	27% male	12.5% male,
		2% other[c]
Race/Ethnicity	Data not available	84% White/European American,
		6% Asian American,
		3% Multiracial[a]
Median length of	2 years,	2 years,
AAIDD membership	46% 1 year or less	43% 1 year or less[a]

a N=30

b N=31

c N=32

Table 2

IDD Organizations that Student and Early Career Professional Members Report Belonging to

2000	2019
Arc	Arc
TASH	TASH
Council for Exceptional Children	Council for Exceptional Children
International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities	International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities
National Association for the Dually Diagnosed	National Association for the Dually Diagnosed
	Academy of Developmental Medicine and Dentistry (AADMD)
	Autism Society of America (ASA)
	American Public Health Association (APHA)
	Association of University Centers on Disability (AUCD)
	Special Care Dentistry Association
	American Educational Research Association (AERA)
	International Society for Augmented and Alternative Communication (ISAAC)
	International Society for Autism Research (INSAR)
	The Gatlinburg Conference on Research and Theory in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities
	Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI)
	APA Division 33

Table 3

Suggestions to make AAIDD more welcoming of students and early career professionals

	2003 (N=59)	2019 (N=26-27)
Lower Registration Fees	77%	78%
Student Scholarships	85%	78%
Cheaper Hotel Accommodations	80%	78%
Option to Volunteer to Reduce Registration Fee	75%	78%
Social Events to Meet More Senior Members of AAIDD	67%	63%
Free Food	53%	52%
(More) Student Presentations	41%	44%
(More) Student Awards	36%	41%
A First Time Attendee Orientation	40%	35%
Social Events to Meet Other Student Members of AAIDD	41%	33%