

From the Section Chair:
Are We on Course to Having an Adequate Workforce of Survey Researchers in the Future?
By Bill Kalsbeek

Cliff Zukin's 2006 article on the future of the survey research profession (*Public Opinion Quarterly*, 70(3): 426-442) raised a number of important issues and questions for me, as did the findings of an informal poll of recent chairs of the SRMS and presidents of AAPOR that I conducted. The purpose of the poll was to hear what these leaders see as looming issues for the field. Findings from these two sources confirmed a number of concerns that I've heard anecdotally from others and felt myself during the past decade. I'm going to suggest below that most of what I see in these findings points to a central but unanswered question that we should answer very soon; namely,

Will the future workforce of survey researchers in the US be adequate, both in terms of numbers and quality?

I'll then toss in a couple of thoughts on how we might address this matter, with the hope of generating discussion that will lead to any needed action.

The Zukin article and my poll point to several important concerns, in order of importance according to the combined number of mentions.

1. *Maintaining a highly trained workforce of survey researchers* – Implied here is concern about how well we recruit new people to the field, the capacity and penetration of our training infrastructure within the academic community, and the adequacy of how and what we teach new recruits and current survey practitioners.
2. *Maintaining professional standards in how surveys are conducted* – The general concern here is with how, as one respondent in my poll stated, “just about anyone can design, implement, and publicize the results of a survey,” often at lower cost and quality than those committed to higher professional standards.
3. *The allure of relatively inexpensive web surveys* – The underlying issue with collecting data via the internet seems to be the absence of a serious balancing of cost vs. error tradeoffs because of obvious cost advantages and less obvious error implications.
4. *The overall cost of surveys* – This item raises the question of how surveys can continue to be conducted if traditional approaches are costing more while at the same time budget line items for these surveys are diminishing.
5. *The perception of surveys outside of the profession* – Here the need is to make users of survey findings more discerning and appreciative of what goes into conducting a “good” survey.
6. *Maintaining the integrity of survey samples* – The concern here is challenges to the quality of samples from such things as frame exclusions (e.g., cell-only households), declining response rates, and continuing pressure to relax standards in how rigorously samples are chosen.
7. *The need for more methods research outlets* – The point implied here is that one can't promote high quality survey methods and methods research, or to support those whose professional livelihood depends on them, unless there are enough top-tier journals to publish survey methods research.
8. *Scientific objectivity and survey findings* – This concern mourns the tendency for some to slant survey design or findings for subjective purposes, thus moving surveys away from their intended use as sources of objective information.

While each of these concerns is distinguishable by who or what is affected, most are tied to having an adequate future supply of survey researchers. For instance, resolving the training concern would contribute

to the quality of the workforce. Moreover, a preponderance of qualified survey researchers would be more likely to expose the failings of a minority of those subscribing to lower professional standards, provide the knowledge base to more fully understand the implications of web-based data gathering, make users of survey findings more aware of their strengths and limitations, find solutions to inadequate sample representation, and promote the objective use of survey data.

What's sobering to me about the future workforce issue is that to my knowledge little or nothing is currently being done about it. I strongly believe that this wait-and-see attitude must change, lest we fall into the same trap as those who continue to doubt the reality of climate change or the likelihood of the future insolvency of the Social Security system.

So what should we do? First, we could determine whether or not existing concern about the future workforce issue is justified. Roundtables and/or invited sessions on the topic at the next couple of JSMS and AAPOR annual meetings would be a start. Then, drawing on our own proclivity to seek information and find answers, we might look into funding a more thorough study to answer our workforce questions and to propose solutions as needed. In addition to the SRMS and AAPOR, groups like the, the National Science Foundation, the Committee on National Statistics, the Office of Management and Budget, and other statistical committees and professional organizations with a focus on survey research might be brought into this effort. The idea is to act now to deal with an issue which, if left untended, could adversely affect the future quality of survey research in this country.

Let me hear your thought on this, or any other related concerns you may have. Feel free to contact me anytime at kalsbeek_srms@unc.edu.