

## **Effective Communication Practices and Barriers Affecting Member Engagement among Association Special Interest Groups**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Objectives:* Organizations such as the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) have thousands of members with diverse interests and continually face the communication challenge of providing the right message to the right member at the right time in a clear, concise manner. This is especially crucial for those who are engaged and actively teaching leadership content in curriculum.

*Methods:* An assessment of the general membership of the Leadership Development Special Interest Group (LD SIG) was conducted. In addition, SIG executive officers were surveyed to identify communication practices and barriers.

*Results:* This research brief provides findings representing 86% of special interest groups' (SIG) executive committees to assess communication barriers and most effective communication methods utilized.

*Conclusion:* Executive officers need to utilize multiple technologies and methods of communication to enhance member engagement. Furthermore, this information provides a starting framework suggesting communication practices that can be used to engage members across all levels.

**Keywords:** communication, leadership, member engagement, special interest groups

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The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #1.

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## INTRODUCTION

Communication keeps professional organization members connected to the latest advancements and development opportunities. This communication within organizations provides promotion to the profession and interaction with members (Hallahan, K. et al., 2007). According to the Union of International Associations, there are over 60,000 professional organizations world-wide (<https://uia.org>). Within the United States alone, tens of thousands of professional organizations exist with millions of members (Weeks, L., 2011). Given the complexity of competing information for the individual member, it is imperative that organizations provide the right message to the right member at the right time in a clear, concise manner. There are five components of the communication process: sender, receiver, message, channel and feedback (Ash, E. & Quarry, P., 1999). A sender is the lead communicator, who designs messages that are clear, specific and timely by selecting an appropriate channel and soliciting feedback. The receiver interprets the information and can then request any clarification and provide feedback.

One example of a complex organization is the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) which includes multiple subgroups of the Academy, including Special Interest Groups (SIGs), sections, councils, and committees (American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy Organization. <https://www.aacp.org/organization>). In addition to section and council involvement, AACP members can designate two primary SIGs among the 21 active groups. Communication could be through meetings, webinars, teleconferences and electronic tools such as AACP Connect<sup>®</sup>, adopted in 2017. President of AACP (2019-2020), Dr. Sorensen noted, “members are often bombarded with information - not just from AACP but from other organizations.... As a result, messages can be lost in the noise” (T. Sorensen, personal communication, March 28, 2019). This may mean that members are missing important information and/or becoming desensitized due to the volume. Without proper communication methods, members are at risk of either information overload (ignoring the message) or not receiving the message at all. These issues could lead to an overall decrease in member engagement (Fraifeld, E.M., 2010; Chaudhary, P. & Tuladhar, H., 2014).

Choosing optimal communication methods can represent a challenge for an organization’s leadership and is a common quality improvement need noted by healthcare-related professional organizations (Fraifeld, E.M., 2010; Chaudhary, P. & Tuladhar, H., 2014). Within national organizations, leaders are often pushed to use a variety of virtual forms of engagement including social media, social networking platforms, virtual meetings, and online forums (Spector, J. M., 2010; Shariff, A.I., Fang, X., & Desai, T., 2013; Agarwal, N., 2014; Golden, C., 2008). Effective use of various communication tools increases engagement and contributes to the health of organizations by promoting member dialogue. (Hockman, J., 2008).

Currently, there is a gap in the literature to describe communication practices amongst SIG members, SIG executive officers and the greater organization. To fill this gap, a research team within a SIG subcommittee used a multi-level approach to evaluate communication within AACP SIGs. This brief describes these findings and includes communication strategies for enhancing the engagement of members across AACP.

## METHODS

Two surveys were conducted in this study. The first study was sent to SIG executive officers to identify communication practices and barriers across all 21 AACP SIGs (Appendix A). The second survey was sent to Leadership Development Special Interest Group (LD SIG) members who were surveyed to provide a preliminary assessment of a large and well-established SIG's communication, member awareness, the impact on SIG members' professional growth, and characterize barriers to communication (Appendix B).

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval as exempt research, an electronic survey was distributed in 2016 to the 81 executive officers of the SIGs, including current SIG chairs, chair-elects, past-chairs, and secretaries of knowledge management. Using a numerically coded Likert scale ranging from poor (1) to excellent (5), respondents were asked to rate the level of engagement of SIG members, and their ability to communicate with SIG members, with scores >3 indicating "Good Communication". Respondents were also asked to describe the types and number of communication methods utilized, identify the most effective communication methods used, describe any barriers to communication, and identify if email was used as the only communication method.

A second IRB-approved survey was conducted as an assessment to more closely evaluate communication practices within an individual SIG. This assessment utilized a convenience sample and was distributed in 2016 to 868 members through the LD SIG listserv to evaluate SIG communication from the perspective of the membership. LD SIG members were asked to describe their utilization of the LD SIG website, the number of LD SIG newsletters received, and the number of SIGs in which they were involved. They were also asked to indicate if they encountered any communication barriers, qualify the level of impact of the LD SIG on their professional growth on a scale ranging from poor to excellent, and use a Likert scale to rate their level of awareness resulting from LD SIG communications. Finally, SIG members were asked to qualify their level of involvement with the LD SIG on the basis of membership status, as well as committee and subcommittee membership. Many of these members are educators who teach leadership courses within their pharmacy organization, therefore clear communication is a critical component to ensuring that information is shared appropriately.

The findings from both surveys were evaluated using descriptive statistics. Pearson correlation analysis was also used to assess for significant relationships between variables, including communication, perceived communication barriers, awareness, engagement, impact, and others. Statistical analyses were conducted using the SAS for Windows software version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC) and  $p < .05$  were considered statistically significant.

## RESULTS

Eighteen of the 21 SIGs (86%) were represented in the SIG executive officers survey responses. The SIGs across AACP represent a diverse interest across pharmacy education (Table 1). To prevent duplication the survey was designed to require officers to respond to survey questions for only one SIG even if they held leadership roles in multiple SIGs. The officer position with the greatest number of responses was the Chair position (38.7%), followed by Chair-Elect (29.0%), Secretary (19.4%) and Immediate Past Chair (12.9%).

The mean (SD) number of communication methods utilized by each SIG was 2.7 (1.1), including email, website, blogs, webinars, toolkits, surveys, file sharing applications, and others.

Over half of respondents (54.8%) identified email as the most effective form of communication. As shown in Table 2, there were positive correlations between SIG communication score, which reflects the officer's perceived ability to communicate with members, and member engagement ( $p=.002$ ). There was also a positive correlation between the number of communication methods used and perceived communication abilities (Communication Score) ( $p=.04$ ). Two potential negative correlations were identified but did not reach statistical significance. The first was between utilization of email as the only communication method and quality of communication. The second negative correlation identified was between utilization of email as the only communication method and engagement. Barriers to communication were also evaluated, with the most commonly reported barriers being low response rate, data overload, inadequate time, and listserv communication problems.

To further investigate member perspective on communication, an assessment of the 868 LD SIG members was conducted and yielded 100 responses (response rate 11.5%). Respondents self-identified as either Member (61%), Non-Active Member (19%), Committee Member (11%), Subcommittee Member (7%) and Executive Committee Member (2%).

The findings showed significant positive correlations between website use level and member awareness about the SIG. Although these findings should be interpreted with caution, given the nature of the LD SIG member assessment, there was a statistically significant positive correlation between website use level and perceived impact on professional growth (Impact Score), as shown in Table 3. Level of SIG involvement was also statistically significantly positively correlated with awareness and professional impact scores, using the same numerically coded Likert scale described previously. The number of SIGs in which participants were involved was also positively correlated with organizational awareness (Awareness Score) ( $p=.02$ ). As shown in Table 4, primary involvement in the LD SIG was significantly associated with impact on professional growth. Thirty-seven percent of LD SIG respondents identified inadequate information and lack of time as the most common barriers.

## DISCUSSION

Overload can occur when information is provided digitally and includes mass amounts of communication. Because of these two components taking place, recipients of information must continually assess whether it is relevant to them (Batista, J. & Marques, R., 2017). The best ways to overcome overload is to incorporate strategies such as filtering information (Bawden, D. & Robinson, L., 2020). Opening organizations to peer-to-peer communication such that the flow of information is no longer solely from the top-down (leadership-driven), but is instead a collaborative approach driven by the membership, however the cost of this transition is often information overload (Overton-de Klerk, N. & Verwey, S., 2013).

While organizations may have a primary communication channel, a single electronic communication tool cannot address the continual overload of information. These types of tools may be higher reach, however, they may not be the most effective communication channel (LaBelle, S. & Waldeck, J., 2020). Despite data overload being identified as a communication barrier by the SIG executive officers survey respondents, the LD SIG member survey reported that inadequate information was a barrier to communication. Therefore, our findings suggest it is important to ensure that the correct messages are being concisely and accurately delivered to only the intended audience.

The results of this study can help inform practices for executive officers to optimize communication. Moving forward, incorporating best practices to enable focused communication can serve the association well. Dr. Danielson, Chair of the Council of Sections (2019-2020), recommends segmenting smaller groups of like-minded professionals to communicate messages that are most relevant and desired by that group (J. Danielson, personal communication, March 27, 2019). For instance, providing a vehicle for communication for specific areas of interest, independent of a specific SIG (e.g. specific curriculum topics, clinical specialties, etc.) may provide a mechanism for more focused communication. This would allow a forum to discuss niche areas of interest and further decrease the amount of unrelated or unwanted communication within the larger SIG or other group. Additionally, Dr. Danielson recommends setting an etiquette for communication within AACP Connect<sup>®</sup>. Setting ground rules for the types of information shared and where and how the information is shared benefits the organization and its members. When leaders utilize the aforementioned communication process, they will serve their members better with clear, concise communication and may increase engagement.

Based on the perspective of SIG executive officers, developing standardized communication practices across the academy may add value. Utilizing the components of the communication process (sender, receiver, message, channel, and feedback) targeted specifically to the intended group could provide a starting point for developing communication best practices. Some ideas for best practices could include; knowing the members' specific needs; identifying the key message of each communication; providing clear, consistent, communication in a timely manner, ensuring information is current, accurate and accessible; promoting healthy dialogue by asking open-ended questions; and managing leadership transitions in order to facilitate the flow of information and retention of resources over time.

One suggested communication practice for SIGs could be to consider developing "New Member Orientation" materials which include a description and guide of resources available (e.g. Newsletter, Podcast, Toolkit, Virtual Symposium, Webinars, Annual Meeting, Book Blog/Journal Club). Each SIG, section, council, and committee should develop communication practices which are applicable to their specific member needs and re-evaluate those frequently for continued effectiveness in order to provide relevant information and adequate communication.

## CONCLUSION

Both data overload and inadequate information were identified as communication barriers within AACP. This suggests that communication with the broadest reach to members is not necessarily effective or offers a high-yield communication. Instead, focused communication targeted only to individuals to whom it is most relevant may be more impactful. Good communication is correlated with high levels of member engagement. Therefore, setting ground rules for appropriate communication could lead to favorable outcomes including decreasing the overall volume of communication to the individual user, ensuring the most relevant information reaches the user, and increasing the overall trust the user has in the organization's ability to provide timely, pertinent information.

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Jennifer Danielson, Chair of the Council of Sections

**Appendix A. AACP SIG Executive Officer Survey**

Please list all SIGs you currently involved with in AACP? <drop-down menu with list of all SIGs – multiple answers allowed >						
In which SIG(s) do you hold an officer position with in AACP? <drop-down menu with list of all SIGs – multiple answers allowed >						
What officer position(s) do you hold? <open-ended text box>						
Please list all communication methods that your SIG utilizes to connect members? (e.x. SIG website, newsletters, toolkits, online communities, blogs, wikis, etc.) <open-ended text box>						
Which of the communication methods utilized by your SIG do you find to be the most effective? <open-ended text box>						
What barriers have you encountered when communicating with your SIG? <open-ended text box>						
How would you rate the (Overall?) level of engagement of your SIG’s general membership (annual meeting attendance, signing up for committees, responsiveness to inquiries, productivity, exchanging information, use of SIG resources) ?						
Poor	0	1	2	3	4	5 Excellent
How would you rate your ability to communicate with your SIG members?						
Poor	0	1	2	3	4	5 Excellent

**Appendix B. AACP Leadership Development SIG Member Survey**

Please list all SIGs you currently involved with in AACP? <drop-down menu with list of all SIGs>						
How would you describe your Involvement in the LD SIG LD SIG member                      LD SIG subcommittee member LD SIG committee member    Exec committee of SIG Not involved at all						
What SIG are you primarily involved with in AACP? <drop-down menu with list of all SIGs>						
How many e-mails have you received from the LD SIG listserv in the last 12 months? <drop-down numeric field>						
How many newsletters have you received from the LD SIG listserv in the last 12 months? <drop-down numeric field>						
Are you aware of the leadership content on the AACP website ( <a href="http://www.aacp.org/leadership">www.aacp.org/leadership</a> )? < drop-down Yes or No field>						
How many times have you visited the LD SIG website in the last 12 months? <drop-down multiple choice field: 0 times, 1-5, 6-12, 13+>						
What barriers have you encountered when communicating within the SIG? <open-ended text box>						
What content and information would be valuable for your leadership in scholarship, teaching, service, practice? <open-ended text box>						
How would you describe your level of awareness of the general structure of the AACP LD SIG?						
Poor	0	1	2	3	4	5 Excellent
How would you describe the impact of the AACP LD SIG on your professional growth?						
Poor	0	1	2	3	4	5 Excellent

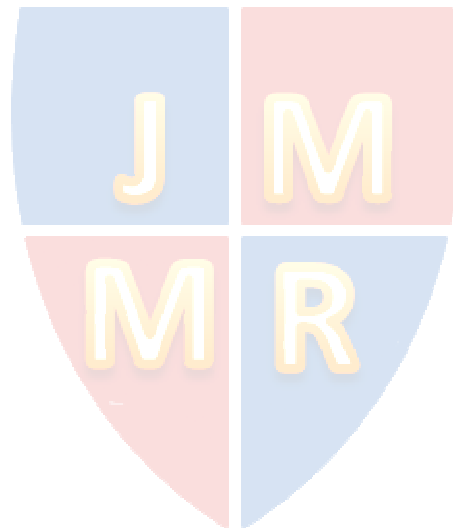
**Table 1. Representation of SIGs in AACCP Executive Officer Survey**

Special Interest Group (SIG)	Number of Responses
Administrative and Financial Officers Special Interest Group	3
Assessment Special Interest Group	0
Curriculum Special Interest Group	2
Development Directors Special Interest Group	1
Geriatric Pharmacy Special Interest Group	1
Global Pharmacy Education Special Interest Group	1
Graduate Education Special Interest Group	2
Health Care Ethics Special Interest Group	1
Health Disparities and Cultural Competence Special Interest Group	0
History of Pharmacy Special Interest Group	2
Laboratory Instructors Special Interest Group	2
Leadership Development Special Interest Group	2
Minority Faculty Special Interest Group	0
Pediatric Pharmacy Special Interest Group	1
Pharmacogenomics Special Interest Group	1
Public Health Special Interest Group	2
Self-Care Therapeutics/Nonprescription Med. Special Interest Group	2
Student Services Personnel Special Interest Group	1
Substance Abuse Education and Assistance Special Interest Group	2
Technology in Pharmacy Education & Learning Special Interest Group	2
Women Faculty Special Interest Group	3
Total Responses	31



**Table 2. AACP SIG Executive Officer Survey Results – Correlation Analysis**

Variables	Communication Score	Good Communication	SIG Size	# Communication Methods	Use of email Communication Only
<b>Engagement Score</b>	r = .68 p = .002	r = .61 p = .007	r = .05 p = .831	r = .35 p = .154	r = -.03 p = .904
<b>Communication Score</b>	-	-	r = .22 p = .389	r = .48 p = .04	r = -.19 p = .444



**Table 3. Assessment of Correlations between Variables and LD SIG Communication Perceptions**

Variable	Barrier Reporting	Impact Score	Awareness Score
Website Utilization	-.02 (p=NS)	.46 (p<.000)	.44 (p<.000)
# SIGS involved	-.04 (p=NS)	.18 (p=NS)	.23 (p=.021)
# Newsletters received	.05 (p=NS)	.11 (p=NS)	.47 (p<.000)

\*

**Table 4. Summary of LD SIG Member Survey Responses Stratified by Level of Involvement**

Summary of Survey Responses Stratified by Level of Involvement			
Level of Involvement	% Awareness	% Impacted	% Reported Barriers
Non-Active Members (n=19)	0	0	31.6
Members (n=61)	21.3	11.5	34.4
Committee Members (n=11)	72.7	54.5	36.4
Subcommittee Members (n=7)	42.9	71.4	57.1
Executive Committee Members (n=2)	100	50	100
Respondents with no LD SIG involvement (n=62)	24.2	14.5	33.9
Respondents with some LD SIG involvement (n=38)	28.9	26.3	42.1
Total (n=100)	26	19	37

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