



SRNT

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SRNT TRAINEE NETWORK LISTENING SESSION REPORT

Monday, November 18, 2024

10:00 AM -11:00 AM Eastern US

10 Participants

*Note: At the request of Trainee Network leadership, Board members were asked not to attend so that participants would feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts. Leadership also requested an outside facilitator. The following is the report submitted by the facilitator, which was reviewed for accuracy by Trainee Network leadership. This conversation was, in part, a follow up to the commentary, [Polarization Within the Field of Tobacco and Nicotine Science and its Potential Impact on Trainees](#), published in *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* in August of 202.*

SESSION GOALS

- Understand primary concerns and challenges for Trainees and Early Career Researchers
- Continue to increase engagement, connection, building a community within SRNT for Trainees and Early Career Researchers.
- Build cohesion – provide a ‘safe, non-judgmental space’ for discussion about controversial topics with different perspectives

SESSION DISCUSSION THEMES/QUESTIONS

Big Picture Discussion Topics:

- What key challenges are trainees experiencing first and foremost as you navigate your careers.
- How are these challenges impacting scientific discussions and the ability to move forward with your research?
- What are some pressing issues that you are concerned will impact your career growth?
- How might these issues and/or challenges be impacting the trainee experience at SRNT

SESSION REPORT

Introduction

The Session was attended by ten (10) Trainee Network members. The majority of session time focused on the differing levels of experience that Trainees have as SRNT members, and as Trainees.

Discussion ranged from challenges with mentorship, to participation and 'connectedness' with SRNT, to the recent controversies within the membership. Participants underscored that the benefits of SRNT membership outweigh their concerns and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to provide input to the SRNT board in a 'safe' space. Their remarks are presented within that context. Session Goals were reviewed as well as Discussion Topics.

Discussion

To begin, participants were asked to describe key challenges to their careers, and the issues that are impacting or have potential to impact their careers as well as their experience as SRNT members.

Participants noted that, as a Network, they are working to build a community within SRNT that encompasses many different trainees from different fields with different perspectives and provides opportunities for more open conversation and connection.

It was pointed out that many Trainees and Early Career Researchers struggle with 'breaking into' SRNT when a student or graduate mentor is not well-connected with more senior investigators at SRNT. Unless directly 'networked in' by a mentor, it can be difficult to know how to volunteer or be a part of leadership (even with being a part of the Trainee Network).

Working with the same people and groups (in academia, at SRNT) does not always spur new learning, so getting introduced and connected to new groups with diverse perspectives was reported by Trainees to be very important. The question is how can that happen without direct help and connections. The research field of tobacco is very broad, and collaborative work with other researchers and institutions would help immensely with career growth, especially with assistance from senior mentors.

Connection and mentoring were key themes throughout the initial discussions, including the opportunities to better connect with senior mentors who can open doors and are engaged in more collaborative work.

These key themes were consistently woven throughout as discussion continued about the impact of current controversial issues on their participation in SRNT as well as their careers.

All agreed that the current controversies put them in uncomfortable positions, specifically, not knowing what to say or do within or outside of SRNT. There is clear concern about jeopardizing careers if they say the wrong thing to researchers who feel very strongly about the various issues such as health equity, harm reduction, or complete industry bans.

This fear is exacerbated by all the 'strongly worded' emails being sent around the membership. The majority agreed they and colleagues are intimidated by observing the exchanges being 'launched' over the listserv and are concerned about a perceived lack of respect for differing positions as well as a loss of civility. They are alarmed by the vitriol, feeling overwhelmed and fearful of making a

misstep. There is significant apprehension about saying the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong people, especially mentors and others who have influence or power over their careers.

This also makes it difficult for Trainees to pursue or be open to careers that are not in academia. They don't know or don't trust with whom to speak about opportunities for careers outside of universities because of these controversies and a strong lean towards academia. This hurts trainees trying to explore all the career options. They were in agreement that saying the wrong thing can make or break a collaboration, and they don't see that Trainees are in a position to say something without getting a backlash. They are not comfortable being open about their perspectives because there can be negative consequences, with concern that if they are seen as being on the 'wrong side' of a controversy it will impact their ability to get grants.

Participants suggested the Board communicate with SRNT members to be more thoughtful about how they fight on the listserv. While the strong messaging back and forth can be 'entertaining', everyone can see the messages and those exchanges can be disrespectful. This is not good 'modeling' for early career trainees and increases the fear of joining any debate.

Several participants noted concerns about being 'ripped apart' by senior researchers/members, especially at Poster Sessions during the conference. For example, if a poster about harm reduction is presented and a senior researcher does not agree with the position, there is potential to be humiliated at the session, in front of other colleagues. (See example below.) These negative interactions can create an atmosphere of dread and decrease Early Career members' incentive to engage with SRNT.

It was suggested that SRNT promote a heightened level of respect and thoughtfulness towards Trainees at conferences. The examples given were of Trainees feeling attacked by senior researchers at Poster Sessions, getting tough questions about their position (i.e., harm reduction) and being berated, leaving at least one person in tears and considering stopping their research. It's important for senior researchers to remember the power differential and to be mindful of how they interact with early career. Be supportive of early career, understand who is at what stage and support them, not tear them down and especially at conferences where early career Trainees are already feeling disconnected and overwhelmed.

**(Consultant Note: It was concerning hearing the example of the person left in tears by a senior researcher who had issue with the position, not the scientific content. Everyone on the call nodded in agreement as the story was told, making it a sort of 'urban legend' about what might happen to any trainee in any poster session if they are on the wrong side of one of the controversies. This does not appear to support early career but, instead, intimidate based on a 'position', not scientific content. How does this reflect on SRNT's organizational values and Statements of Commitment specific to supporting early career?)*

Conclusion

Participants appreciated the anonymous nature of the Listening Session and agreed that having this type of session is very helpful. There was great appreciation for the session being a 'safe space' to talk about challenges as Early Career Trainees. It was also clear that they want to be more involved in and connected to SRNT and its broad membership because they see the value.

Participants were also initially hesitant to share any views, gaining confidence as the session proceeded. There was clear commonality of experiences, challenges, and concerns. There was also

appreciation for SRNT as an important venue for Early Career Trainees to connect more broadly throughout the research field, and optimism that their feedback and suggestions can help enhance their experience as members and as researchers.

The challenge and opportunity for SRNT will be the application of its stated Core Values and Statements of Commitment in identifying remedies to the concerns shared in this session and in future gatherings.