

Results of SAR Strategic Planning Survey 2022-23

March 2023

Scholars at Risk's governing board prepares a strategic plan every five years to guide the network's growth and activities. In anticipation of the current plan ending August 31, 2023 and the next plan starting September 1, 2023, SAR invited all stakeholders to share their views by completing an online survey (see Appendix). The survey was distributed via email link in SAR newsletters and targeted emails, online links on the SAR website and elsewhere, via social media, and QR code at events and in materials. The survey could be completed via website or mobile app.

In all, the survey received approximately 517 responses from November 22, 2022 through March 20, 2023. Responses included a good distribution of respondents across stakeholder groups, including SAR scholar-applicants, current SAR-assisted scholars and alumni (28% combined); university representatives and various partners (51%); SAR staff, Board and Ambassadors (8%); donors (2%) and others (10%). Responses included a good distribution of persons self-described as "new to SAR" (0-5 years, 64%) and long-time participants in SAR activities (>5 years, 36%).

This report does not attempt to offer a formal statistical assessment of the responses. Rather, for questions seeking relative levels of importance, responses are evaluated based on both the score given (level of importance) and the ranking of each response relative to other choices (relative importance). For questions requesting a preference among two or more choices, a 25% or greater difference is taken to indicate a **strong preference**, while a 10% to 24% difference is used to indicate a **mild preference**. (Minor respondent or coding errors that had no significant impact on the results have not been adjusted and may appear in some underlying tables.)

Overall, this report summarizes the key findings from the survey for the purpose of informing discussions and the drafting of SAR's 2023-2028 strategic plan.

Key findings:

Distribution of resources

- All respondents favored allocating the majority of SAR's resources to, in order, (1) services for at-risk scholars/practitioners, (2) advocacy for at-risk scholars and academic freedom generally, and (3) research promoting understanding of academic freedom. This is generally consistent with SAR's current allocations.
- No stakeholder group suggested eliminating any area of current SAR activities.

SCHOLARS AT RISK

411 Lafayette Street 3rd Floor
New York, NY 10003, USA
www.scholarsatrisk.org

EMAIL: scholarsatrisk@nyu.edu
TEL: +1 212-998-4427
@scholarsatrisk

SAR EUROPE

c/o MUSSI, Maynooth University
Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland
www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sar-europe

EMAIL: sareurope@mu.ie
TEL: +353 1 7086177
@sar_europe

Services for scholars and practitioners

- Respondents overall ranked **all current SAR services for scholars/practitioners as important or very important**. No stakeholder group ranked any current SAR services for scholars/practitioners as unimportant.
- Stakeholders in all groups unanimously ranked arranging temporary positions for scholars/ practitioners as most important.
- The responses showed a **strong preference** across all stakeholders except SAR staff for increasing the number of scholars/practitioners assisted each year (volume) over increasing the level and duration of services for those accepted. SAR staff ranked both choices equally.

Monitoring and advocacy

- Respondents overall ranked **all current SAR monitoring and advocacy activities as important or very important**. Only donors (a small cohort) ranked one activity as not important (the Advocacy Insider email bulletin, although it is unclear whether this is based on assessment of its content or because they may not receive the bulletin which requires a special email opt-in).
- Stakeholders in all groups ranked (1) monitoring attacks on higher education as among the most important, followed by (2) advocacy for imprisoned scholars and (3) advocacy for academic freedom at the UN and regional and national bodies. Scholar respondents ranked advocacy for scholars in prison as most important. SAR Board members ranked the Academic Freedom Media Review bulletin as most important (perhaps reflecting the Board's role in increasing SAR's visibility).
- Most university and partner respondents showed a **mild preference** for increasing post-reporting advocacy using monitoring data (advocacy) over increasing the total numbers of reported incidents in SAR's *Free to Think* reports (monitoring). SAR staff, Board and Ambassadors showed a very **strong preference** for advocacy using monitoring data. Only scholar respondents showed a **mild preference** for prioritizing the number of incidents reported.
- With regard to scholars in prison, overall responses showed a **mild preference** for increasing the number of scholars in prison cases accepted (volume of scholars) over increasing the level and number of campaigns for fewer scholars overall (actions per scholar). Respondents at SAR member institutions showed a **strong preference** for increasing the volume of scholars in prison cases. SAR Board members showed a **strong preference** for increasing advocacy actions.

Research and learning

- Respondents overall ranked **all current SAR research and learning activities as important or very important**. Respondents overall and across stakeholder groups generally ranked (1) Mellon/SAR academic freedom fellowships/workshop and (2) academic freedom/values publications as most important.
- Nearly all stakeholder groups ranked the *Free to Think podcast* as the least important activity in this area, with the exception of SAR Board members who ranked it most important. (In both cases, it is unclear whether this is based on assessment of its content, because they are not familiar with the podcast or, in the case of the Board, perhaps reflecting the Board's role in increasing SAR's visibility).
- Responses overall were mixed when asked to choose among focusing on (i) publications and materials for distribution to the network; (ii) workshops and trainings; or (iii) projects to advance the state of knowledge about academic freedom. SAR Board members showed a strong preference for materials and academic freedom research over trainings. Donors showed a strong preference for trainings and research over materials and publications.

Network and member services

- Respondents overall ranked **all current SAR network and member services as important or very important**. Respondents overall and across stakeholder groups generally ranked (1) organizing and supporting SAR sections, (2) the SAR Global Congress, and (3) organizing regional advocacy as among the most important.
- Only donors (again, a small cohort) ranked one activity as not important (the SAR network newsletter email bulletin, although again it is unclear whether this is based on its content or because they may not receive the bulletin).
- Among SAR's most active partners, those serving on the International Advisory Committee (IAC), in national SAR sections, or in partner networks, **ranked the SAR Global Congress most important**.
- SAR Board members and donors (both small cohorts) ranked the Prins/SAR Speaker Series and Courage to Think Award, respectively, as most important, perhaps reflecting the appeal of these activities to different audiences.
- With regard to SAR events, including the SAR Global Congress, most responses, including from those at network member institutions, showed a **mild preference for hybrid events** over in-person only or online only, with Board members and donors showing a **strong preference** for hybrid options.

- Roughly 75% of respondents across most stakeholder groups indicated they were extremely (45%) or somewhat (30%) **likely to attend a SAR Global Congress** within their home region. Likelihood of attending decreased roughly 20% if more than 5 hours of travel would be required.
- Roughly 75% across most stakeholder categories were at least somewhat likely to attend a Global Congress in hybrid or online only formats. Only donors were unlikely to attend in person, but more than half were somewhat or extremely likely to attend online, if given the option.

Funding SAR activities

- Stakeholders **unanimously feel that SAR's primary source of funds should be (1) grants from private sources**, followed generally by (2) grants from government sources, (3) membership subscriptions, and (4) gifts. This is generally consistent with SAR's current revenues.
- There is significant support for SAR accepting government funds and for raising funds from *individual* subscriptions, which do not currently exist.
- Among all respondents, **28% have made a personal financial gift to SAR** (43% of those associated with SAR for more than 10 years). An additional 12%, mostly scholars, indicated intent to give when they are more professionally secure. A number of respondents indicated they would give if it was easier to know how or if SAR asked.
- Of those who have not given a gift, **most support SAR's work by volunteering** time with students and colleagues on their campus and beyond. Some mentioned helping to secure a membership subscription from their institution, or working to secure funds to host a scholar or event.

Comments

- A number of respondents shared additional comments, which are included in the appendices by stakeholder. Examples of **general comments** (excluding scholars, SAR staff and Board members) include:
 - "I have been involved with the work of SAR for over a decade. I have been most impressed by the caliber of staff with whom I have had most of my interactions. They have always been professional, attentive and compassionate. Truly exceptional."

- “The work of the organization is unique, unparalleled globally and necessary. The reporting side (free to think etc) of the organization is vital to keeping us aware of the threats to academic freedom.”
- “One aspect that could be developed further which I think would advance the work of SAR is support for the national sections. In some areas of the world, this work is supported by funders, but in many, it is not. In these areas the work is largely done off the side of desks and through sheer volunteerism. This is laudable, but not sustainable or consistent.”
- “The number one challenge for us as a host institution is identifying options for scholars once their term is up. I believe that SAR should focus on developing their network beyond higher ed institutions to include potential employers like hospitals, nonprofits, and more.”
- “Focus on building a better support infrastructure for both scholars at risk and their hosts.”
- “Please let us focus in the future on solving the intrinsic problems that caused the scholars to flee their countries rather finding havens for them abroad. Finding practical solutions to the problems, in coordination with other agencies, will help the scholars at risk to return to their home countries and participate in rebuilding them.”
- “I wish SAR could reach more people.”
- “Nothing to add. Keep up the good work.”
- Examples of **comments from scholars** (possibly including pending applicants, declined applicants, current SAR-assisted scholars and alumni) include:
 - “I am aware that offering temporary positions for individuals who are in great danger is a complex task, and SAR has made commendable efforts to achieve this objective. However, I would like to respectfully suggest that such positions could be extended further to provide scholars with sufficient experience to secure employment in their respective countries. As an individual who shares this experience, I understand the importance of having sufficient time and opportunities to rebuild one's life and career.”
 - “This is so frustrating as we established scholars cannot find a decedent position, particularly in Europe, simply because there are very very few job available, the job market changed so much since we completed our PhDs, starting a new career from scratch is extremely devastating.”

- “As an alumni I would like to engage in a more active and structured manner with SAR. I am currently working to make my institution a member but I would be more than happy to dedicate time in other ways - speaker/ advocacy /training etc.”
- “I would like to take this opportunity to thank SAR Network, which really helps those whose lives are not safe. My family and I owe SAR's help. I hope that one day I will be able to compensate for these efforts in some way.”
- “It will be important to develop other ways of measuring risk because some countries are generally regarded as peaceful but being very risky for some academics.”
- “Many endangered academics are unaware of SAR. Especially in countries with restrictions on social media and the internet.”
- “I recommend that SAR evaluate applications more quickly. For this, more people should be employed if necessary. In fact, part of the budget can be allocated to recruiting new employees instead of congresses.”
- “It would be good to check in with Sar alumni about their progress in their careers on regular basis in addition to survey follow ups or email follow ups and provide mentorship. The follow ups could be virtual and regional. Or creating a community circles for the sar scholars (alumni or current) from similar disciplines to promote community building, networking.”
- “Support your members for a long time please. Without your support it is impossible to stay in academy.”
- “While sincerely thanking SAR and its colleagues who have saved my life and hundreds of others, I believe in "working WITH endangered scholars" instead of "working FOR them." It is absolutely better than, instead of making decisions for them, they are seriously involved in decision making. I suggest that a council (advisory or even with voting rights) of them be added to the SAR organizational structure/ chart. This council, whose members will be elected from active scholars from different regions (for example, the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe, etc.) and will be selected with gender equality for 2 or 3 years, meet twice a year. In winter, to provide suggestions for the following year's activities, and in spring, to analyze last year's activities.”

Appendices¹

1. Survey response ranking tables by stakeholder
2. Survey responses by stakeholder
 - All respondents
 - Member institutions
 - International Advisory Council, SAR Sections, SAR Partner Networks
 - Scholars (including pending applications, accepted, alumni)
 - SAR staff
 - SAR Board and Ambassadors
 - Donors
3. Comments
 - Respondents excluding scholars, staff, Board
 - Scholars (including pending applications, accepted, alumni)
 - SAR staff, Board and Ambassadors [not included]
4. Appendix: Willing to discuss with SAR (including contact info) [not included]
5. Appendix: Giving to SAR [not included]
 - All respondents (excluding scholars)
 - Scholars (including pending applications, accepted, alumni)
 - Members, hosts, advocacy hosts, Congress attendee (excluding scholars)
 - Staff, Board, Ambassadors
 - “Yes...” by stakeholder
 - “Would be willing if...” by stakeholder
 - “No but contribute by...” by stakeholder
6. Appendix: Survey questions and response options

¹ Appendices are available as a separate document from the SAR website, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/sar-strategic-planning-2023-2028/>.