



NATIONAL  
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MEMORANDUM

TO: NCA Executive Committee  
FROM: Trevor Parry-Giles  
DATE: March 25, 2019  
RE: Backgrounder on Distinguished Scholar Award

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The NCA Distinguished Scholar Award was established in 1991 when the Administrative Committee accepted a donation from Mark Knapp to create the Mark L. Knapp Distinguished Scholar Fund. The purpose of the award was to “recognize and reward a lifetime of scholarly achievement in the study of human communication by members of SCA.”

The proposal for the creation of the Distinguished Scholar (DS) Award specified that “the last four Presidents of SCA (Gouran, Knapp, Friedrich, and Osborn) and the current chair of the SCA Research Board (McCain) will comprise the committee responsible for reviewing and revising the selection criteria and selecting the first five scholars to receive this award.” The founding proposal also indicates that “‘Scholarship’ and the extent to which it is ‘distinguished’ will depend on the subjective judgments of the persons doing the selection (initially and later).” The proposal also established the system for selecting subsequent DSs via a vote of sitting DS recipients: “Nominations can only be made by Distinguished Scholars.”

The initial “class” of DSs, in 1992, consisted of the following (with affiliation): Carroll Arnold (Penn State), Samuel Becker (Iowa), Ernest Bormann (Minnesota), Karlyn Campbell (Minnesota), Dennis Gouran (Penn State), Franklyn Haiman (Northwestern), Kathleen Hall Jamieson (UPenn), George Kennedy (North Carolina), Gerald R. Miller (Michigan State), and Robert Scott (Minnesota).

Between 1992 and 2007, 64 scholars were named NCA Distinguished Scholars (some posthumously). Of those 64 scholars, 54 were male (84%) and 10 were female (16%). None were scholars of color.

In response to concerns raised by the Executive Committee, a task force was convened in 2007 to consider changes to the DS selection process; the task force consisted of EC members and DSs (including Dawn Braithwaite, Betsy Bach, Rich West, Roger Smitter, and “15 DSs”). That group met at the 2007 NCA Annual Convention to address the following: “(a) concerns about the nomination process (e.g., how well are DS able to evaluate candidates on c.v. alone and as the candidates become more diverse in terms of expertise areas in the discipline expand) (sic), (b) concerns about lack of diversity of DS (at this point in time gender diversity appeared to be the major concern), and (c) concerns of how DS may stay informed about voting patterns and any other issues they might need to address.” As reported in the EC minutes from February-March of 2008, the following changes (as drafted by Celeste Condit, David Seibold, and David

Zarefsky) were unanimously approved by the EC: “Recommendations 1, 2, 4 and 5 are: 1) Include a brief statement by the nominator contextualizing the record of the nominee. 2) After voting is completed, distribute to all Distinguished Scholars a tabulation by gender and ethnicity of those who were a) elected, b) ranked but not elected, and c) not ranked because not supported by enough Distinguished Scholars. 4) If one of the top four nominees is deceased, an additional person may be selected, provided he or she is ranked by enough Distinguished Scholars to qualify. 5) Reinstate the annual meeting of the Distinguished Scholars at the NCA Convention.” Recommendation 3 was not presented/voted upon; it stipulated that “Each voting DS will be asked to indicate in 1-2 sentences the most influential factors in his or her evaluation of each nominee.” It appears that DSs were asked to vote on these recommendations in advance of the EC’s deliberations about these changes.

Between 2008 and 2015, 28 scholars were named NCA Distinguished Scholars. Of those 28 scholars, 20 were male (71%) and 7 were female (25%). One (3%) male scholar was a scholar of color.

At its June 2014 meeting, the NCA Executive Committee discussed again the issue of diversity and the Distinguished Scholar program—that discussion occurred in the context of the EC’s endorsement of the 2014 DSs—Contractor, Goodnight, Gross, and Vangelisti. No decision was reached and the 2014 DSs were endorsed. The EC did endorse further discussion and investigation about achieving greater diversity among the DS nominations. A letter was sent by then-ED Nancy Kidd to all the DSs; that letter asked for input from the DSs: “When the Executive Committee met last week, inquiry about the requirement described above revealed that I can only infrequently provide a complete report about inclusion of gender without revealing identities of specific nominees, and ethnicity remains undefined for these purposes. This led to a discussion about whether there might be some better ways of fostering consideration of a broader range of Distinguished Scholar nominees. On behalf of the Executive Committee, I ask you to please share any ideas you may have in this regard. They can be sent to me at [nkidd@natcom.org](mailto:nkidd@natcom.org).”

Four replies to this request were sent to Dr. Kidd. These comments were reported, with names attached, to the EC. One DS (Leslie Baxter) noted: “I have to admit my ongoing frustration and disappointment with how DS are selected. The problem is less nominations per se but more the selection process. Current DS should not do the selecting in my view. The process reproduces the status quo in every imaginable way—white male rhetoricians elect their own again and again.” Another (Linda Putnam) said: “I am not one to raise flags and label a process as inadvertently exclusionary or discriminatory, but I have participated in many an NCA Distinguished Scholar election and I am discouraged by these results. Past elections have led me to systematically weigh women and minorities first in my own voting because I have seen the patterns. It is NOT that I do not vote for men because I do and this time we elected an Asian [the first and only scholar of color chosen to be a DS] and two social scientists--which is some balance in its own right. However, I’m discouraged about the women and minorities who were qualified in my mind and did not get it.” The other two comments came from Art Bochner and Ed Schiappa.

These comments were forwarded to the EC for discussion; comments received subsequent to the four replies were also noted and identified by name. At the February 2015 EC meeting, proposals were introduced to expand the pool of nominations by allowing any member of NCA (and not just DSs) to nominate scholars and to expand the number of potential DS awards in a given year, dependent upon the amount of nominees received. The following appears in the February 2015 EC minutes: “A motion was made by Turner to ask the Distinguished Scholars to do an advisory vote on the two proposed changes to the award policies. Seconded by Beck. Motion carried unanimously.”

Notably, the EC materials for the February 2015 meeting contains the following advisory, derived from the DS comments: “First, with respect to authority to make decisions, there was ‘general agreement that EC

has the authority to change the procedures for DS nomination and selection (although at least one doesn't believe the EC should exercise the authority). Knapp, who funded and founded DS, believes that this is EC purview and EC should make changes if they see fit.” Both proposals were ultimately enacted by the EC at the June 2015 meeting.

Between 2009 and 2018, 122 scholars were nominated to be DSs; 81 (66%) males, 41 (37%) females, and 3 (2%) scholars of color. Of those, 42 were named as DSs; 29 (69%) males, 13 (31%) female, and one scholar of color (the same individual noted above in the 2008-2015 data).

Since the enactment of the 2015 changes to the DS nomination and selection process, there has been regular contact between the National Office and the Distinguished Scholars. Those discussions have concerned a number of matters—convention programming, the status of the Distinguished Scholars within NCA's governing structure, filmed interviews with the DSs, etc. Those discussions also addressed the ongoing problem with the lack of diversity among the DSs. They culminated with the DS meeting at the 2018 Annual Convention in Salt Lake City where the DSs were informed of the petition submitted to the EC regarding the lack of diversity among NCA's editors and among the DSs and of the EC's concern about both the petition and the diversity and inclusion issues in the DS selection process. The DSs at that meeting suggested that the DS nomination process be expanded and that greater outreach occur with divisions and caucuses in an attempt to expand the diversity of the nominees for the DS Award. This response was communicated to the EC who opted, in March of 2019, to change the selection process for the DS Award.