**Report on SCE Programming**

Jean Porter and Dan Finn

September 11, 2018

The basic programming of the SCE is well designed and deeply appreciated by the membership. We are a scholarly society and the mix of plenaries, concurrent sessions dedicated to a single scholarly paper, and various interest and other groups all seem broadly valued. Thus, the first thing to be said is that we see no need for fundamental changes in programming in the Society.

We do, however, have some suggestions for consideration. The first two concern gathering helpful information. The others concern a diverse set of issues

**Information Gathering**

1. We strongly suggest that the membership be surveyed to assess member attitudes about current programming. Employing an app such as SurveyMonkey, the Board could get helpful feedback on a number of issues.
   1. Because of the survey fatigue that many feel, this could be done asking members to answer, perhaps, six basic questions (with an option to end the survey then), with the request that those so inclined would respond to another 15 or so. If the committee overseeing this process had enough energy for it, those 15 extra questions might be tailored to various subgroups (based on age, gender, ethnicity, tenure status, etc.).
   2. Here are examples of the kinds of questions that might be helpful:
      1. Importance of various factors for their decision to attend the annual meeting:
         1. being on the program
         2. lunch event(s) for groups they are part of
         3. “Catching up” with colleagues
         4. the Journal
         5. the location of the annual meeting
         6. a 10% increase or decrease in the cost of attending the annual meeting
         7. availability of financial assistance from their own campus
         8. the presence of SJE and/or SSME during the annual meeting
      2. Some of the same issues could be asked about concerning their decision to maintain SCE membership
      3. Attitudes about changes in recent years concerning
         1. SCE annual meetings now have a theme
         2. Sharper focus at SCE meetings on applied ethics and advocacy
         3. Funding for travel provided by own campus
         4. their overall judgment of changes in the SCE “in the recent past” (whatever “recent” means to each respondent)
      4. Information about themselves
         1. Current position
         2. Age/sex/race or ethnicity
         3. How many years since they first joined SCE?
         4. About how many times have they attended the annual meeting in the past 15 years?
         5. About how many times have they presented a paper at the SCE in the past 15 years?
         6. Many members attend more than one academic society’s meetings. How important is attending the SCE for you compared to the other societies (1st? 2nd? 3rd?)
2. We suggest trying to “squeeze” as much information as possible from the 16-17 years of electronic data we have.
   1. The “off-the-shelf” software that Andrea relies on may not be able to do all this, but standard statistical software could. An SCE Board member on a campus with a graduate program in computer science or mathematics could likely find an appropriate grad student who, for $20/hour, would do this for less than $500.
   2. The questions to be investigated might include:
      1. For several identifiable demographic groups, e.g.,
         1. Race/ethnicity
         2. Full, contingent, student members
         3. Date of first membership (last five years, 5-10 years ago, earlier than that)
         4. Frequency of convention attendance since first date of membership (90%+, 50-90%, 25-50%, 0-25%)
         5. The 5-6 largest denominational groups
         6. Canada, UK, and other international members (grouped together)
      2. Report on the following (as appropriate, given the nature of the group):
         1. Date of first membership (last five years, 5-10 years ago, earlier than that)
         2. For those no longer members in the last full year for which we have complete data,
            1. Number of years of membership
            2. Date of last year of membership
         3. Frequency of convention attendance since first date of membership (90%+, 50-90%, 25-50%,0-25%)

**Other Issues**

1. We suggest that the Society might make richer use of the opportunity for inter-religious reflection on controversial issues. For example, a 3-person panel (from the SJE, the SSME, and the SCE) might assess the current situation in the Middle East. Although we always aim for irenic relations among the three associations, it might be interesting to choose panelists whose views will create a lively contrast of perspectives concerning the underlying ethical issues.
2. Although the participation of younger scholars is more critical for the long-term health of the Society, we suggest that the Board consider a session each year designed to entice additional senior scholars to participate in the annual convention. The theme might be “How My Mind Has Changed,” or “How the Field Has Changed,” or “What I Wish I Knew When I Was a Graduate Student.”
3. We strongly suggest piloting a poster session. These are standard parts of annual meetings in a number of other academic disciplines where scholars summarize their argument (of what would otherwise be a stand-alone paper presented orally at a concurrent session) on a poster (2’ x 3’). Other members then walk around the room where the posters hang, stopping to speak with those authors whose arguments most interest them. More details about poster sessions appear in the appendix to this report.
4. We are aware that some members of the larger committee have suggested applying to various funding sources, perhaps Luce, Lilly, Templeton, etc. We are skeptical about these possibilities, doubting whether these foundations would fund what we in the SCE would want to do. Still, some possibilities exist.
5. Templeton grants often entail some kind of public lecture component. If the SCE were part of the initial proposal, we might arrange for a fascinating outside speaker to participate in one of our annual meetings.
6. Some groups have been successful securing small grants from foundations for short-term purposes (e.g., $500 grants to help students attend national conventions). The SCE, or more likely subgroups within it, could develop similar proposals.
7. Similarly, we might schedule a pre-meeting, just prior to our annual meeting, that engages an ethics-oriented set of scholars participating in such a grant.

As the larger committee and eventually the SCE Board consider various potential additions to SCE programming (whether within the Society, such as regional meetings, or with outside groups interested in discussing ethical issues with SCE members) we suggest a careful consideration of the underlying goals. If the goal beneath this envisioning exercise is to secure the long-term stability of the SCE, the result would likely be much different from beginning with the quite different goal of trying to provide SCE assistance to other groups, organizations, or institutions.

Our own sense is that most groups (churches, universities, seminaries and even denominations and associations of universities or seminaries) already have ready access to the members of the SCE. Thus, it doesn’t seem likely that adding outreach programming will be attractive enough to others that the new programming would be of long-term financial help to the SCE (as granting organizations want the activities to go on long after their grants run out).

Appendix: Poster Sessions

The idea for a poster session at the SCE was first suggested by SCE President-Elect Patti Jung at the July 2018 international Catholic moral theology conference in Sarajevo. There were two "poster sessions." They proved to be very engaging, energetic (the room was abuzz), and intellectually effective.

Close to 100 posters (2 ft. x 3 ft.) were hung throughout a gymnasium. Each summarized what would otherwise have been an academic paper presented orally at a conference. During the first 30-minute session, the first half of the authors were directed to stand near their posters while individual conference participants, walking through the room, would stop to read a poster and ask the author questions or make comments. Then during a second 30-minute session, the other half of the authors did the same.

All conference participants were given the list of authors and titles for the posters. Many entered the room wanting to focus on particular posters during each of the two sessions. For these, as well as for those who did not decide in advance which posters to seek out, a few minutes of reading allowed one to grasp the presentation. Because the author of that poster stood right there, one could ask questions and respond to the author’s comments.

There are definite advantages to poster sessions for the non-authors in attendance. At the SCE, we commit 90 minutes to listen to a paper, and typically stay even if it turns out that the topic was not as advertised or the argument not as interesting as hoped for. At a poster session one discovers this within three or four minutes and can walk on. At the same time, one can usually ask a series of questions to the author, more than a single auditor can politely do at a typical SCE breakout session.

More to the point for the purpose of our committee, poster sessions allow a lot more people to be presenters "on the program" than our current system. We do not question the long-standing SCE policy that dedicates a 90-minute session to a single paper. Far better than just about every other professional conference, this allows for serious conversation. But the Board could take one of those concurrent sessions and turn it into a poster session, beginning with an experimental first year to gauge member reaction. Instead of the current 11 or so authors during one concurrent session, there might be 30-40 authors of posters. Improving on the process at Sarajevo, the SCE conference program could include a short abstract of each poster.

Some SCE members only attend in years when they are on the program; for a far larger number, participation on the program strengthens their ties to the Society. Given the intellectual respectability of poster sessions in other disciplines, this might be a way to increase conference participation and even SCE membership in the coming years.

On a very practical note, we would need a large room where the posters would be hung. Given the usual hotel arrangements for the SCE, this would likely have to be the ballroom in which the plenaries are held, with the posters along the outside walls perhaps for the duration of one morning (including a plenary and this poster session). Another possibility would be to rent a separate ballroom for the entire conference, where the posters might hang on the perimeter, with an inner circle of book publisher tables, with a large space for the coffee breaks in the middle. That way members could also peruse the posters at any time during the conference (though without the authors present). The publishers would likely appreciate the greater than usual traffic in the room.

The Society would also have to rent the frames on which posters are hung. According to staff members at the American Economic Association who oversee their poster sessions, such frames are standard materials rented either from the hotel or from a local "conference decoration" business.

For more information, consult <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poster_session>