

Distinguished Scholars of NCA

At its March 2019 meeting, the NCA Executive Committee changed the process for the selection of the Distinguished Scholar award; calls have been issued under the new system for nominations to serve on the selection committee and for nominees for the award, and several award nominations are in process. David Zarefsky has asked the EC to rescind the decision, seriously consider ways to expand nominations, and apologize to the Distinguished Scholars. Failing that, he urges us to take a year of hiatus and work with the Distinguished Scholars on creating a mutually agreeable selection process.

In response to the petitions recently delivered to the NCA Executive Committee by Professor Zarefsky, this report will offer a perspective on the concerns felt about the Distinguished Scholars award and about the recent changes made to the selection process, discuss the consultation efforts made by the Executive Committee and the National Office, and explore constraints on finding a way for all of us to move forward.

Concerns about the Distinguished Scholar Selection Process

It is clear that the Distinguished Scholars are frustrated and angry about the change adopted by the Executive Committee at our March meeting. That change took the selection of future Distinguished Scholars out of the hands of existing Scholars and into a process where a selection committee (chosen by the Leadership Development Committee) will choose the Distinguished Scholars from among the nominations received each year. The original petition (Appendix 1) signed by 66 Distinguished Scholars shared disappointment at the failure to consult with them before making the change, and noted that their solutions focusing on expanding nominations were dismissed without serious consideration. Concerns about the potential lack of academic credentials involved in the new process, together with the Executive Committee's failure to consult with the originator of the award, leads to a call to restore the selection process, issue an apology to the Distinguished Scholars, and take seriously the suggestions for expanding the nomination pool. These expressions of anger and frustration have reached us in other ways as well, including a resignation from NCA membership by one Distinguished Scholar, comments by colleagues at recent conferences, and David Zarefsky's expression of great emotion (endorsed by many of the Distinguished Scholars as well, Appendices 2 and 3). This anger is heartfelt, and the leadership of NCA acknowledges the depth of these emotions.

Executive Committee Response

To clarify some of the sources of frustration and concern by the elected leaders of the Association, we need to consider the history of NCA efforts to address evident inequities in the Distinguished Scholar award. A brief timeline, drawn from the NCA Backgrounder on this issue (Appendix 4), is helpful in laying out some of our past discussions and their impact.

- After being founded in 1991, between 1992 and 2007, 64 scholars received the award, with 84% (54) being male, 16% (10) female, and not a single person of color.
- In 2007, twelve years ago, the NCA Executive Committee formally raised the issue of diversity, which led to a task force which tweaked the process a bit and provided the Distinguished Scholars information on gender and ethnicity after each year's vote had taken place.
- Between 2008 and 2015, 28 more scholars received the award, of which 71% (20) were male, 25% (7) were female, and one was a male person of color (3%).

- In 2014, NCA again discussed the diversity issue, and Executive Director Kidd asked for the Distinguished Scholars to offer suggestions for considering a broader range of nominees.
- In 2015, based on responses to that call, a policy was introduced to open up nominations to members who are not currently Distinguished Scholars. In seeking Distinguished Scholar input on that proposal, NCA received notice from the Scholars that the Executive Committee had the authority to change the nomination and selection process, which was also agreed upon by the award founder (see Appendix 4).
- From 2015 to today, calls for Distinguished Scholar nominations have been sent to *every member of NCA*.
- Last year, NCA presented a petition from more than 125 scholars about lack of diversity in NCA editorships and the Distinguished Scholars to the Distinguished Scholars, and asked them to come to the table with ways to address this petition and their lack of diversity. At the Salt Lake City meeting in November they acknowledged the issue, but again focused exclusively on how NCA should distribute and highlight the call to solicit more nominations.
- After 12 years of consideration on this issue, and three years of open nominations, we are at this juncture: **104 Distinguished Scholars since 1992, 81 (78%) are males, 23 (22%) are females, and 1 (.96%) is a male of color.**

For the current members of the Executive Committee, twelve years of effort to make the Distinguished Scholar award process more inclusive has resulted in a less than 1% change in the composition of the awardees. When, after twelve years of being aware that the Distinguished Scholars Award is exclusionary and three years of open nominations, we are not seeing any substantial change (more on this below), and the only significant proposal by the Distinguished Scholars was “more nominations,” then the leaders of the Association came to a point where this approach was simply insufficient to incite change, and expressed their frustration at the lack of progress by implementing a change.

Community Concern

The situation with and the awareness of the lack of diversity is not simply a function of the Executive Committee’s perceptions. There has been a significant change within the past five years in both the leadership structure and the Association’s public commitment to diversity and inclusion. When the membership voted to adopt the new bylaws in 2016, a stronger voice was accorded to historically disenfranchised groups.

In our current member approved structure, the Chair of the Diversity Council (a Council featuring representatives from the Asian/Pacific American Caucus, the Black Caucus, the Caucus on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Concerns, the Disability Issues Caucus, the La Raza Caucus and the Women’s Caucus) now sits on the Executive Committee, bringing that strong set of voices and concerns to the table and making sure the Executive Committee sees diversity, equity and inclusion as high priorities for the Association.

In 1995, then SCA adopted our statement on diversity, equity and inclusion (Appendix 6), which was modified in 2012, and then most recently modified by the Diversity Council and approved by the Legislative Assembly in 2018. That public statement says in part that “NCA believes that diversity enriches the academic understanding, analysis and use of human communication, which can be understood only to the extent that ideas from diverse spokespersons and perspectives are heard and

valued. The highest quality criticism and research of communication requires an understanding and appreciation of diversity within and across cultures.” Our publicly available Strategic Plan (Appendix 7) highlights these values via an addition to the NCA mission statement passed in 2018: “NCA supports inclusiveness and diversity among our faculties, within our membership, in the workplace, and in the classroom; NCA supports and promotes policies that fairly encourage this diversity and inclusion.” In our most recently adopted bylaws, Article I Section 2B, under the purpose of the organization, is clear that NCA “has the goal of fostering and promoting a diverse and inclusive organization.”

So the leadership of NCA is both willing and obligated to address these issues, and has already begun to do so in several other ways. The Diversity Council and the Publications Council are currently developing a plan for creating more diverse pathways to becoming an NCA journal editor, and our harassment policies have been dramatically changed and publicized to foster a safer and more inclusive environment at all NCA-sponsored events and meetings.

Over 125 members of the NCA community signed a petition expressing deep concern that the Distinguished Scholar award (alongside the lack of diversity and inclusion in NCA’s publishing program) does not represent the values of the Association. The Executive Committee has an obligation to challenge institutionalized exclusion and take the perspectives of those who have been historically excluded by various features of the Association, including the Distinguished Scholars Award, into account, and we have public statements of our organization that oblige us to do so.

Why has this continued to be an issue?

This discussion involves a very important point about structural exclusion. Whether an individual person is racist or sexist is not at issue. Racist and sexist structures do not require individually racist and sexist people to work the way they work.

The structure that was set up years ago with the Distinguished Scholars selecting who gets the award has systematically excluded people of color and women. The Aspen Institute describes structural racism as a “system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity” (<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/structural-racism-definition/>). They further note that “structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist.” This is not about any one individual’s *intent* to discriminate but about a structure that functions to exclude. We know there is exclusion empirically by the numbers (78% white males, 22% white females, .96% scholar of color), and we know it perceptually because we hear it from the caucuses and the Chair of the Diversity Council and we see some of the community concern in the petition signed by 125 of our colleagues. Racial equity, the Aspen Institute notes, holds society to a higher standard and “demands that we pay attention not just to individual-level discrimination, but to overall social outcomes.”

This also dramatically impacts the focus by the Distinguished Scholars on generating more nominations for the Award to achieve greater parity. We have to ask ourselves: *Does anyone really believe that there is only one scholar of color in our broad and expanding discipline that merits the award of Distinguished Scholar?* We think not, and know that there has to be something more going on here. One of the features of structural exclusion is that it becomes both emotionally defeating and motivationally estranged from those who are marginalized. Why nominate a person of color when the

evidence is so clear, dating back to 1991, that their materials will not be equitably evaluated? Why accept a nomination as a person of color when the potential outcome is to become a token representation of diversity and join a group of “peers” who are not inclusionary? A brief hypothetical might illustrate: If the situation were reversed, and the award winners were 99.04% people of color, all voting to select the recipients, would the current Distinguished Scholars feel no hesitation or concern about putting their materials forward for consideration? It does not escape the attention of the Executive Committee, as Zarefsky argues, that “not a single member of the Association (including the EC members themselves) chose to place any such diverse scholars into the Association-wide nomination pool” (Appendix 2). The structure itself creates very real and also very strongly perceived barriers to a robust set of nominations. The Executive Committee feels that trying to get more diverse nominations in a process where mostly white people determine who is admitted to the group is highly unlikely—insufficient nominations are an outcome of the problem—the exclusionary structure is the problem.

NCA recognizes that some of our brightest, most engaged, and most prolific scholars are experiencing anger over these adopted procedural changes. Please understand that Executive Committee actions also come from a place of frustration with twelve years of discussion, that our values and newly revised leadership structure will not allow us to ignore the numbers and the community anger, and that we believe corrective action must address the structural nature of the exclusion rather than convincing more people to seek entry into the structure.

Consultation

Over the years, we should acknowledge some difficulties in creating clear communication channels and identifying decision-makers for smooth interactions between the Distinguished Scholars and the Executive Committee of NCA. Very few people serve more than four years on the Executive Committee. The officers cycle through, focus heavily on the convention preparation, and then have one year of leadership as President. The Council Chairs, for the most part, serve three year terms. It is also true that the Distinguished Scholars have been a relatively diffuse group, with a loose sense of leadership, and some difficulty in communicating effectively with the large group and directly addressing critical issues in a timely fashion. And, of course, the Distinguished Scholars, as a group, have no formal/structural role within NCA’s governance system. In this regard, having David Zarefsky as a point person has been a good change.

As the timeline in the Backgrounder shows, NCA has communicated a concern with a lack of diversity to the Distinguished Scholars a number of times over 12 years. It seemed like a breakthrough in 2015 to induce the Distinguished Scholars to allow people other than Distinguished Scholars to nominate people for the award. It has also been very clear that the Distinguished Scholars have resisted any change to the structural nature of the award, and are insistent that only Distinguished Scholars could select award winners. When we informed them that the system wasn’t working, that the numbers weren’t changing, and that opening up the nomination process hadn’t achieved any substantive results, the only options brought up were ways to publicize the nomination process. However, this approach has already been employed and resultantly failed to yield any substantial changes. Under these circumstances, the Executive Committee felt that enough time had passed for the Distinguished Scholars to reassess their approach, and that it was unlikely that they would recognize and address the structural issues of the

award. When in Salt Lake City they rejected our call for substantive change and referred us back to ways to expand nominations, the Executive Committee felt the need to change the award.

There are some additional issues that have been raised or are implicit in the petition that also should be addressed here.

Why didn't we consult the Award creator?

There are really two aspects of this. First, without an attached name, the award doesn't present and is certainly not highlighted with the creator's name. I suspect not a single member of the Executive Committee was clear on the association between the two. Second, and more importantly, the Distinguished Scholars and Mark Knapp himself agreed in 2015 that the Executive Committee had the authority to change procedures for Distinguished Scholar nomination and selection (Appendix 4). A courtesy call might have been in order, but it would have simply been courtesy since it is an NCA award and the Executive Committee has the authority to make the changes we did.

Is the Award about diversity?

No, it is not. It is about sustained scholarship of sufficient quality and breadth. However, it is an NCA award, and as such is subject to our mission, our values, and our goals moving forward.

Zarefsky has said that our claim to bring the award selection process in line with other awards is a red herring, because the award was not intended to be like other NCA awards. NCA has accepted that for many years, but it has now become painfully clear that the current structure empirically and perceptually functions, at minimum, to exclude people of color and women.

This award should procedurally be like other awards in that the award winners are selected by a diverse group of people, and that within the focus of the award, no persons or group of persons should feel excluded because of something over which they have no control.

Moving Forward

Based on a review of the history of this issue, our commitment to valuing and celebrating communication research and to ensuring a diverse, inclusive and equitable Association, and on our responsibility and authority over NCA awards, the Executive Committee stands by our decision to change the method of selection for the Distinguished Scholar Award for this year (2019), and will seek feedback and input from a variety of stakeholders to explore further improvements in the process.

To be clear, this is not a decision that is taken lightly or on a whim. We are aware that systemic change is going to take time; and while we are optimistic that the changes made to the 2019 award process will have an impact, this will be an ongoing process so that the award reflects the Association's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We would like to clarify some of our rationale and then identify specific steps moving forward. Our perspective is based largely on the following points:

- The NCA National Office has made it clear repeatedly to the Distinguished Scholars that significant steps must be taken to address the lack of diversity among the Award recipients. Years of drumming up nominations had no effect, task force work and recommendations adopted by the Executive Committee in 2008 yielded no substantive changes, and opening up nominations to all NCA members in 2015 also yielded no significant changes.
- Last year, the Executive Director delivered a clear and strong message about the urgency of the issue, sharing the #NCAsoWhite petition, and then meeting with Distinguished Scholars in Salt Lake City to underscore the Executive Committee's desire for serious change. The Award has been given for twenty-six years, and for twelve years we have raised the lack of diversity issue, adopted a host of changes in the voting processing details, and opened up nominations to all members. Yet the Award is still clearly and empirically exclusionary: Gender is not equitably represented, and the .94% scholar of color statistic is still shocking, considering the blossoming richness and breadth of our discipline.
- The time for incremental changes has passed. The November 2018 Distinguished Scholar response that "we just need to get more nominations" is an approach that has already failed to increase diversity, and does not address the need for structural change. The Executive Committee feels strongly that the nomination approach is not working because there is a structural exclusion operating within the Award process. As noted earlier, this decision is not about individual Distinguished Scholar perceptions or attitudes. That the need for substantive change is strongly perceived by a community of scholars around the Association is clear from the petition we received, from feedback from the NCA caucuses, and from views expressed by members of the Executive Committee.
- The new selection process is time-tested for NCA Awards, and our efforts to ensure diversity in our other awards and recognitions has worked well with the Leadership Development Committee (previously the Committee on Committees) ensuring robust and thoughtful recipient selection from a diverse set of nominations. We strongly believe that you don't have to be a Distinguished Scholar to explore and recognize good, quality sustained scholarship. We also encourage Distinguished Scholars to nominate Scholars for participation in the Award selection committee.
- Finally, it is clear to us that the Executive Committee has the authority and the obligation to ensure equitable access to our Association awards. This authority is implicit in Executive Committee oversight of Association activities, was made explicit in 2007 when the Scholars and the Award creator agreed that NCA had oversight of the Award, and is historically validated since it was the Executive Committee that voted to adopt some of the Task Force recommendations in 2007 as well as the change to open up nominations to the membership in 2015.

We do recognize that there are potential improvements as we move forward with the new selection process. We are creating a working group to solicit input, gather feedback, and identify improvements moving forward. Here are some specifics of this continuing improvement process:

- The Award process will move forward this year as crafted by the Executive Committee in March. The public announcement of the changed process means that this year's nominees are operating under certain expectations that we will not be changing at this time. Again, Distinguished Scholars are welcome to nominate themselves or other Scholars for participation on the selection committee.
- Over the next ten months, four members of the Executive Committee and two representatives from the Diversity Council will undertake a quality improvement assessment. Generated ideas and options will be considered by the Executive Committee at the NCA Leadership Retreat in February 2020.
- The group will solicit information and generate policy options by 1) Listening to key stakeholders (Caucuses, Distinguished Scholars, #NCAsowhite petitioners, among others); and 2) Developing ideas and proposals for refinement of the Award, including nomination strategies, improving the selection process, and revisiting the criteria for selection.

As difficult as this is, to question and change the structure of the Award, the Executive Committee agrees that each of the Distinguished Scholars is a prolific, creative, and dedicated scholar, and that changing the award structure does not diminish the distinction and honor of the Award. The Executive Committee also believes, as it crafted these changes, that structural change is necessary for the achievement of NCA's diversity and inclusion goals. We hope, in fact, that making such changes, and pursuing improvements as we move forward, is a way for all members of the Association to feel positive and proud of our Distinguished Scholar Award.

Star Muir, President
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