

SCASA Leadership Legacy Corner

A Special Issue Honoring Rodney Jee, SCASA President (2003–2004)



Rodney Jee at the 2012 SCASA Poster Competition for H.S. Statistics Students Held at UCI

Southern California Years

I received my Ph.D. in Mathematical Sciences from Rice University under statisticians David Scott and George Terrell in summer of 1985 after which I moved to Southern California for a position as member of technical staff at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Early into my career, I met Michael Chernick who made me aware of the activities of SCASA. In the mid-90's I started working at Risk Data Corporation in Orange County and got to know Bob Newcomb who encouraged me to get more involved with SCASA. The Career Day at City of Hope was perhaps my first entry point into working with SCASA K-12 activities and this experience led me to the idea of hosting a poster competition for AP statistics students in parallel with Career Day in 2006. My idea was to basically copy the standard high school science fair format except to have the projects focus more on the statistical analysis which is usually minimally mentioned. The competition started small with just 2 schools that year, but each year it grew piggybacking on the Career Day which already brought SCASA members to City of Hope. By 2009 it was ready to split off from Career Day and be an event on its own. That year I added an AP Stat teachers' enrichment session to the event and drew upon our local AP Stat readers to lead the training sessions. I could see that students were excited to get interviewed by judges on their projects, that teachers appreciated the chance to receive additional training in statistical topics, and that chapter members enjoyed their interactions with students and teachers. The event continued to grow, getting to over a hundred students from several schools. The teachers' training benefitted from sessions by Jessica Utts, Lee Kucera, Rob Gould, Bob Newcomb, and other SCASA members over the years. I was fortunate to be in SCASA which was one of the largest chapters and has many excellent people to recruit from and work with. Also, just being in a densely populated region with many schools with dedicated AP statistics teachers within an hour's driving distance enabled a sizable draw of participants that makes for an exciting event. Organizing and running this annual event was both a fun and enriching experience for me and I'm glad to see it continue in my absence to this day in some form.



2010 PosterComp: Interviewing and Poster Viewing in Cooper Hall COH



2010 PosterComp: Rob Gould and Bob Newcomb Preparing for Leading the Teachers' Sessions



Judges at 2010 Poster Competition at City of Hope



Teachers at 2010 Poster Competition at COH

In 2011, I was to organize the chapter for judging for the ASA Special Awards in Statistics at the International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF). ISEF is a huge major annual event that takes place in different cities mostly in the US and the ASA is just one of many participating organizations providing special awards of their choosing (above some required minimum by ISEF). It is a special experience for our members, especially for those who participate in the interview round of judging because there is a good chance we will interview some high school students who are much smarter than ourselves and have applied themselves to a nontrivial scientific problem to be in the finals of the international competition. The chapter came through with sufficient volunteer judges to perform the screening of over a thousand projects and interviewing of maybe a dozen finalist project teams. I don't know of

anyone who wasn't impressed by the students at the event and grateful for the unique experience. This is important because I expected it would really help recruit for SCASA's next turn at ISEF because the competition had started on a 3-year rotation between Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Phoenix. However, most of my long-term plans with regards to SCASA and aspects of my life were soon disrupted. In 2013, I relocated to Phoenix for a new job but the experiences and people with SCASA would continue to influence what opportunities I would see in a new environment.

Phoenix

In late 2013, I joined the credit risk analytics department of Discover Financial Services in Phoenix. After taking a few months to settle in I started thinking about how I could become active with a new chapter of the ASA. It wasn't easy making new connections. So, primarily because of a SCASA connection, I became more involved with the ASA at a national level. From 2015 to 2018, I led the ASA national poster competition for K-12 which is directed by the ASA/NCTM Joint Committee on Curriculum in Statistics and Probability (the competition is now known as the ASA Data Visualization Competition for K-12). Without my association with the poster competition I started at SCASA, I likely wouldn't have gotten this opportunity. With the exposure to the ASA/NCTM committee I started getting ideas to implement some kind of statistics teacher's workshop like I had going on with the SCASA poster competition. At the SCASA poster competition, I had teachers on site because they accompanied their students in the competition. This time, I wanted a way to attract teachers for a partial day of educational enrichment. The "big name" speaker that came up most frequently was Roxy Peck who had been active in SCASA and was willing to come out to Phoenix. In 2017, I was still leading the ASA poster competition which always left me with over a hundred poster boards that had been mailed in. I suggested Roxy use these posters to devote one of her hours to talk about statistical graphics and she worked it into a set of topics on statistical thinking, statistical literacy, and understanding statistical displays. The workshop was held that May featuring her and a viewing of the posters for about two dozen teachers mostly from Arizona. In 2018, it happened that the usual Beyond AP Statistics (BAPS) Workshop wasn't held at JSM so I took it as an opportunity to invite Roxy to do a BAPS workshop in Phoenix. She accepted the invite and arranged for two Arizona statisticians, Roy St. Laurent and Dave Sonderegger, to take part in presenting BAPS to about a dozen teachers in July. While organizing teachers' workshops was a fulfilling activity for me, there was one thing that started in SCASA just before I left the region that I really wanted to be involved with – ASA DataFest. So, I began arranging a handoff of the leadership of the ASA Data Visualization Competition to Jennifer Broatch of ASU/New College so that I would be able to devote most of my volunteer time to starting a DataFest in Phoenix.



Roxy Peck surrounded by Arizona teachers (SCASA member Madeline Bauer, far right) at High School Stat Teachers' Workshop in Phoenix, May 2017

When I relocated to Phoenix, Rob Gould's DataFest had already seemed like the kind of event every university with a degree program in statistics should be hosting. I kept checking to see what schools in Arizona were hosting DataFest but never saw anything and never heard anything about someone starting one in Arizona. Finally, when I became president of the Arizona Chapter of the ASA in 2017, I started making plans to start one somehow. It's a long story on how it finally happened but here are the main steps I took: (1) make sure my chapter officers are on board to support this – they were, (2) find a host university – ASU/Tempe was where I had a contact in the stat department who could provide some guidance, (3) do a sales pitch to a large group of students and ask them to sign an informal pledge to participate if the DataFest does happen – I got around 25 students to express interest on

paper, (4) get donations to cover the expenses of a DataFest – I was so lucky my VP of Analytics was willing to write a big check to cover this after seeing I had a list of students expressing interest, (5) start planning in detail on required personnel (someone with access to physical facilities at the university and assistance during the event) – ASU/Math had a marketing person devoted to assisting in special events, (6) recruit judges and mentors, and (7) work, work, work. The first ASA DataFest, held weekend of March 23, 2018, was a success pulling in students not just from the main ASU/Tempe campus where the event was held but also in comparable numbers from the ASU/New College campus an hour away. Though it has not been easy, the Arizona Chapter has managed to hold DataFests annually (excepting 2020) and has grown the participation from ASU to all three public universities in Arizona. DataFest is the kind of event that every statistics undergraduate should take part in if available and my hats off to Rob Gould for starting it and to the SCASA community for supporting it so well. Your successes make it possible for other chapters to aspire to similar levels of outreach and going beyond the classroom to prepare the new generation of statisticians/data scientists.



ASA Datafest/ASU 2018: Rodney Jee (organizer), Ji-Hyun Lee (then District Vice Chair), Jennifer Broatch (ASU/New College)

Sunset

Those who've been participating in the ISEF/ASA Special Awards for a decade or so will likely have run across my name or seen me in a Zoom meeting. When I became Arizona Chapter president in 2017, I was made aware of the upcoming demands on the chapter with ISEF coming to Phoenix in 2019. Fortunately, I was able to recruit Anne Hansen (a SCASA transplant to Phoenix from UC/R) to take on the head judging coordinator role. I also made a call out to some SCASA members who had more recently worked the ISEF/ASA event and made sure we took advantage of their experience and special tech tools to make the process more manageable. It was a great relief to Anne and me that Madeline Bauer, Rebecca Le, and Luke Thelen volunteered their time to make sure we had the best preparation possible for ISEF 2019. The added support of a few SCASA members to not only assist from afar but also to travel to Phoenix for judging/interviewing was greatly appreciated for making the event doable. The commitment of some SCASA members to the needs of the statistical community is outstanding.



2019 Phoenix ISEF/ASA Judges' Dinner: Rodney Jee left side with glasses and 4 Southern California members Rebecca Le(far end), Madeline Bauer(near end), Luke Thelen (to Madeline's right), and David Doane (next to Luke).

With 2019 ISEF over, the preparations for ISEF 2020 in Anaheim and the ASA Special Awards were essentially underway. Beyond basic preparation for the event assuming a status quo, there were discussions by core SCASA ISEF leaders about defining more carefully what we're trying to achieve with the ISEF/ASA award, how the interview should be conducted, how to use the rubric properly, and many more basic questions as there was a real desire to improve the process. ISEF was also ending the 3-city cycle and this prompted questions about how the ASA Special Awards should proceed with the change in scheduling. Then COVID hit and ISEF was effectively cancelled. I stepped in and tried to take on the role of ISEF/ASA liaison to work with ISEF more formally on ASA's participation. However, more serious was the damage done to the process of preparing local chapters to tackle running the ASA Special Awards as had been done in recent decades with its high resource demands (financial and human resources) which chapters would find challenging to meet and with the changes in attitudes about volunteerism brought about by the aftermath of COVID. I was not ready to tackle the challenge of guiding or helping the ASA through this period of financial challenge and questioning of what activities were of sufficient strategic value to the organization or profession. To me it seems the ISEF/ASA Special Awards has come to an end unless someone or some group could present a new vision that captures the support of the ASA membership/leadership. However, if we believe that a major goal of having ASA representatives at ISEF was to make the students aware of the value of applying statistical methods to their scientific data and if we believe that statistics education and awareness improved sufficiently since the founding of the ISEF/ASA award, then we may believe that the goal has largely been achieved. If that is true, then it would be good to reconsider if new challenges exist that merit special attention from the profession and ASA.

I am of age now when retirement is likely within the coming year. There are many new challenges facing the profession requiring fresh thought that I may be too unfamiliar with to offer any good ideas on solving. However, I trust that there will be new leaders stepping up to these challenges, perhaps some having benefited from or having been inspired by a competition or workshop I've had a hand in setting up. It has been my honor and pleasure to have served the Southern California Chapter and community. Hopefully, I've provided some leadership and vision on what our profession can be and bring to the community we live in. Certainly, the joy and excitement I get to see in our events from the chapter members or participants have always served to fuel my desire to do more. I'm thankful for what SCASA has provided. We often don't realize how good something is until we're away from it. Now, from a distance and years later, I know what a great experience I've had being a SCASA member because there are wonderful people out there who have inspired me, exhorted me, and encouraged me on this part of my life journey. Thank you, SCASA.

J. Rodney Jee