

Assessing AFS Student Needs and Desires  
Summary of Student Subunit/Chapter Survey  
2008 Governing Board Retreat  
AFS Annual Meeting – Ottawa

## **INTRODUCTION**

Students compose 10-15% of the membership in the Parent Society. Recent AFS initiatives, including reducing yearly student membership rates and granting free access to AFS journals, have helped to increase the number of student members in the organization. However, recruitment and retention of students and young professionals has been identified as an issue within the Parent Society (see initiative written by the Membership Committee and the Student Subsection in spring 2008). Initial exposure to AFS most often begins at the student subunit or student chapter level. Identifying the needs and desires of student subunits/chapters and responding to those needs may foster increased recruitment and retention of students and young professionals in the Parent Society.

## **METHODS**

The Membership Committee and the Student Subsection of the Education Section authored and administered a 10-question online survey via SurveyMonkey.com (Appendix A). A link to the survey was e-mailed to known student subunit/chapter presidents, officers, and faculty advisors in early July 2008. The survey was open for at least 30 days, and a reminder to complete the survey was sent two weeks before the final deadline in early August 2008.

## **RESULTS**

Thirty-five responses were recorded in our online survey. Most (54%) of the respondents were faculty advisors, but subunit/chapter presidents composed 31% of the responses. All “ages” of the student subunits/chapters were represented in the recorded responses (Figure 1).

A majority of respondents (91%) claim that they have contacted the Parent Society regarding subunit/chapter business fewer than twice a year (Figure 2). When officers or advisors do contact the Parent Society, they most often contact the Constitutional Consultant (55%), Webmaster/Application Support (27%), Executive Director and Membership Coordinator (tied, 18%), and the President (9%), respectively (Figure 3). Other contacts include the Awards Coordinator and the Student Subsection President.

Most (64%) respondents consider their student subunit/chapter “somewhat” connected to the AFS Parent Society; 21% reported little to no connection between their student-based unit and the Parent Society (Figure 3). In addition, most (67%) respondents reported at least a basic understanding of the AFS hierarchy (Figure 4). However, 21% stated they have no understanding of the hierarchical system.

Half of the respondents identified recruitment of new members as the biggest challenge their student subunit/chapter faces (Table 1). Planning events and retention of members were also identified as important challenges. If the Parent Society were to distribute information to student subunits/chapters in an effort to help them overcome the challenges they face, most respondents said they believe the packet should include ideas on how to recruit and retain members and information on the benefits of student membership in AFS (Table 2). A list of ideas for subunit/chapter events was also identified as information subunits/chapters would need. A majority of respondents (75%) believe this information would be best distributed to subunits/chapters via the AFS website (Figure 5). Electronic media was preferred over paper or other media.

In final comments by survey respondents, some suggestions were recurring (Table 3). Student subunit/chapters would benefit from mentorship and cooperation from those in the upper tiers of the AFS hierarchy or at least those who have more experience within AFS and the fisheries profession. This list includes faculty advisors, professional mentors, and state or regional chapters. Finally, students would like better financial opportunities to attend division and Parent Society meetings. Suggestions were made to either reduce the cost of meetings or to provide more scholarships and grants to students attending these meetings.

## **DISCUSSION**

The survey distributed to AFS student subunit/chapter officers and faculty advisors provided information on how the Parent Society can better address the needs and desires of students and young professionals through outreach efforts to student-based units. Information subunit/chapter activities or events can recruit and retain members is desired in a quick, easily accessible electronic format. Further, the benefits of AFS membership should be disseminated from a more seasoned AFS representative. Finally, student subunit/chapters desire to be better integrated within the AFS hierarchy. By assisting subunits/chapters with their issues with recruitment and retention of members, the Parent Society may improve student perception and, in turn, increase the number of students and young professionals within the Society.

Table 1. Responses of student subunit/chapter officers and faculty advisors to the question, “Which of the following items are important challenges facing your AFS student chapter or subunit?” Please rank from 1 - 4 (1 = most challenging; 4 = least challenging).” Numbers reported are the percent of respondents who ranked the options at a given value.

	1	2	3	4
Recruitment of new members	50	28	13	9
Retention of members	3	41	38	19
Understanding the role of the AFS student unit in the AFS hierarchy	9	45	38	28
Planning events	28	34	25	13

Table 2. Responses of student subunit/chapter officers and faculty advisors to the question, “If the Parent Society of AFS distributed information to assist AFS student chapters and subunits, what information do you think should be included? Please rank from 1 - 8 (1 = most important; 8 = least important).” Numbers reported are the percent of respondents who ranked the options at a given value. Suggestion provided in the “Other” category include fundraising ideas, information on student grants and scholarships, advice and information on how to find jobs and internships, a list of potential guest speakers, and information on the role of AFS in fisheries science.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	NA
How to create an AFS student unit website	13	10	19	19	10	7	13	10	0
How to create a listserv	16	3	16	16	10	16	20	3	0
Information on the AFS hierarchy	3	19	9	22	16	13	13	6	0
Student benefits of membership	44	25	16	3	3	9	0	0	0
Event ideas	29	39	10	13	0	7	0	3	0
Back copies of "Students' Angles" from Fisheries magazine	9	16	13	28	16	6	9	3	0
Ideas on how to recruit or retain members	52	36	9	0	0	0	3	0	0
Other	30	20	20	0	0	0	0	10	20

Table 3. Responses of student subunit/chapter officers and faculty advisors to the question, “Do you have any other suggestions regarding how AFS can better serve students and AFS student chapters and subunits?” Suggestions provided below are taken directly from survey results.

Suggestion
1 Some education of faculty advisors and student officers on their specific roles and how best to attain them.
2 Giving ideas of trip that we can take to better explore the students field
3 The Chapters are the key connection for the student sub units. Having good people there that understand how to motive and include students in the mix is essential. I think we have done well in Idaho and in many places, because of this. Think mentoring committees are great assets.
4 I am extremely happy with how AFS views and caters to students. The "problem" is not with AFS per se, but rather with students who do not understand to the value of AFS for their professional development (even though I and others drill it into their heads through our words and by setting a good example).
5 Provide additional travel awards/grants to help students attend professional meetings
6 I think that our subunit is very different from other subunits as our members encompass a large geographical region with many universities. We are a province-wide subunit which creates many different logistical issues than other subunits. While I think we have done a good job with incorporating everyone, our survey results are skewed as a result of our unique subunit.
7 Encourage State chapters to work closely with Student Sub-unit; send key info out regularly to Faculty Advisors, e-newsletter highlighting key issues, accomplishments, meetings and award deadlines
8 Get more students to Division and National meetings!! We need more money for travel awards, desperately! I know of several students every year (including myself) who have been active in AFS for years and simply can not afford to attend National and Division AFS meetings. This is unfortunate because there are so many opportunities at those meetings if they are anything like our state Chapter meetings. I would urge the Parent Society to find ways to cut or eliminate student costs. We need to reduce the barriers to attending these meetings and that starts from a financial standpoint.
9 Instill in them through information and personal communication the importance of being a fisheries professional.
10 If there was a way to sign up for a mentor, I would. I would welcome the chance to have a mentor AFS fisheries biologist to talk to and ask for advice. I sometimes worry about my transition from graduate school and into the workforce. I would especially like to be hooked up with a female fisheries biologist because when I've gone to state chapter AFS meetings to present my research, I have yet to meet one which is very discouraging.
11 Successful subunits have a lot of active participation from all members, not just officers. It is important that students understand that their participation in any AFS activity will be highly beneficial in the future. While I stressed this at meetings, some students do not take it seriously. Continual encouragement from state and parent chapters may help students realize how beneficial AFS is to professional development. Providing resources or materials that emphasize this are critical for young or new members to get involved.
12 We need mentors that can take students along for first hand experience in the field. This kind of networking and professional contact could be instrumental in retaining students in the fisheries field and AFS.
13 Provide more scholarships and travel grants.
14 Affordability of the meetings and AFS support of student attendance and participation can always be improved. I think the Southern Division is the model for student support. SDAFS provides motel rooms and students can recover the modest registration fees via A/V work. They provide ample food during breaks and socials such that even an unsupported undergraduate student can afford to attend the meeting. Similar models for the parent society would be a blessing for gaining new members at the earliest levels of the profession.
15 Provide information to convince students that the fisheries profession is exciting and jobs in this field will be available throughout their careers.

Figure 1. Responses of student subunit/chapter officers and faculty advisors to the question, “Approximately how long has your AFS student chapter or subunit existed?”

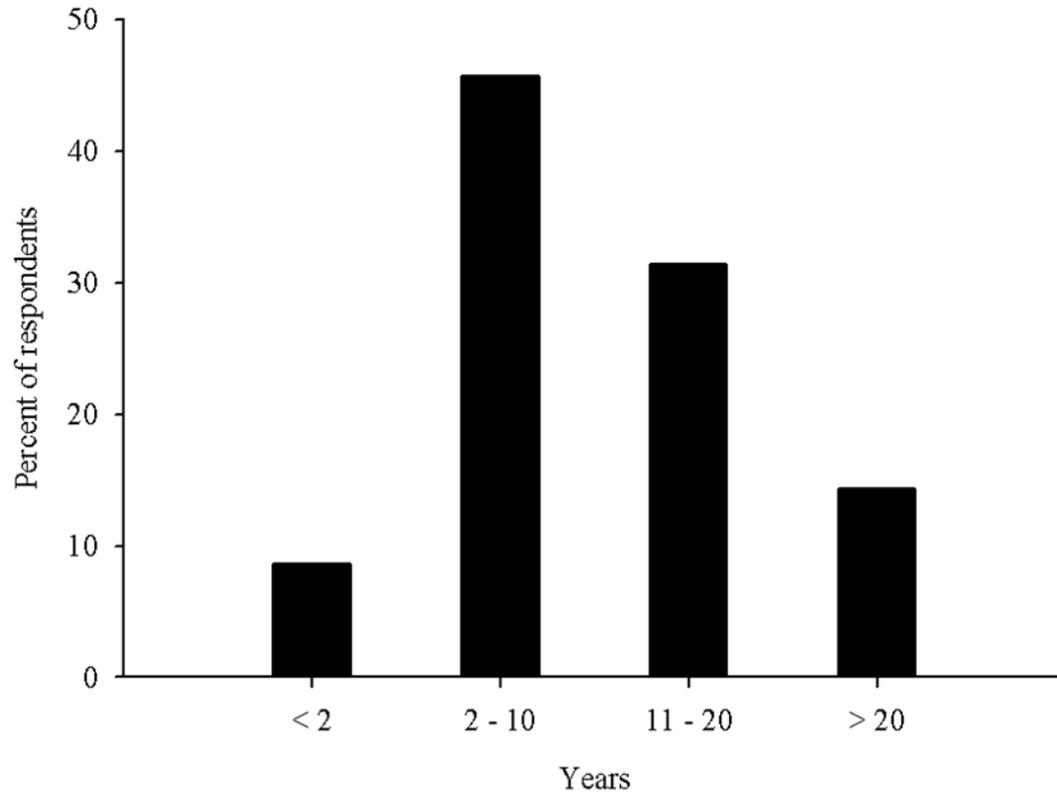


Figure 2. Responses of student subunit/chapter officers and faculty advisors to the question, “In the past 12 months, how many times has your AFS student chapter or subunit contacted the Parent Society of AFS regarding business of your AFS student unit?”

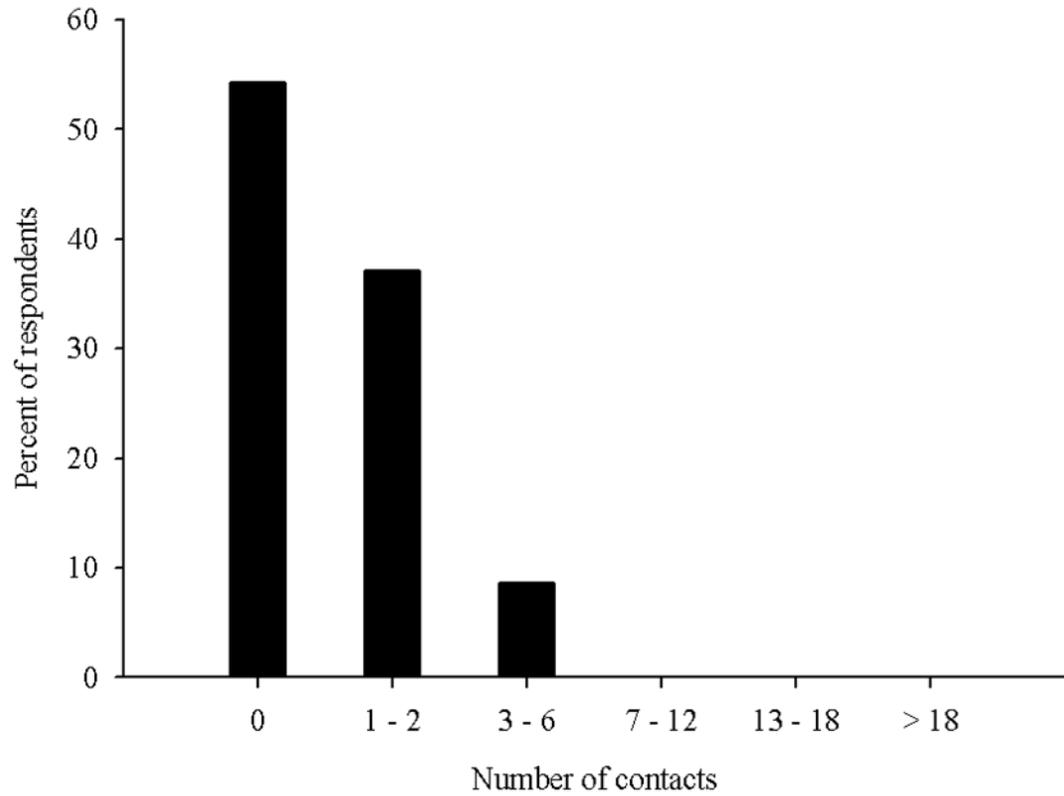


Figure 3. Responses of student subunit/chapter officers and faculty advisors to the question, “In your opinion, how well does your AFS student chapter or subunit feel ‘tied to’ the AFS Parent Society?”

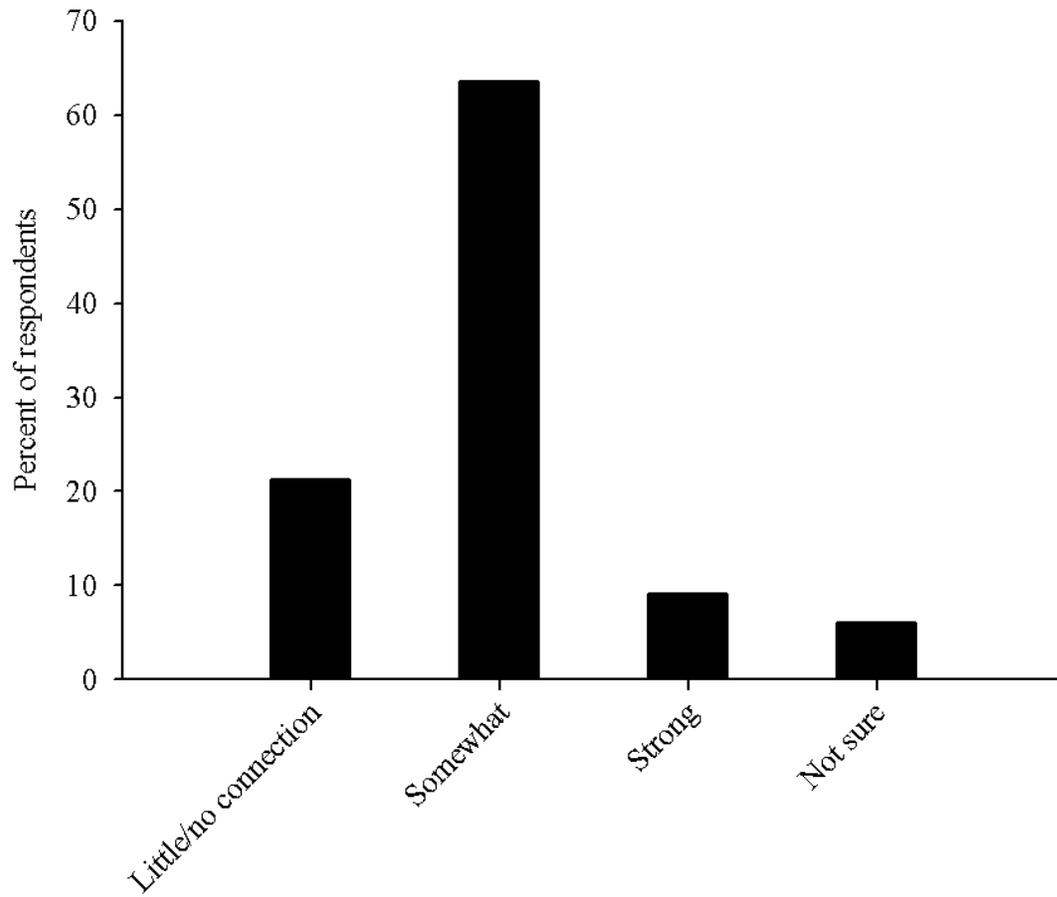


Figure 4. Responses of student subunit/chapter officers and faculty advisors to the question, “In your opinion, how well do the members of your AFS student chapter or subunit understand the AFS hierarchy?”

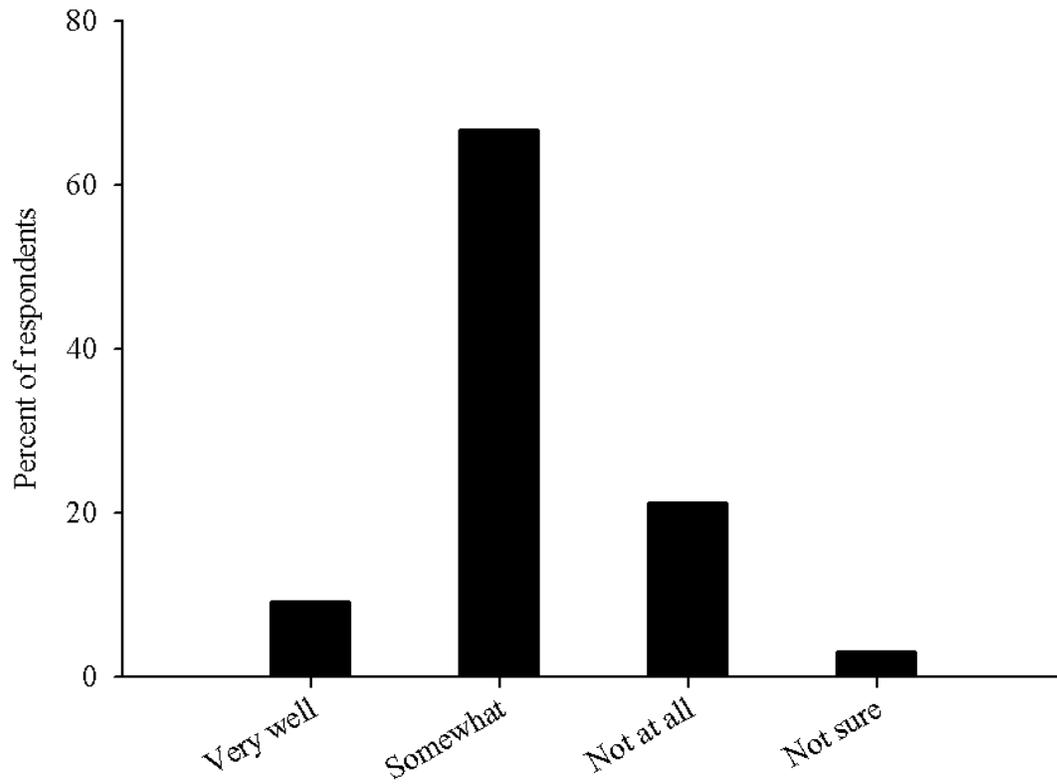
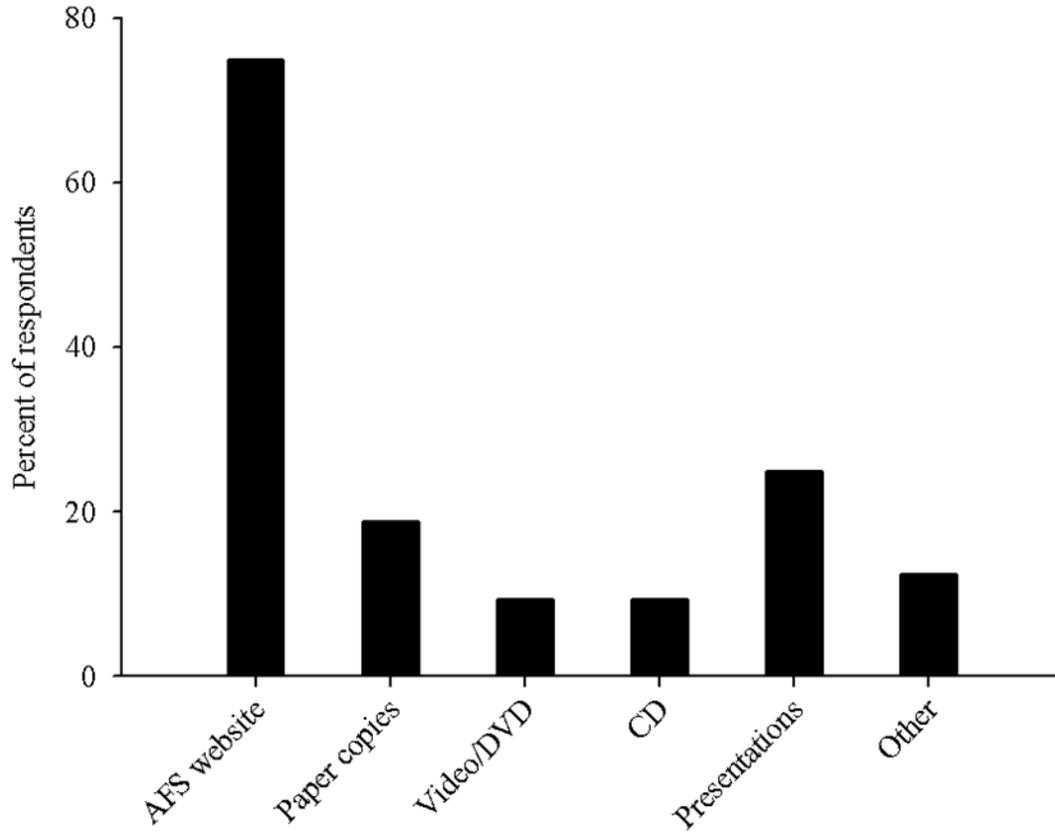


Figure 5. Responses of student subunit/chapter officers and faculty advisors to the question, “How do you think this information would best be distributed to all AFS student chapters and subunits?” Suggestions listed in the “Other” category include e-mails to student subunit/chapter officers and information provided to faculty advisors or by chapter presidents in electronic or paper media.



Appendix A  
Survey of AFS Student Subunit/Chapter Officers and Faculty Advisors  
Distributed via SurveyMonkey.com  
July-August 2008

**1. Please identify your role in your AFS student chapter or subunit:**

- President
- Faculty Advisor
- Other

(please specify)

**2. Approximately how long has your AFS student chapter or subunit existed?**

- < 2 years
- 2 - 10 years
- 11 - 20 years
- > 20 years

**3. In the past 12 months, how many times has your AFS student chapter or subunit contacted the Parent Society of AFS regarding business of your AFS student unit?**

- 0
- 1-2
- 3-6
- 7-12
- 13-18
- > 18

**If you answered "0" to the previous question, you may skip to Question #5.**

**4. Which AFS Parent Society officers/employees has your AFS student chapter or subunit contacted within the past 12 months (select all that apply)?**

- Executive Director
- Webmaster/Application Support
- Membership Coordinator
- President
- Constitutional Consultant
- Other

**5. In your opinion, how well does your AFS student chapter or subunit feel "tied to" the AFS Parent Society?**

- Our AFS student unit feels little to no connection.
- Our AFS student unit feels somewhat connected.
- Our AFS student unit feels a strong connection.
- Not sure.

**6. In your opinion, how well do the members of your AFS student chapter or subunit understand the AFS hierarchy?**

- Very well
- Somewhat
- Not at all
- Not sure

**7. Which of the following items are important challenges facing your AFS student chapter or subunit? Please rank from 1 - 4 (1 = most challenging; 4 = least challenging).**

	1	2	3	4
<b>Recruitment of new members</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Retention of members</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Understanding the role of the AFS student unit in the AFS hierarchy</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Planning events</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

8. If the Parent Society of AFS distributed information to assist AFS student chapters and subunits, what information do you think should be included? Please rank from 1 - 8 (1 = most important; 8 = least important).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	N/A
How to create an AFS student unit website	<input type="checkbox"/>								
How to create a listserv	<input type="checkbox"/>								
Information on the AFS hierarchy	<input type="checkbox"/>								
Student benefits of membership	<input type="checkbox"/>								
Event ideas	<input type="checkbox"/>								
Back copies of "Students' Angles" from Fisheries magazine	<input type="checkbox"/>								
Ideas on how to recruit or retain members	<input type="checkbox"/>								
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>								

9. How do you think this information would best be distributed to all AFS student chapters and subunits?

- AFS website ([www.fisheries.org](http://www.fisheries.org))
- Paper copies distributed via postal service
- Video/DVD
- CD
- Presentations given by AFS members in your area
- Other

10. Do you have any other suggestions regarding how AFS can better serve students and AFS student chapters and subunits?