Building Advocacy and Policy Capacity: A Survey of SCRA Members

Kenneth Maton, Melissa Strompolis, and Leopold Wisniewski

In the summer of 2012, the Policy Committee of the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) administered a web-based policy survey to the SCRA membership. The primary purpose of the survey was to gather information to help SCRA consider ways to enhance its policy capacity. The survey included a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. Areas of focus included current occupational status, policy experience, the most important social problems/issues for SCRA to focus on in the policy arena, areas of policy expertise, activities for building SCRA policy capacity, and policy and advocacy activities viewed as critical to SCRA's mission, including member willingness to contribute to them. Two hundred and seventy-nine SCRA members returned surveys (response rate of 22.9%). Key survey findings are highlighted below (a somewhat shorter summary was provided in *The Community Psychologist*, Spring, 2013 issue, pp. 13-16). We conclude by drawing several implications for future SCRA activities to enhance our policy capacity and influence.

Occupation

Respondents were asked to report their occupational status by selecting all response options that applied: *student* (undergraduate, masters or PhD student), *practitioner*, *professor/academic*, *researcher*, *consultant*, or *government employee*. The 279 respondents selected a total of 357 occupations (multiple responses included; see Table 1). Just under half of all respondents selected *professor* (48.4%), followed by *PhD* student (20.9%), *practitioner* (14.7%), *consultant* (12.7%), and *researcher* (12.4%). Overall, a large number of SCRA members responding to the survey are involved in the academic arena as a professor or student. However, the SCRA respondents also include representatives from a variety of non-academic occupations.

Table 1.

*Self-Described Occupational Status of SCRA Members (*N = 279; 357 occupations selected*)*

Occupation	%	*n* (occupations)
Professor/academic	41.5%	148

PhD student	17.9%	64
Practitioner	12.6%	45
Consultant	10.9%	39
Researcher	10.6%	38
Government	2.8%	10
Other	1.4%	5
Masters student	1.1%	4
Undergraduate	1.1%	4

For the purpose of conducting exploratory analyses, respondents were collapsed into three categories (academic; students; all other). Chi square analyses were conducting comparing these three groups on the close-ended survey responses. Significant findings (only) are reported below.

Slightly less than one-fifth (18.6%, $n = 52$) of respondents selected two or more occupations. Among these respondents, the most common occupations selected (see Appendix, Table A-1) were *consultant* (65.4%), *practitioner* (59.6%), *professor/academic* (53.8%), and *researcher* (40.4%). As indicated in Table A-1, the most common secondary occupations for respondents who selected *consultant* and another occupation were: *practitioner* (51.3%), *professor* (48.7%), and *researcher* (28.2%). Of note, 34 of 39 (87.2%) respondents who indicated *consultant* indicated one or more other occupations, as did 31 of 45 (68.9%) of those indicating *practitioner*, and 21 of 38 (55.3%) of those who indicated *researcher*.

Policy Experience

More than one-third of survey participants (35.4%; $n = 92$) responded to the open-ended question requesting a description of up to three policy influence experiences, providing a total of 187 codable experiences (mean = 2.0 experiences described). The two most common policy-related work domains were legislative (34.8%; without a specific intermediary or advocacy indicated) and working with intermediary or advocacy organizations (31.6%; in most cases, these organizations appear to be involved in legislative advocacy). The next most common domain was community-based organizing or work with local advocacy organizations (18.7%; most of these likely involved attempts to influence legislation). Next most frequent was work with executive branch officials (12.3%). Finally, the least common was policy-related work within the judicial/legal system (2.7%).

The most common level of government was local (39.6%), followed by state (32.6%; including both city and county), and national (26.6%). Only a small number focused at the international level (1.1%).

Examples of policy involvement in the legislative domain include working for passage of the Violence Against Women Act (national), successful lobbying for AIDS Drug Assistance Program funding (state), and public service as an elected representative (to local Town Meeting). Examples of work with intermediary organizations include serving as a consultant to the UN Program on Aging (international), contributing to amicus briefs as a member of the American Psychological Association Committee on Legal Issues, (national), serving as a legislative

committee member for a coalition against domestic violence (state), providing community-based participatory research to a community partner which is heavily involved in advocacy work (local), and serving as director of a public policy center (multiple levels).

Examples of involvement in the community-based organizing and advocacy domain include organizing large protest/rallies and being a representative to the media for these events, working with grassroots organizations on specific policy issues (e.g., homelessness, Latino day labor rights, local arts initiatives for returning soldiers, education financing, LGBT issues, women's issues, racial disparities in education), and personally organizing neighbors to stop the establishment of a local gun range. Finally, examples of policy involvement in the executive branch domain include working for a federal agency that advocated for prevention funding (national), engagement in research for the Department of Civil Rights (state), and research-based contributions to changes in criminal justice system policy (local). The policy experiences described, taken together, indicate a wide diversity in branches and levels of government addressed, work settings (e.g., academia vs. intermediary vs. government), policy influence roles and activities, intensity, and specific policy issues of focus.

SCRA Policy Priorities

Respondents were asked to write in the top three social problems/issues which SCRA might work most effectively on, alone or together with allied groups, to influence public policy in the coming year. Taken together, 515 responses were provided: 186 top ranked social problems/issues, 174 second ranked, and 155 third ranked. The 515 open-ended responses provided were categorized into a list of 35 social problems (see Appendix, Table A-2 for full listing). The summary below represents the total number of times a given social issue was indicated. Table 2 indicates the ten social issues of greatest policy importance to SCRA members, along with sample responses. Health care (39.3%) and poverty (29.0%) appeared at the top of the list, followed by education (21.5%), mental health (15.1%), economic inequality (12.9%), community development (11.8%), prevention/promotion (10.8%), violence (10.2%), immigration (10.2%), and policy/government (9.7%).

Table 2.

Top Ten Social Problems/Issues for SCRA Focus in the Policy Arena

Social Problem/Issue	%	n	Sample Responses
Health Care	39.3%	73	*Heath care reform, Health disparities*
Poverty	29.0%	54	*Affordable housing; Poverty and child dev.*
Education	21.5%	40	*Reading failure; Achievement gap in schools*
Mental Health	15.1%	28	*Community impact of reduced services*
Economic Inequality	12.9%	24	*Widening gap between rich and poor*
Community Development	11.8%	22	*City development related to health*
Prevention/Promotion	10.8%	20	*Prevention as cost-solving mechanism*

Violence	10.2%	19	*Youth violence reduction*
Immigration	10.2%	19	*Immigration reform (e.g., Dream Act)*
Policy/Government	9.7%	18	*Public accountability for government*

Areas of Policy Expertise

More than one-third of survey participants (35.0%; *n* = 91) described up to three areas where they had substantial policy expertise and could potentially serve as a policy expert. Mental health (11.4%) was the most frequent area of expertise. Sample responses were: *mental health user/consumer/survivor issues; reform and funding alternatives*. The second most frequent was prevention/promotion (10.8%) and responses included: *the national prevention strategy of the American Care Act*; *suicide prevention*. The third most frequent area of policy expertise was policy/government (9.0%). Sample responses were: *public participation in policy making*; *lobbying*. The fourth most frequent was health care (7.2%) and responses included: *Medicaid program for children*; *tribal long term care supports and services*. The fifth most frequent was youth (6.6%). Sample responses were: *juvenile justice*; *youth development*. Clearly, among SCRA members there are a substantial number with critical areas of policy expertise who are willing to contribute significantly to the policy/advocacy arena. (See Appendix, Table A-3 for the full listing of areas of policy expertise provided).

Activities for Building SCRA Policy Capacity

Survey respondents were asked "May SCRA call on you regarding your areas of expertise (e.g., to provide input into a SCRA policy-related activity)?" Response options were: *Yes, Maybe, No*. A total of 119 survey respondents indicated willingness to provide input into a SCRA policy-related activity (74.8% of the 150 individuals who responded to this question). Respondents were next asked if they were interested in contributing to three specific types of SCRA activity: building capacity of SCRA members, advocacy, and collaborating with allied disciplines or organizations. About one third (32.9%; *n* = 74) of those who responded indicated they would be interested in participating in efforts related to building SCRA member capacity, with more than two-fifths (43.1%, *n* = 97) indicating *Maybe*. Approximately one quarter (25.9%; *n* = 58) of the respondents indicated they would be interested in participating in SCRA policy efforts related to advocacy, with close to another two-fifths (39.3%, *n* = 88) indicating *Maybe (*53.2% of students provided *yes* responses compared to 29.5% of other respondents, a statistically significant difference). Finally, more than one fifth (22.3%; *n* = 50) of the respondents indicated they would be interested in participating in SCRA policy efforts related to collaborating with allied disciplines or organizations, with more than two-fifths (43.3%, *n* = 97) indicating *Maybe* (39.2% of students provided *yes* responses compared to 19.5% of other respondents, a statistically significant difference).

Of the 111 individuals responding *No* to at least one of the three SCRA policy effort options provided, 32 (28.9%) provided a response to the open-ended follow-up question requesting "additional policy-related efforts in which you would like to be involved." The most frequent

category of response was a specific policy area of interest to the respondent (e.g., *bullying as it pertains to LGBT youth*; *educational reform issues*; *racial justice approach to health disparities).* Additional areas of contribution focused on graduate education (e.g., *development of a webpage/distance learning course on policy for community psychology graduate programs*); policy-relevant research (e.g. *research discussion groups; research on the effects of policies*); and specific types of advocacy activity (e.g., *community-based advocacy*; *crafting policy statements*; *promoting awareness about nonprofit rights to advocacy; talking to policy makers on behalf of SCRA*).

Finally, 42 individuals expressed interest in joining the SCRA Policy Committee (19.9% of the 211 who responded to this item). Another 114 members (*54.0%*) endorsed *Not now, but possibly in the future.* Overall, a substantial number of SCRA members appear interested, in various ways, in contributing to SCRA policy-related activities.

Policy and Advocacy Activities Viewed as Critical to SCRA Mission

The survey examined the views of members concerning several policy-related activities, including policy advocacy, capacity building, collaborations, and research grants. The survey items included three response options: *critical to SCRA's mission*, *important but not essential*, and *not important*). The number of respondents ranged from 256-260.

Policy Advocacy
The vast majority of respondents feel that engaging in policy-related activities is *critical* to SCRA's mission (78.1%; *n* = 217). Another 21.2% of members feel that engaging in policy-related activities is *important but not essential* to SCRA's mission (n = 59). Taken together, 99.3% of SCRA members who responded to the survey feel that, at a minimum, policy-related activities are an important part of SCRA's mission.

Concerning specific policy advocacy activities, as indicated in Table 3, the most highly rated activity was to *disseminate policy positions or research findings* (81.1% rated as *critical* to the SCRA mission), followed by *develop policy position statements* (66.5%), *develop relationships with policy makers* (62.4%), and *meet with policymakers* (55.1%).

Table 3.

Policy Advocacy Activities within SCRA

_____

Activity	N	Critical	Important	Not Important
_____

Disseminate policy positions or research	259	81.1% (210)	17.4% (45)	1.5% (4)
Develop policy position statements	260	66.5% (173)	29.6% (77)	3.8% (10)
Develop relationships with policymakers	258	62.4% (161)	35.3% (91)	2.3% (6)
Meet with policymakers	256	55.1% (141)	40.2% (103)	4.7% (12)

Other[a]   35   80.0% (28)   17.1% (6)   2.9% (1)
_____

Note. [a]Examples of *Other* include education (i.e., *policy education initiatives*), funding (i.e., *fund policy specific studies and dissemination efforts*), and membership communication (i.e., *mobilize SCRA members to take action locally and nationally*).

As depicted in Table 4, the level of focus of policy advocacy activities, according to survey respondents, is most *critical* for SCRA at the *national* level (75.6%). About half of the respondents feel that *state* (54.1%) and *local* (55.0%) policy advocacy are *critical*, compared to only 30% at the *international* level. None of the the type of activity and level of focus of policy advocacy items received an endorsement of *not important* to SCRA's mission by more than 7.4% of respondents. Students were significantly more likely to rate state (80.0%) and local (73.8%) levels as *critical* to SCRA's mission than were other respondents (53.2% and 48.7%, respectively).

Table 4.

Level of Focus of Policy Advocacy
_____

Level of Focus	N	Critical	Important	Not Important
National	258	75.6% (195)	23.6% (61)	0.8% (2)
Local	258	55.0% (142)	37.6% (97)	7.4% (19)
State	257	54.1% (139)	42.4% (109)	3.5% (9)
International	258	30.2% (78)	65.5% (169)	4.3% (11)

_____

Capacity Building
Respondents were asked to indicate how important it was to build the capacity of SCRA members in a number of different policy-related areas. As indicated in the top portion of Table 5, respondents to the survey feel that it is most *critical* to the SCRA mission to build the capacity of members to *disseminate policy positions or research findings* (77.4%) and to *conduct policy-relevant research* (75.5%), followed by *learn to link SCRA values to policy initiatives (68.4%), advocate with policymakers* (59.4%), and *develop policy position statements* (55.1%).

In terms of mechanisms to enhance member capacity, as indicated in the bottom portion of Table 5, respondents feel it is *critical* to *integrate policy-relevant coursework into graduate programs* (73.5%) and to provide *workshops or training sessions at conferences* (69.6%). *Important but not essential* capacity building approaches were *webinars* (51.0%) and *web-based policy courses* (51.8%). Only a small number of respondents rated the capacity building activities and mechanisms offered as *not important* to SCRA's mission.

Table 5.

Building SCRA Member Capacity in the Policy Domain: Activities and Mechanisms

_____

	N	Critical	Important	Not Important
Activities				
Disseminate policy positions or research	257	77.4% (199)	22.2% (57)	0.4% (1)
Conduct policy-relevant research	257	75.5% (194)	24.1% (62)	0.4% (1)
Link SCRA values to policy initiatives	256	68.4% (175)	28.5% (73)	3.1% (8)
Advocate with policymakers	256	59.4% (152)	38.7% (99)	2.0% (5)
Develop policy position statements	256	55.1% (141)	40.2% (103)	4.7% (12)
Mechanisms				
Policy-relevant graduate coursework	257	73.5% (189)	24.9% (64)	1.6% (4)
Workshops/trainings at conferences	257	69.6% (179)	28.8% (74)	1.6% (4)
Webinars on specific topics	257	45.5% (117)	51.0% (131)	3.5% (9)
Web-based policy course	257	42.4% (109)	51.8% (133)	5.8% (15)

Collaborations

As shown in Table 6, over half of the respondents feel that it is *critical* to SCRA's mission to collaborate on policy-related issues with the *Society for Prevention Research* (57.8%), the *Society for Psychological Study of Social Issues* (56.8%), *Psychologists for Social Responsibility* (52.9%), and the *American Psychological Association* (51.4%). In terms of being *critical* to the SCRA mission, the *Society for Research on Child Development* (SRCD; 32.4%) and *international* organizations (29.6%) received less support, with the majority of respondents indicating collaborating with these latter organizations was *important but not essential* (58.6% and 62.6%, respectively). Only a small number of respondents (ranging from 1.9% to 9.0%) rated collaboration with any of the organizations listed as *not important* to SCRA's mission. When asked to list other potential policy partners or organizations, thirty respondents provided remarks, including 14 general comments (e.g., *federal health organizations*, *let's reach out beyond psychology*) and 20 specific organizations to partner with (e.g., American Evaluation Association, Association for Psychological Science, and American Public Health Association). See Appendix, Table A-4 for the full list of organizations.

Table 6.

Enhanced Policy-Relevant Collaboration with Allied Disciplines or Organizations

_____

Discipline or Organization	N	Critical	Important	Not Important

_____

Society for Prevention Research	256	57.8% (148)	39.5% (101)	2.7% (7)
Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues	257	56.8% (146)	41.2% (106)	1.9% (5)
Psychologists for Social Responsibility	257	52.9% (136)	44.7% (115)	2.3% (6)
American Psychological Association	257	51.4% (132)	45.5% (117)	3.1% (8)
Society for Research on Child Development	256	32.4% (83)	58.6% (150)	9.0% (23)
International Organizations	257	29.6% (76)	62.6% (161)	7.8% (20)

Research Grants

Respondents ($N = 254$) rated how important SCRA policy mini-grants (up to $5,000 each) are to SCRA's mission. Most respondents (58.7%; $n = 149$) rated the mini-grants as *critical* to SCRAs mission while 95 rated them as *important but not essential* (37.4%) to SCRA's mission. Only 10 (3.9%) rated the mini-grants as *not important*. Students were significantly more likely to rate mini-grants as *critical* to SCRA's mission (75.0%) than other respondents (53.2%).

Additional Policy-Related Activities

Respondents to the survey were asked for additional policy-related activities that are critical to SCRA's mission, or ideas for important new policy-related activities that SCRA should consider undertaking. Forty provided a response to this question, with the most common responses falling under the following themes: education (e.g., *Application based training to help practitioners in the field to better prepare and participate in advocacy activities*), collaboration (e.g., *Linking up with existing community-based organizations and/or networks that work on policy issues*), and research (e.g., *Support research on the effects of policies*). Less frequent themes included: policy-related capacity building, development, dissemination, and issue-specific work.

Conclusion

Based on the responses to questions regarding policy-related activities, the top priorities for SCRA and its members are conducting policy-relevant research and developing and disseminating policy-relevant position statements. To enhance SCRA member involvement in these policy activities, SCRA should consider incorporating more policy-relevant course work into graduate programs and providing more policy-relevant trainings.

Implications for SCRA Moving Forward

The SCRA policy and advocacy survey provides a valuable snapshot of SCRA member views on the importance of policy influence activity for SCRA as an organization, current levels and types of member policy involvement, and priorities for future organization-level policy initiatives. Although any interpretation of these findings must be tempered by the modest response rate and the unknown representativeness of those who responded, the survey nonetheless reflects the perspectives of hundreds of SCRA members.

Based on the survey findings, the membership feels it is critical for SCRA to engage in policy and advocacy efforts and are very interested themselves in contributing to policy/advocacy work. Furthermore, there are many important social issues and problems that SCRA members not only feel passionately about (i.e., health care and poverty) but also about which they have great content expertise. SCRA thus has an opportunity to address the social issues that are important to the membership by providing opportunities to those with expertise to contribute further, and by building the policy-influence capacity of those interested members with less experience in the policy arena.

In terms of providing opportunities and building capacity, the survey provided several clear directions. Based on the responses to questions regarding policy-related activities, the top priorities for SCRA and its members are conducting policy-relevant research and developing and disseminating policy-relevant position statements. When examining willingness to contribute to policy/advocacy initiatives, there is a slight decrease in response compared to the overall question of whether or not SCRA should engage in policy/advocacy related activities. This may be due in part to the number of individuals who do not yet feel capable to personally contribute to policy work. These members might benefit from the top two capacity building activities reported by the membership: integrating policy and advocacy relevant material into graduate coursework and providing trainings and workshops.

At the organizational level, SCRA should explore ways to capitalize on the content and policy/advocacy expertise of its members and at the same time build the capacity to engage in policy/advocacy activities of less experienced members. This may be achieved in part by providing opportunities for SCRA's less experienced members to work with our experts in disseminating research and developing policy position statements. Additionally, SCRA could provide an opportunity for more experienced members to help design graduate course work, provide training materials, and participate in workshops to increase capacity for interested SCRA members. Clearly, collaboration with partner organizations is critical to effective policy work, and SCRA should explore ways to build partnerships with allied organizations. Finally, as SCRA moves forward in the policy domain, the SCRA Policy Committee welcomes your input on this report (send email to maton@umbc.edu), and in particular on how best to utilize, mobilize, and expand the capacity of SCRA and its members to contribute in the policy domain.

Appendix

Table A-1

Self-Described Occupational Status of Subset of SCRA Members Indicating More than One Occupational Status (N = 52)

Occupation	%	n
Consultant	65.4%	34
Practitioner	59.6%	31
Professor	53.8%	28
Researcher	40.4%	21
Government	11.5%	6
PhD student	11.5%	6
Other	9.6%	5
Masters student	1.9%	1
Undergraduate	0.0%	0

Table A-2

Social Problems/Issues of Importance to SCRA: Full List

Social Problem/Issue	%	n	Sample Responses
Health Care	39.2%	73	*Heath care reform, Health disparities*
Poverty	29.0%	54	*Affordable housing; Poverty and child dev.*
Education	21.5%	40	*Reading failure; Achievement gap in schools*
Mental Health	15.1%	28	*Community impact of reduced services*
Economic Inequality	12.9%	24	*Widening gap between rich and poor*
Community Development	11.8%	22	*City development related to health*
Prevention/Promotion	10.8%	20	*Prevention as cost-solving mechanism*
Immigration	10.2%	19	*Immigration reform (e.g., Dream Act)*
Violence	10.2%	19	*Youth violence reduction*
Policy/Government	9.7%	18	*Public accountability for government*
Environment	8.6%	16	*Environmental justice*
LGBT Rights	8.6%	16	*Marriage equality*
Oppression (Racism/Sexism)	8.6%	16	*Resurgence of Jim Crow in states*
Social Justice	7.0%	13	*Child welfare*

Social Services	6.5%	12	*Increasing low-income voter turnout*
Homelessness	5.9%	11	*Approaches to solving homelessness*
Diversity	5.4%	10	*Disability issues*
Unemployment	5.4%	10	*Job training/intervention for the unemployed*
Youth	5.4%	10	*Youth empowerment*
Child Development	4.8%	9	*Early childhood development*
Domestic Violence	4.8%	9	*Intimate partner violence*
Drug Use	4.3%	8	*Criminalization of substance use*
Research	3.8%	7	*Bias in U. S. scientific research agenda*
Women's Rights	3.8%	7	*Women's reproductive rights*
Crime/Incarceration	3.2%	6	*High number of incarcerated*
Evidence-based	3.2%	6	*Translating research into effective policy*
Organizing	3.2%	6	*Civic engagement*
Gun Control	2.7%	5	*Gun violence*
Bullying	2.2%	4	*Bullying – in schools & workplace*
Civil Rights	2.2%	4	*Migrants' rights*
Human Trafficking	1.6%	3	*Sex slavery and female genital mutilation*
Aging	1.1%	2	*Aging*
Parenting	0.5%	1	*Deficits in parental involvement*

Note. Percentages and *n*s are based on first ranked, second ranked and third ranked responses combined (515 responses in total, from 186 respondents). Some responses are shortened to save space. Survey Question: Please list below any additional policy-related efforts in which you would like to be involved.

Table A-3

Most Frequent Areas of Expertise (Willing to Serve as a Policy Expert)

Area of Expertise	%	*n*
Mental Health	18.3%	19
Prevention/Promotion	17.3%	18
Policy/Government	14.4%	15
Health Care	11.5%	12
Youth	10.6%	11
Community Development	7.7%	8
Immigration	6.7%	7
LGBT Rights	6.7%	7
Domestic Violence	5.8%	6
Education	5.8%	6
Environment	5.8%	6

Homelessness	5.8%	6
Child Development	4.8%	5
Research	4.8%	5
Organizing	3.8%	4
Poverty	3.8%	4
Crime/Incarceration	2.9%	3
Diversity	2.9%	3
Drug Use	2.9%	3
Economic Inequality	2.9%	3
Social Justice	2.9%	3
Evidence-based	1.9%	2
Oppression (Racism/Sexism)	1.9%	2
Social Services	1.9%	2
Women's Rights	1.9%	2
Aging	1.0%	1
Bullying	1.0%	1
Parenting	1.0%	1
Violence	1.0%	1

Survey question: Please indicate up to three areas where you have substantial expertise AND could potentially serve as a policy expert (i.e., available to talk to the media; take part in Congressional hearings; contribute to a policy position paper).

Table A-4

Other Enhanced Policy-Relevant Collaboration with Allied Disciplines or Organizations

Name of Organization	%	*n*
Association for Psychological Science	13.3%	4
Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minorities	13.3%	4
American Public Health Association	10.0%	3
American Evaluation Association	6.7%	2
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	6.7%	2
American Educational Research Association	3.3%	1
American Orthopsychiatric Association	3.3%	1
Community Campus Partnerships for Health	3.3%	1
Health Psychology	3.3%	1
International Association of Society and Natural Resources	3.3%	1
Living Knowledge	3.3%	1
National Association of Social Workers	3.3%	1
National Council on Family Relations	3.3%	1
Psychologists in Public Service	3.3%	1

Society for Research on Adolescence	3.3%	1
Society for Social Work Research	3.3%	1
Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence	3.3%	1
The Association of Black Psychologists	3.3%	1
The Marcé Society	3.3%	1
Veterans Affairs	3.3%	1