

Brief History of the Society of Experimental Psychologists (2006)

The first meeting of the Society of Experimental Psychologists — then called The Experimental Psychologists — was held at Cornell University on April 4–5, 1904. The meetings then and for many years thereafter were presided over by Edward Bradford Titchener. Researchers from Cornell, Yale, Clark, Michigan, and Princeton attended these early meetings with Chicago and Iowa soon joining. Research papers were read and discussed by both established researchers and tyros. As the number of practicing experimental psychologist grew, along with it grew discussions concerning the limits that should be placed on membership: Should it be kept small to ensure a manageable series of conferences; or should it be open to all interested practicing experimental psychologists. It was kept small — the Academy model — and eventually Fellows of the society founded an alternative society, The Psychonomic Society, to serve the needs of broader representation and communications. During these early years the total membership ranged around 35 individuals.

In 1929 the Experimental Psychologists were reorganized as the Society of Experimental Psychologists — SEP. After the reorganization the SEP grew in numbers and diversity of experimental interest. The meetings were kept small and relatively brief, just one and half days of sessions, and continued their emphases on communication of ongoing research and the open exchange of ideas amongst active researchers. In the original bylaws of 1929, the purpose of the SEP was stated to be “To advance Psychology by arranging informal conferences on experimental methodology.” Methodology had been an important focus of the Experimental Psychologists; visits to laboratories and demonstration of equipment were encouraged. But as the SEP evolved, interest in methodology waned, displaced by interest in theory and data.

The SEP has never been an activist organization; it is not part of federations nor does it advertise its meetings. In 1943 — and again in 2001 — there was talk with an affiliation with the American Psychological Association or the American Psychological Society. No action was taken, perhaps

because of the fellows' wish to preserve the informal atmosphere associated with meetings hosted in psychology departments.

The activities of the SEP are primarily organized around the annual spring meeting, consisting of presentations by the members, and a banquet at which honors are conferred on members of the SEP or other individuals. The two signal honors are the Warren Medal, bestowed since 1936, endowed by the widow of Howard Crosby Warren to honor the life of that exceptional psychologist. The Lifetime Achievement Award was endowed by Norman Anderson in 2002. Also instituted in 2002 was a young investigator award, which recognizes individuals within 15 years of their Ph.D.

The SEP maintains a mailing list (SEPforum@virginia.edu), for communications among members, and two web sites (<http://www.sepsych.org/> and <http://www.faculty.virginia.edu/SEP/>).

Every year ten new members are elected, including the recipient of the Young Investigator Award. The membership comprises about 200 active members with expertise in all the domains of psychology in which experiments are conducted.