



## ***Practical Significance* | Episode 34: Exploring ASA Sections and Interest Groups**

**Donna LaLonde:** Welcome, everyone. We are super excited to be here for the October edition of the *Practical Significance* podcast. Ron and I are really pleased to be able to welcome three colleagues to a discussion about ASA sections and interest groups. So, our guests all have day jobs—Susan, Sharina, and Wendy join us today in their capacity as leaders of sections or leaders of section initiatives, so not representing their employer, but we would love to have you introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your day job. And Susan, we'll start with you.

**Susan Paddock:** Thank you, Donna. Hello, everyone. I'm Susan Paddock, and I'm the executive vice president and chief statistician at NORC at the University of Chicago, which is an independent, nonprofit research organization. And our focus at NORC is to provide trustworthy, research and data for our clients, policymakers, and society. And our main substantive areas in which we work include health, education, economics, justice, and public affairs. My role at NORC is to provide strategy and vision to advance our capabilities in statistics, data science, survey methodology, and AI—and I'm happy to be here.

**Donna LaLonde:** Great, thank you. And I should say that Susan joins us because she is the current chair of the Council of Section Governing Board. And so, we'll have lots of insights! And I'm happy to turn next to a new colleague, Sharina. And Sharina joins us because she is the current chair of the Biometrics Section, which I believe is the oldest section in the ASA. So, Sharina, please introduce yourself.

**Sharina Person:** Hi, Donna. Thank you so much for having me. My name is Sharina Person. I'm a professor and vice chair of the Department of Population and Quantitative Health Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School. I am still a practicing statistician in addition to all of my administrative roles, but I also serve as a co-director of our Quantitative Methods Corps, which houses all of our statisticians and data managers, as well as serve as the Deputy Director of our Burgeoning Cancer Center here at the institution.

**Donna LaLonde:** Thank you so much for taking time to join us. Our last guest is Wendy Martinez, and Wendy is joining us as the chair of the newest section, the Text Analytics Section. So, Wendy, please introduce yourself.

**Wendy Martinez:** Thank you, Donna. No pressure, although I do feel some pressure after hearing about Susan and Sharina! In my day job, at least the one that pays the bills, I am a senior mathematical statistician for data science at the U.S. Census Bureau. I work in the Research and Methodology Directorate, where I get to do some interesting research in data science that supports programs across the Bureau. I also get to do a lot of mentoring and training, which is very fulfilling for me. And I'm looking forward to the rest of the conversation today.

**Ron Wasserstein:** I'm going to start with a question for all of you, and I'll just call on you one by one, but I'm interested in finding out what motivated you, first of all, to join a section and then eventually to become the leader of a section. So, Sharina, why don't we start with you?

**Sharina Person:** Thanks, Ron. Well, I joined the Biometrics Section at the same time I joined the ASA while I was in grad school. As a trained biostatistician, the Biometrics Section was really just a natural fit that aligned with my training and the focus of my career at the time. I've always benefited from the resources and training provided by the Section but was on the margin if you will. I have to be honest; I wasn't as active as I should have been, but I always maintained my membership.

But how I got into leadership is actually kind of a funny story. I got a cold call from a colleague from another local institution whom I did not know prior to this encounter who contacted me out of the blue and asked if I would be interested in running for a leadership position. I kind of laughed him off and told him I would think about it, but I really wasn't planning on thinking about it.

But I happened to mention it to one of my friends and mentors and he encouraged me to get more involved in the organization. And so, I decided, okay, well, if you need someone on the ballot, I'll put my name on. I didn't really think I would win again because I didn't feel like anybody knew who I was or I had the credibility, if you will, because of not really being as active in the section as I could have been, but who knew I ended up winning?

And so, it was actually one of the best decisions I could have made because it not only provided me the ability to connect with other statistical professionals nationally, and internationally, that I may not have had an opportunity to connect with before, but it also gave me an opportunity to give back. And so, I've been enjoying this time that I've been in this role and am actually a little sad that it's coming to an end this year.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Well, we thank you for your involvement. I'm sure you'll agree that I found that most of the best things I have professionally are because somewhere along the line I said "yes" to something and lots of good things happened from that. And also, people seem to be

surprised and shocked when they actually win these elections. And I'm looking right at Susan now because I had conversations with her where she told me she was pretty sure she wouldn't get elected, and she has gotten elected to things. So, Susan, say a little bit about your interest in sections and how you got into section leadership.

**Susan Paddock:** So, I started out in sections very similar to Sharina when I was a graduate student. So, I did my dissertation on Non-Parametric Bayesian Methods at Duke University. And so, the Bayesian Statistics Section was certainly a natural entry point for me in terms of the ASA when I was a graduate student. And for me at the time, it was really important to be active in that section for a whole host of reasons: networking and just being part of a community. I was meeting other people who were coming out of graduate programs around the same time, and so that was a lot of fun.

My section memberships really mirror the course of my career. For the first fifteen or so years of my career, I was in and out of the Bayesian Section and Health Policy Statistics Section in terms of being an officer. And those sections were very important for my career development. And that's interesting because they're very different sections so that's one thing I really like about the ASA sections. There is such a variety and there are so many ways to find relevant and very helpful communities through those sections.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Thank you, Susan. When it comes to doing things and saying “yes” to things, there are few people who can rival Wendy Martinez in terms of the scope of things that she has agreed to do for the ASA, for her organization, and for others. So, Wendy, roll us way back to when you first got started in sections, and how moving from joining a section to becoming a section leader or other kinds of leadership positions has happened in your professional career.

**Wendy Martinez:** Thanks. Ron, what you said about saying “yes” really resonated with me, and I would encourage people to say “yes” even though it can be scary. I have said “yes” to some really scary things, but they turned out to be some of the best decisions I've ever made. Like Susan and Sharina, I became a member of the ASA as a student. First introduced to the ASA sections by my Ph.D. advisor, Ed Wegman. He was heavily involved with the Stack Computing and Stack Graphics Sections when I was working on my Ph.D. I won't tell you how long ago that was, though. And I was hanging around with him at the JSM and I went to their Section mixer at my first JSM and I found that that was such a great way to meet people because you're in this relaxed atmosphere and of course, there's usually some really yummy food.

I just remember that first mixer, two chairs of the two sections were so funny and I thought, wow, this is just a really great group of people and I want to be part of it. So, I joined the sections, and at that time I worked for the U.S. Navy as a civilian and the Defense and National Security Section was just getting established.

So, I wasn't one of the organizers or the folks who started that section, although I probably signed the petition. So, I learned a little bit about how a section was established at that point. Once it got established, they needed candidates to run for some of the offices and I

volunteered. I was elected, which also was a surprise, but that was the start of my ASA leadership journey. And I have to say, as we've heard from Susan and Sharina, this is a great way to get some leadership experience as well as to network with colleagues that have the same or similar interests to what we have. So that was my journey and I'm still on it.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Thanks, Wendy. And before I leave the notion of saying “yes” to things, I feel like I should give Sharina a fair warning. Your other two colleagues on this call—Wendy is a former president of ASA and Susan is about to be a vice president. So, things happen, Sharina and you just have to beware, all right! So, Susan, I'm going to go back to you for the next question. Donna mentioned your role in the Council of Sections Governing Board, and I expect that a lot of our listeners, and a lot of ASA members don't really know what that is. What does the Council of Sections Governing Board do and what sort of things is it up to these days?

**Susan Paddock:** Sure, I'd be happy to. So, the Council Sections Governing Board supports members of ASA as they pursue their scientific and statistical interests. The support is through the creation of sections and interest groups. The Governing Board has the role of promoting coordination and cooperation across sections. The Council of Sections Governing Board also serves as a voice for Sections at the ASA board level. And so, the Council of Sections itself is a very important and interesting entity within ASA. And I found that when I first became a Council of Sections representative for a section, it really opened my eyes to how ASA works. And so, I certainly recommend serving in that role.

And it's a great way to make sure that the issues that are important to one section are heard throughout the broader ASA. And I guess I should probably explain what sections and interest groups are as well, just briefly. So, sections are groups of at least 200 ASA members who organize around a particular statistical approach or statistical area of practice, or some sort of theme. This allows the sections to contribute to the JSM program formally in terms of having invited topic-contributed sessions, other sessions, activities, et cetera.

And sections often initiate other activities as well, such as webinars or conferences and other activities. Interest groups can be started by a petition of 25 ASA members. However, unlike sections, interest groups do not need to have all of their members involved with the ASA. And so, interest groups can be really effective for outreach. And in fact, this year we have two new interest groups that really exemplify this. One is called the Partnership for Clinical Research and Statistics.

One of their main goals is to be a voice in the clinical research community and liaise with other professional organizations in that space. And the other is the Privacy and Confidentiality Interest Group. And that's certainly a very wide-ranging and important topic as well that touches a lot of areas.

So, in terms of what the Council of Sections Governing Board is focusing on currently is that at JSM we sponsored a workshop for section officers to discuss the findings from the ASA's Anti-Racism Task Force report. David Marker, who was a co-chair of that task force, led that

workshop and the focus was on actions that sections can take. I know there's a parallel and longer workshop for chapters as well that I'm sure many of you might hear about. Another initiative is Monitoring the Health of Sections.

And so we conduct an annual survey to find out what activities that sections are undertaking for their members and that sometimes can spark ideas across the Council of Sections in terms of one section hearing about what other sections are putting out, like a newsletter or a social media campaign or things like that. Another area that we are looking at, and it's actually a continual area, is just making sure that sections feel like we're helping them coordinate enough with respect to activities they have in common.

So, a lot of sections have student paper awards for example, and so this year we had a discussion about the timeline for those awards and how that works across sections in terms of coordination. A fourth initiative is that we are discussing with sections their activities in terms of their conferences in particular and making sure that the communication channels between sections and ASA are as open as possible in terms of understanding to whom to reach out when they're thinking about organizing a conference or activities like that. So those are the main initiatives that we've been working on this year.

**Donna LaLonde:** That's great. So now we're going to focus a little bit on what Biometrics and Text Analytics is up to. And I also know that you may be involved in other sections so feel free to add in other initiatives. But Sharina, I'll start with you and ask what some of the initiatives are that Biometrics is working on and maybe also if you can look in your crystal ball and tell us a little bit about what might be coming in the future.

**Sharina Person:** The Biometrics Section currently is focused on getting back to basics and specifically reconnecting with our members as well as the leaders reconnecting with each other. So, we've included more frequent meetings so that we can strategize, so that we can really benefit from cross-collaboration and we also want our section members to feel in a tangible way the benefit of joining the Biometric Section.

So, it's not just because it's the oldest section, but they feel that there is a real benefit for them to check that box off for joining. So, to that end, we're trying to get down deep in the weeds about what our members really want and need and creating more opportunities for individuals to actively get involved. Many times, people say, "I would like an opportunity to get involved," but we don't have anything to give them to do.

And so that's one of the things we're working through so that we can actively engage our members and we are in the process of doing things to celebrate our members. To celebrate them for their longevity in the section or welcome brand-new members.

We're also actively working on developing seminars and workshops and roundtables and continuing education opportunities for a proposal for the upcoming JSM and we are also restarting our strategic initiatives push so that kind of fell on the back burner, especially during

the pandemic and not being able to necessarily focus resources in certain areas. And thanks to the information that came out from Susan's group about looking at innovative ways to help fund some of these strategic initiatives. We have just elected some brand-new leadership for the strategic initiatives for our Biometrics Section who are dynamic and ready to go. And so, we're just excited about those endeavors. So be on the lookout if you're a member of Biometrics for celebrations along the way.

**Donna LaLonde:** That's really fantastic. Or join Biometrics so that you will be able to be a part of it right?

**Sharina Person:** Absolutely, absolutely.

**Donna LaLonde:** That's great. Wendy, what's Text Analytics up to?

**Wendy Martinez:** Okay, we're up to a lot of good. As you pointed out at the beginning, the Text Analytics Section is very new. This is our first year of existence, so we're just figuring things out. We're getting things organized and transitioned from being an interest group. So, there are growing pains there, but we're getting through them. And thanks to the fantastic colleagues and leaders that we have in this section, we already have accomplished important things this year.

One activity that we had was a small symposium in July on statistics and large language models, which was jointly hosted with the New York City Metro Area ASA Chapter and the Department of Statistics at Columbia University. We also helped draft a late-breaking session on large language models like Chat GPT that was accepted and presented at JSM in Toronto this year. So that was exciting.

We also led the effort to write a response to the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, their request for public input on threats posed by the use of large language models and their use to spread disinformation. This was submitted to the ASA Board for approval and dissemination but hasn't been yet. It will be.

As for the future, we submitted a proposal for an introductory overview lecture on large language models for JSM 2024. And like most of the sections, we're also working on invited sessions for JSM, so we're looking forward to Portland. And Donna, since you opened the door to talking about other groups that we're involved in, I'll just put a little plug for one of the interest groups that I'm pretty passionate about, which is the History of Statistics Interest Group.

We have a good group of people there. We're always looking for more to help us lead the group. One of the things we've done is have a table at JSM. It's usually positioned next to the Education Section so it's always a good group of people that we can interact with there and share lots of really useful information. And some of the activities that the group does are we have Wikipedia edit-a-thon, book clubs, as well as Webinars. It's a good group, so check us out

– the History of Statistics Interest Group.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Thanks, that's great. I'll go ahead and ask my next question, but if you've touched on some of this already, you may want to elaborate some more. And I'll start with you Susan and then go around the room. But why should someone join a section? What advice do you have for listeners about joining and even more importantly, after they've joined, how to get involved? So, we'll do Susan and then Wendy and Sharina.

**Susan Paddock:** The main reason I think to join a section is that it can really shrink the ASA down to size. I believe people can be intimidated sometimes by the size of the ASA and the size of JSM. One way to cut through that concern is to join a section. It will make you feel less lonely at JSM if you have a section mixer to attend. And that might sound kind of silly, but I think it's a huge part of going to conferences is connecting with people and so it's such a valuable way to right-size the JSM for you through sections.

Another piece of advice I might give is that another way to use the offerings of sections would be to give a talk or a poster. Also attending roundtables that are sponsored by sections is an amazing way to meet people.

There are a lot of really interesting speakers who are hosting. So, another way that you can use sections is to follow the sections you're a member of and know what they're putting on, and then register for that. I also think that as Sharina said, giving back is really valuable and it can be fun. A section I spent most of my career so far is the ASA Fellow Nominations Committee and I was fortunate enough to be nominated by one of these. For the ASA Fellow, just to help them feel that appreciation for everything that they've accomplished. There are so many opportunities through sections to connect.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Thanks Susan. As I go over to Wendy, I'm just going to emphasize what you said about shrinking the size of the ASA or the size of the JSM - sections and chapters really do that. They really provide a place to start meeting people and expanding your network in the organization. So, thanks for mentioning that. So, Wendy, to you about reasons to join a section and advice for getting involved in a section.

**Wendy Martinez:** It's not just the JSM, because there's so much interaction between the sections. I guess I should say through discussion boards and conversations through the ASA mechanisms for communicating with members. So, it's really this ongoing conversation throughout the year where you learn about opportunities and you're able to network with people.

But the important thing is that you're networking and interacting with people who have similar interests to you. And as statisticians and data scientists, we come from many different domains. We've heard several of them just today. That struck me when I was hearing from Susan.

There's just such diversity amongst the three of us in terms of our areas and interests. And of

course, members could also be retired or independent consultants. But I think by becoming absolutely involved in an organization, you get so much more out of it. You do get the opportunity to give back. That's so important. But it's so much more than just saying, "Oh, I'm a member of this organization, I'm getting journals, or what have you." It's that interaction with people that's so important. And as we've seen, with all of us here, our interactions with the sections provide not only networking but leadership opportunities, so ways to give back. And I think what's really important is a way for us to craft and affect the future of our profession.

**Donna LaLonde:** Thanks, Wendy. Sharina, what would you like to add to this conversation?

**Sharina Person:** I wholeheartedly agree with all the comments that Susan and Wendy have made. I really believe it's important to join a section, regardless of which section you choose sections because it allows you to better connect with like-minded individuals who have similar interests, and it allows you to benefit from all of the wonderful resources and workshops, et cetera, that are available.

As far as how to get involved, I always encourage people just to speak up. If you have an idea, just say so. I have gotten more emails from people saying I really would like to volunteer and I think that's wonderful. Let's figure out a way to really give you a meaningful experience that will be mutually beneficial to you and a section as well. The leadership of sections doesn't have all the answers, so we completely welcome ideas and volunteering to participate. So just don't be afraid. Shoot an email to someone and they'll be more than happy to. Let's get you involved.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Thank you all. Nearly 40 years ago, on the advice of my Ph.D. mentor, I wandered into a section mixer at JSM, and that led to 20 years of volunteering with the ASA before coming on the staff. So, showing up and speaking up, those things make a difference.

**Donna LaLonde:** This has been such a wonderful conversation, and so I will share with you that my vision is that every member of the ASA will become a member of at least one section, right? So that's the aspiration I'm putting out there for us all because it's such a wonderful way to find your people. But I'm going to shift gears for this final question because I need to add to my reading, watching, and listening list, right? So, I'm a real podcast person, so I would like each of you to share what you're reading, what you're listening to, what you're watching, or all of the above. And Sharina. I'll start with you.

**Sharina Person:** So that's a really good question. I love to read and don't do it as much as I should, but I have a book that I have not been able to put down and it's called *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michael Leedes and it's on the *New York Times* bestseller list. It's really good. It's about this creative person who is in love with her husband and then one day she kills him and she stops talking and no one knows why she did it. And so, there is this psychiatrist who is trying to get to the bottom of it, trying to get her to start talking, and at least give a motive for doing it. It's a page-turner.

**Donna LaLonde:** That is great. And I am definitely adding that to my list. So, thank you. Wendy,



we'll go to you.

**Wendy Martinez:** I'm adding that to my list also. I just wrote it down. That sounds like a really interesting book. So, thank you. Sharina. Well, I have been taking some college courses for the past year or so just for fun, and my concentration is on Art History. But over this past summer, I decided to branch out a little bit and learn about other topics. And so, I just recently finished a course on the Bronte sisters, so I got to revisit some of the classics *Jane Eyre*, *Weathering Heights*, and the *Tenet at Wildfell Hall*. That was pretty exciting.

But the fall semester starts next week and I signed up for a class in French Impressionism. I don't have the syllabus yet, but I'm sure there'll be lots of reading involved. In fact, I've been gathering books on the topic so I'm sure I'll fill up my TBR list there. I'll keep you informed, Donna!

**Donna LaLonde:** Wonderful. And Susan?

**Susan Paddock:** First I want to say I am so impressed by Sharina and Wendy's activities and reading choices. So, I will make some notes, but I'll go in a different direction. I'll tell you about a comedian who I learned of actually on the flight back from JSM because on Delta Airlines they were featuring Atsuko Okatsuka: *The Intruder*. She's amazing and I highly recommend her.

**Donna LaLonde:** Oh, that's fantastic. Well, again, we are so appreciative and we have another tradition on the *Practical Significance* podcast, and that is we always conclude with Ron's "Top Ten." So, I'll turn it over to him.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Thank you, Donna. I hear all the time about people's bucket lists, it is so fascinating. So, I thought that the *Practical Significance* podcast should also have one. And you know, I'm always trying to be helpful, so here is my, "Top Ten List of Buckets."

#10 A bucket of fried chicken—lots of deliciousness coming in at about 4,000 calories.

#09 A bucket of popcorn—to enjoy while watching a three-hour Christopher Nolan movie and ingesting a full gram of salt.

#08 A mop bucket—with those nice rollers to squeeze the mop head.

#07 An ice bucket—very handy at hotels, or to keep you cool on the beach, where you will need...

#06 A beach bucket—for building sandcastles.

#05 A helicopter bucket—for putting out those wildfires.

#04 A paint bucket— 'nuff said.

#03 An upside-down paint bucket—for busking drums in the subway.

#02 An excavator bucket—so that you can dig even faster that hole you are digging yourself into.

And the #01 bucket has to be: One with a hole in it, dear Liza, dear Liza.

Well, that's it for this month's episode of *Practical Significance*. We look forward to joining you next month to continue the conversation next month!