

A survey to elucidate the thoughts and behaviors of fisheries professionals toward membership in the  
American Fisheries Society

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On behalf of the young professional committee of the fisheries management section of the American  
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## **Background**

In February 2014, the Fisheries Management Section (FMS) established a committee to address the specific needs and issues facing young professionals in the fisheries field. Young professionals from the Education Section and its Student Subsection joined the effort, resulting in a collaborative group of individuals employed through state and federal agencies and universities. The newly formed Young Professional Committee (YPC) was charged with identifying potential bottlenecks in the recruitment and retention of young professional members to the American Fisheries Society (AFS). In 2014, the YPC drafted a list of goals and objectives. The goals of the YPC are to:

1. Prepare and support young fisheries professionals to remain active and engaged in AFS, and to bring resource expertise and leadership into their workplace.
2. Increase coordination/involvement between FMS and other AFS Units to engage and support young professional membership in AFS.

Initial tasks were developed to meet the YPC goals, and a survey was developed to identify recruitment and retention patterns in AFS membership and participation.

## **Objective**

The specific objectives of this study were to 1) identify factors that influence fisheries professionals' decisions to become a member of AFS, and to 2) determine the various facets of AFS that are important for fisheries professionals, while identifying specific areas that the society can enhance to better serve its members.

## **Strategy**

We designed a survey to collect information from fisheries professionals from both current AFS members and non-AFS members. We hypothesized that the best way to gather these data were to

coordinate with Division leaders to solicit the local AFS chapters (e.g., Nebraska Chapter, Dakota Chapter, Southern New England Chapter). Current AFS members are likely to participate at the state Chapter in addition to AFS; however, Chapter membership is also frequently comprised of non AFS members. In addition, we assumed that most state agency fisheries personnel are more likely to be supported (from administration) to participate with state chapter activities than regional or national meetings. Furthermore, private and federal agencies often attend state chapter annual meetings as a way to network with fellow professionals at a nominal cost (e.g., minimal dues fees and travel requirements).

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Description</b>
Student AFS Member	Student that is currently a member of AFS
Young Professional AFS Member	Fisheries professional that is less than 3 years post-graduation and currently a member of AFS
Professional AFS Member	Fisheries professional that is greater than 3 years post-graduation and currently a member of AFS
Student Non-member	Student that is not a member of AFS
Young Professional Non-member	Fisheries professional that is less than 3 years post-graduation and not a member of AFS
Professional Non-member	Fisheries professional that is greater than 3 years post-graduation and not a member of AFS

### **Survey methods**

We designed a descriptive survey to gather opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of fisheries professionals toward membership of the AFS with respondents partitioned into current AFS members and non-AFS members to better describe metrics used to evaluate AFS membership. For non-AFS members, close-ended questions were devised to determine the most influential factors leading to the decision to refrain from membership. Current AFS members were asked a series of questions relating to their professional status, the duration of membership, and the reasons why they value their membership and participation in AFS. These responses will help to identify strengths of AFS that may be used to better

suite current AFS member's needs and for future marketing techniques for recruiting new members. Finally, demographic questions were asked of all survey respondents to describe the participant pool and determine if unique trends existed among meaningful groupings. At the conclusion of the survey, a section for comments allowed respondents to further expand on survey responses or to add additional insight into AFS membership.

Surveys were distributed on March 3 2015 to the various AFS Division representatives. We asked Division President and President-elects to dispense the survey to each of their local Chapter Presidents within their division. We monitored survey submissions through time to isolate various states where response was poor and provided follow-up emails to ensure complete coverage throughout AFS. Surveys were also distributed through various email listserv's (e.g., FMS listserv) when requested to gain as much exposure as possible. The survey tool was closed on June 1 2015.

## **Results**

There were 625 survey respondents, and fisheries professionals from all 50 states were represented. In addition, there were 10 Canadian (from three provinces) and 2 international (outside of North America) respondents. A large percentage of respondents were AFS members (74%; 499 of 625) that were composed of professionals (41%), young professionals (19%), and students (14%). A high proportion of AFS members that were of professional status had been AFS members for many years. Nearly 65% of professionals had been AFS members for at least 5 years and 23% were members for more than 20 years (Figure 1). Retention of AFS members appears to be high and is largely supported by their perceived importance of AFS to their career and professional development (Figure 2). Furthermore, approximately 75% of AFS members have been a regular member since they graduated from some form of schooling, and only about 10% acknowledge to occasionally becoming a member every few years (every third or fourth year). Full professionals are currently defined by AFS as three years post-

graduation, and the majority of respondents generally believe they transitioned from student or young professional between 1-5 years (59%), with the highest percentage of people believing that 5 years was the optimal transition period (Figure 3).

Evidence suggests that current members value AFS and likely feel that the perceived benefits compensate for the associated fees, as demonstrated by the number of AFS members that have retained membership for a number of years. A hypothesized benefit of AFS membership is the value that belonging to and participating in a professional society has on resume and CV building. Furthermore, job acquisition may be enhanced through networking with professionals, professional development activities, and viewing job announcements on the AFS job board postings and listservs. Despite these perceived benefits to members, the majority of AFS members responded that AFS was not helpful in finding or obtaining a professional job position. The category of “not important” was selected by 35% of AFS members and the overall mean score was 3.5 (0.06 SE). Only 26.4% responding that AFS participation had some importance in finding or securing their first professional position (Figure 4). For those that thought AFS was important for attaining a professional position, the ability to network with other AFS members was the most important factor (Figure 5). We hypothesized that AFS membership would be an important tool for aiding in job promotion (e.g., professional development, networking capabilities, AFS certification); however, results suggest that this was not the case. The mean score was 3.3 (0.06 SE), indicating a neutral to slightly negative connotation toward this perceived benefit (Figure 6). Despite members responding that AFS is important for their careers (Figure 2), we were not able to capture the specific benefits that are valued by members.

A high percentage of AFS and non-AFS members have been in the fisheries career field for a number of years. Over 75% of non-AFS members had reported being a fishery professional for over 5 years, and 50% of those respondents had more than 10 years of service in the industry (Figure 7a). The

majority of AFS members were similarly employed as fisheries professionals for a number of years, but had a higher percentage of those with collectively fewer years of experience (Figure 7b). A number of non-AFS members (59%) had previously been an AFS member at some level (e.g., student, young professional or professional) (Figure 8). In an effort to determine factors that may be hindering fisheries professionals from becoming AFS members, survey respondents were asked to identify multiple factors that contribute to their decision to abstain from membership. A series of choices were given and also an opportunity to provide additional items. The largest factor that non-AFS members reported that contributed to their decision to abstain from membership was the financial cost (60.7% of respondents), despite many respondents selecting multiple factors that influenced their decision. Additional factors that carried similar weight in this decision were that state chapter participation was sufficient (44.8%) and that non-AFS members did not see the value or benefit of being a member (Table 1). When non-AFS members were asked what the single largest factor was that contributed to their desire for AFS membership, financial cost was again selected most often (39.1% of respondents). However, 27.2% of respondents indicated that they did not perceive a value or benefit from being a member (Table 2). Additional reasons contributed by respondents included unawareness of the society (n=7), unhappiness with AFS (n=5) (e.g., catering to specific groups, change in policy, complicated renewal process), and competing time commitments (n=2).

A high percentage of non-AFS respondents (30.1%) were unaware that membership at the local chapter level does not constitute membership within AFS. Although this result was somewhat surprising, this information represents an opportunity for AFS to educate Chapter members and potentially increase membership, particularly since 59.9% of non-AFS respondents were currently members of a local chapter. An increase in communication is therefore paramount for AFS leaders hoping to increase recruitment of new members or participation from stagnant or cyclical members.

Respondents perceived a difference in employer support for participation between AFS and the local chapter level (Figure 9). This indicates that employers value their participation at the local chapter more than they support AFS participation. There are likely a variety of reasons for supporting local chapter participation as opposed to AFS, including financial constraints for travel, competition for time, or strong commitments to local projects. Nonetheless, this divergence of support suggests that a dialogue is needed with employers to better connect their needs with AFS participation.

There were 66 constructive comments (excluding irrelevant comments such as extending gratitude for the survey) that were received from both AFS and non-AFS members. Respondents' comments largely fit into three category types: general thoughts about AFS, perceived problems with AFS, and recommendations to improve AFS. Common thoughts were often easy to identify non-AFS and AFS members. Current members described how helpful AFS has been with their professional development and ability to network with other professionals across the country. Non-AFS members' comments relayed specific events or reasons that drove them away from membership, such as financial constraints, catering to specific groups (e.g., academia), policy changes, or the difficulty in renewing or changing account types with AFS. Many respondents provided comments about the perceived problems with AFS. The majority of these responses (58.1% of all negative responses) were related to poor incentives for fisheries professionals to maintain membership and the financial burden of membership fees (Table 3). Additionally, respondents claimed that employers do not financially (through raises or promotion) reward those that participate in AFS, AFS is no longer in touch with field biologists, and there is nothing to offer fisheries professionals who cannot attend the annual meeting. Some common recommendations to increase membership or provide additional value to current members were to provide more support (i.e., money) for young professionals to attend meetings and workshops, provide online platforms to virtually attend meetings and conferences, adopt different or new marketing

strategies, and provide additional benefits to members such as term life insurance, training opportunities, and travel discounts.

Demographic information was also collected from survey respondents to characterize individuals or groups of people who completed our survey. Most fisheries professionals who responded to our survey were generally white (94.5%) and employed by state agencies (56.7%). Federal (e.g., U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) and University employees were the bulk of the remaining employers (29.7%). Responding fisheries professionals were typically well-educated with nearly 50% holding a master's degree and 16% a doctorate degree (Figure 11). Very few fisheries professionals attained their position without a minimum of a bachelor's degree. There were few differences in demographic information between current AFS members and non-members. Non-AFS members had a higher proportion of individuals with income ranging from \$30,000-\$50,000 (50.4% of respondents) compared to AFS members (31.9%). Conversely, AFS members had a higher percentage of those that made between \$50,000-\$100,000 (42.7%) compared to non-AFS members (35.1%). Finally, current years of experience in the profession varied among AFS and non-AFS members. Non-AFS members were typically in the fisheries profession longer, where 75.6% of respondents had more than 5 years of experience. Conversely, AFS member respondents were composed of collectively fewer individuals with more than five years of experience (64.5%).

## **Summary**

- Hypothesized benefits of AFS membership, such as obtaining a professional job position or aiding in job promotion, were not perceived as important components of membership of AFS.
- The largest factors non-AFS members reported to contribute to their decision to abstain from membership was the financial cost (60.7% of respondents). Additional factors were that state



chapter participation was sufficient (44.8%) and that non-AFS members did not see the value or benefit of being a member (39.3%).

- 30.1% of respondents were unaware that membership at the local chapter level does not constitute membership within AFS, and 59.9% of non-AFS respondents were currently members of a local chapter.
- Respondents perceived that employers value their participation at the local chapter more than they support AFS participation.
- Several respondents indicated frustrations with the membership renewal process, particularly when changes such as membership status are required.
- Survey respondents who were AFS members had a higher percentage of individuals making a larger annual income. These data could be interpreted as: 1.) fisheries professionals who become AFS members typically make more money, or 2.) only fisheries professionals who are making a larger annual income choose to maintain membership.
- Non-AFS member respondents typically had a larger percentage of years of service than AFS member respondents. This coincides with a number of respondents who commented that there were no incentives to continue membership, implying that AFS may have been helpful early on in their career, but the benefits are no longer exceeding the financial cost to continue membership.

Table 1. The number and percentage of non-AFS member respondents who answered the question, “What factors contribute to you NOT being an AFS member?”

Answer choice	Number of responses	Percentage of responses*
Financial cost of membership	99	60.70%
Feel that participation in the state chapter is sufficient	73	44.80%
Participation in other societies	25	15.30%
Employer does not support your participation	37	22.70%
Do not see the value or benefit of being a member	64	39.30%
Other	24	14.70%

\* Multiple selections were allowed

Table 2. The number and percentage of non-AFS member respondents who answered the question, *“What is the single biggest factor that has contributed to you NOT being an AFS member?”*

Answer choice	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Financial cost of membership	59	39.1%
Feel that participation in the state chapter is sufficient	34	22.5%
Participation in other societies	10	6.6%
Employer does not support your participation	7	4.6%
Do not see the value or benefit of being a member	41	27.2%

Table 3. Additional comments provided by all survey respondents at the end of the survey.

Comments	# of comments	Percentage of comments
<i>Positive perceptions regarding AFS</i>		
AFS provides a benefit	12	18.2%
<i>Negative perceptions regarding AFS</i>		
Do not see the value or benefit of being a member	10	15.2%
Financial burden	9	13.6%
Interaction between cost and benefit	6	9.1%
Employer does not support participation	9	13.6%
AFS caters to specific groups/not in touch with management	5	7.6%
Problems associated with renewing or changing membership	3	4.5%
Unhappy with the organization	1	1.5%
<i>Recommendations for AFS</i>		
More support for YP (travel and grants)	3	4.5%
Additional benefits (life insurance, travel discounts)	2	3.0%
More training opportunities (at a low cost)	2	3.0%
Better marketing to describe the benefits of AFS	2	3.0%
Provide online platforms for conferences and training	2	3.0%

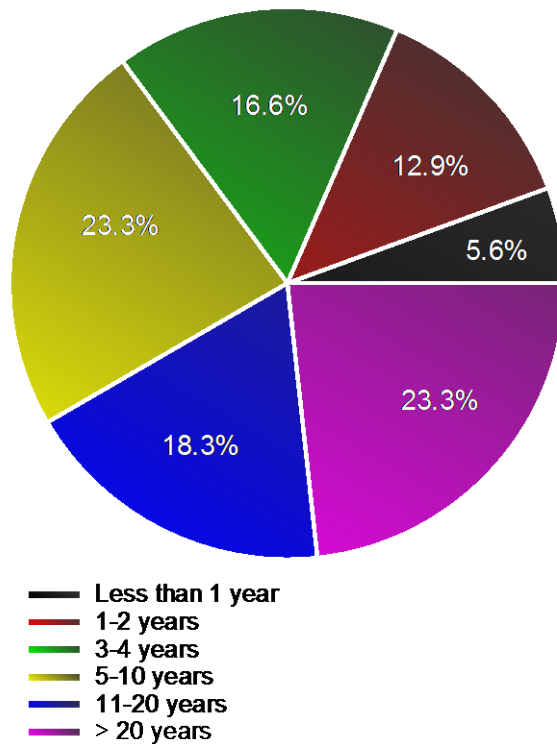


Figure 1. The percentage of respondents that answered the question, “How many years have you been an AFS member?”

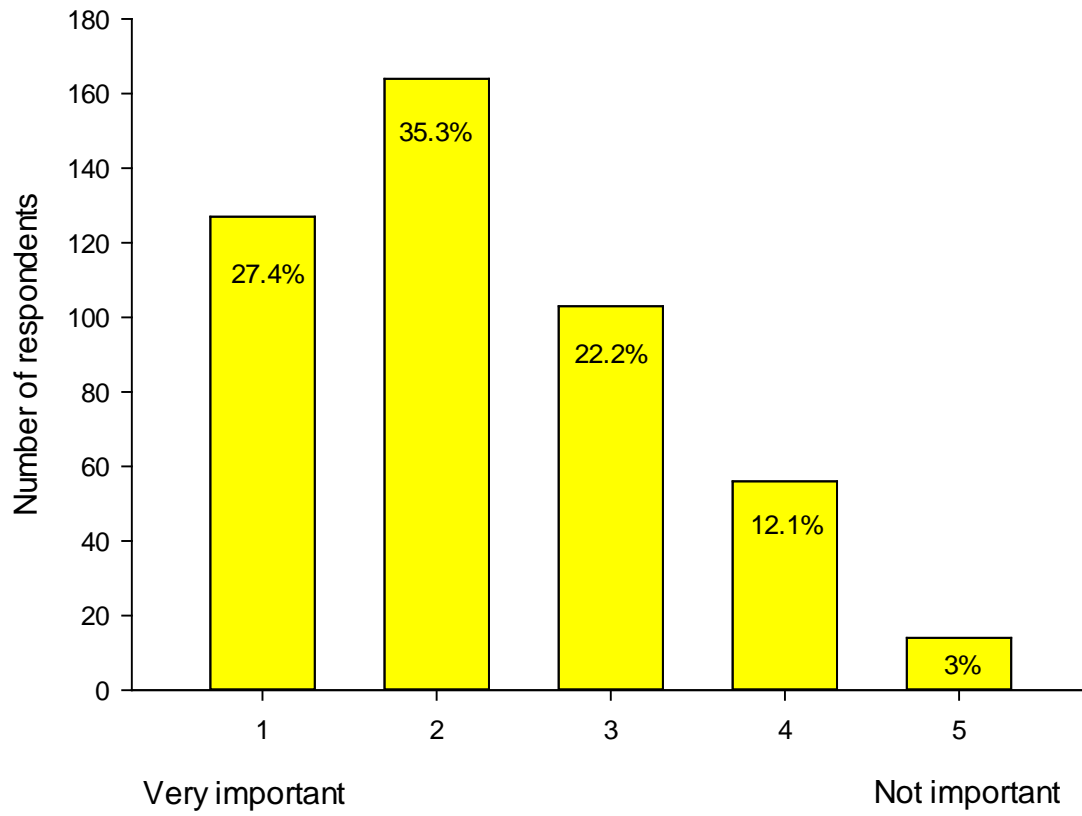


Figure 2. The number and the percentage of AFS member respondents that answered the question, “How important is AFS membership and participation to your career and professional development?”

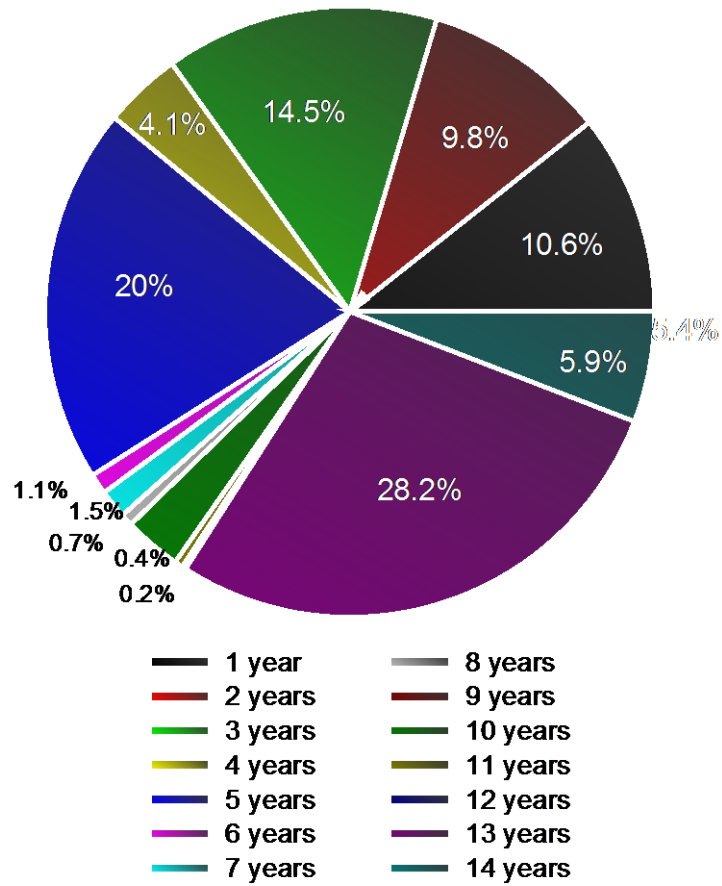


Figure 3. The percentage of AFS-member respondents that answered the question, “In your experience, how many years post initial professional employment elapsed before you felt that you were a full professional?”

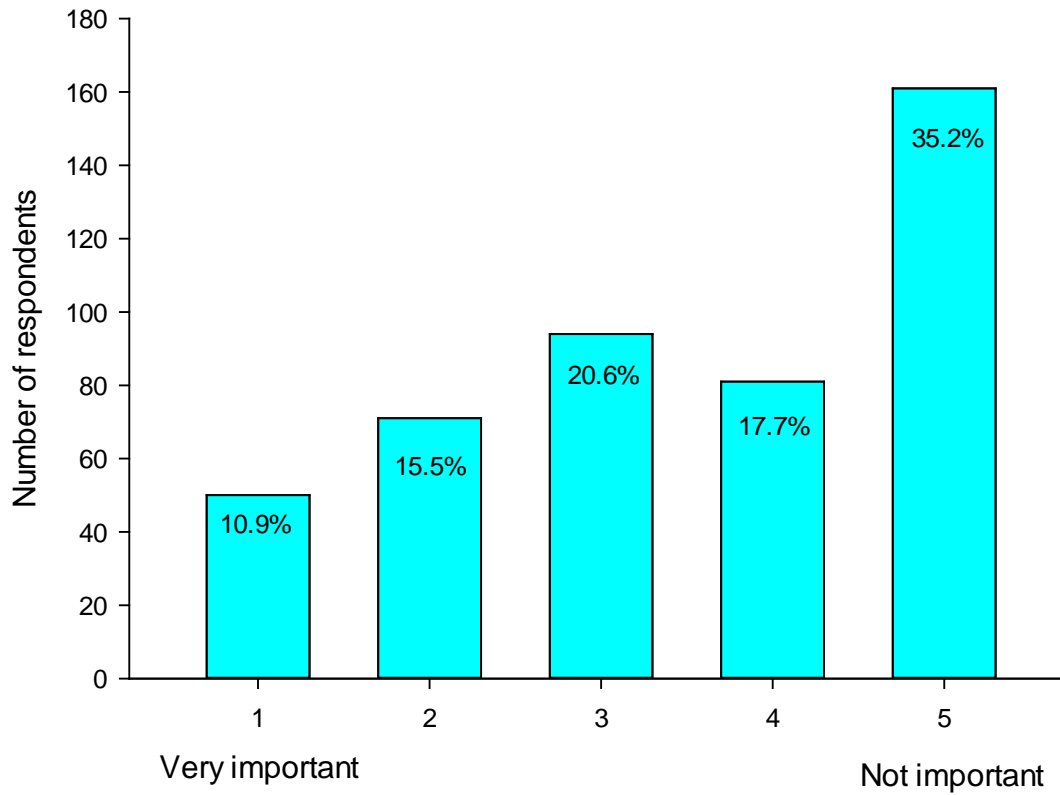


Figure 4. The number and percentage of AFS member respondents that answered the question, “How important do you believe your membership in AFS was in helping you find and/or obtain your first professional position?”



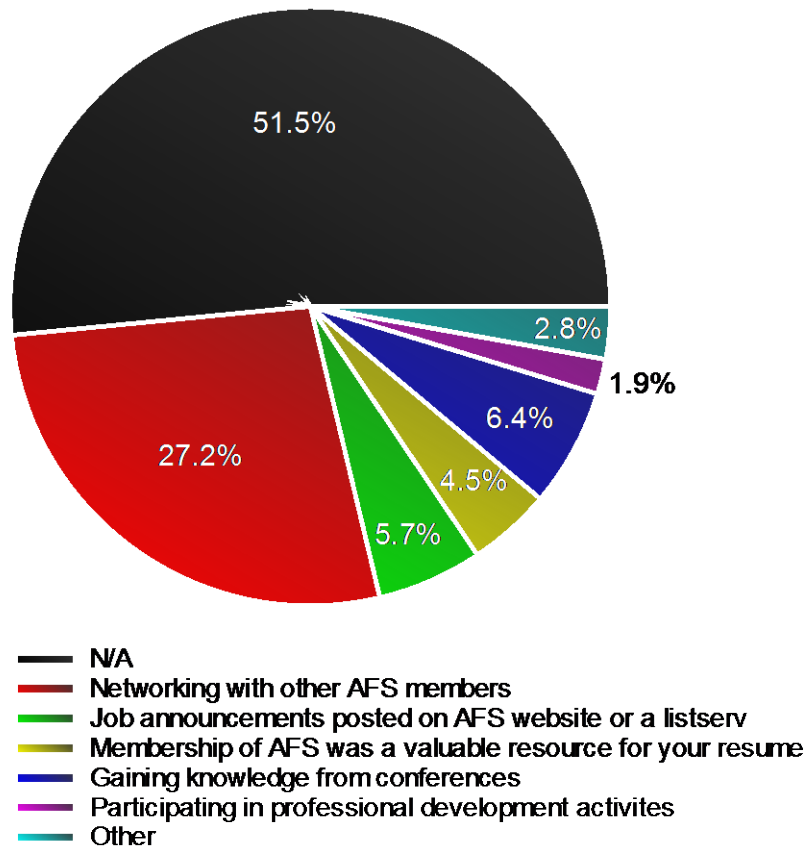


Figure 5. The percentage of AFS member respondents that answered the question, "If AFS was helpful in attaining your first professional position, what was the most important reason?"

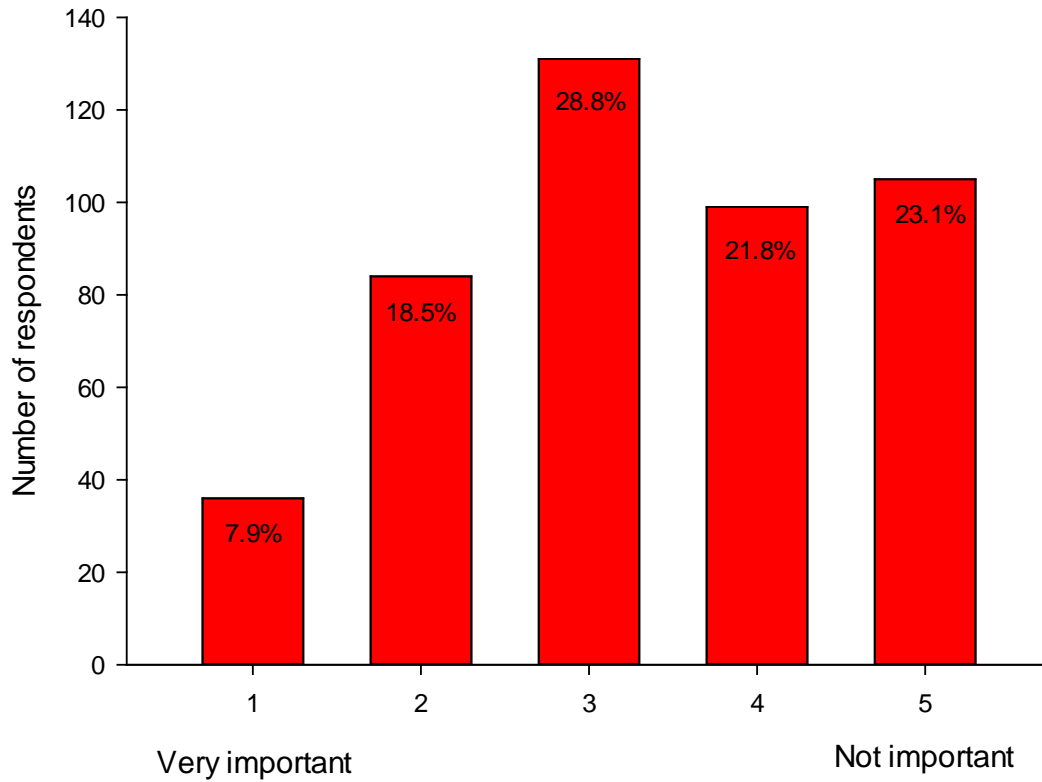


Figure 6. The number and percentage of AFS member respondents that answered the question, “How important do you believe your AFS membership and/or participation is in aiding you in promotion?”

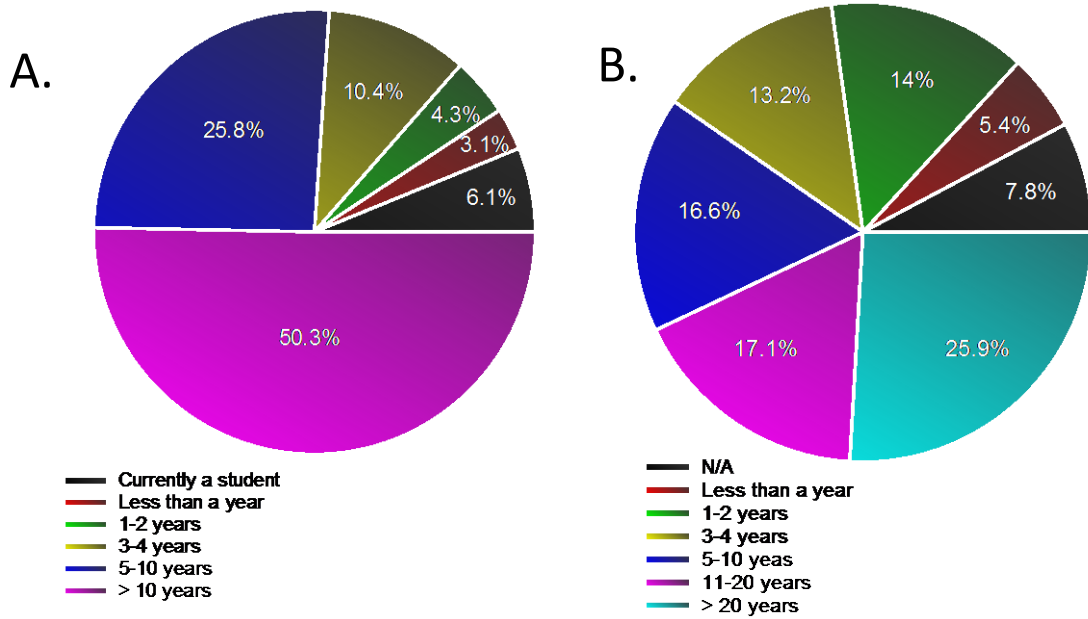


Figure 7. The percentage of non-AFS member (A) and AFS member (B) respondents that answered the question, “How many years have you been a professional within the fisheries field?”

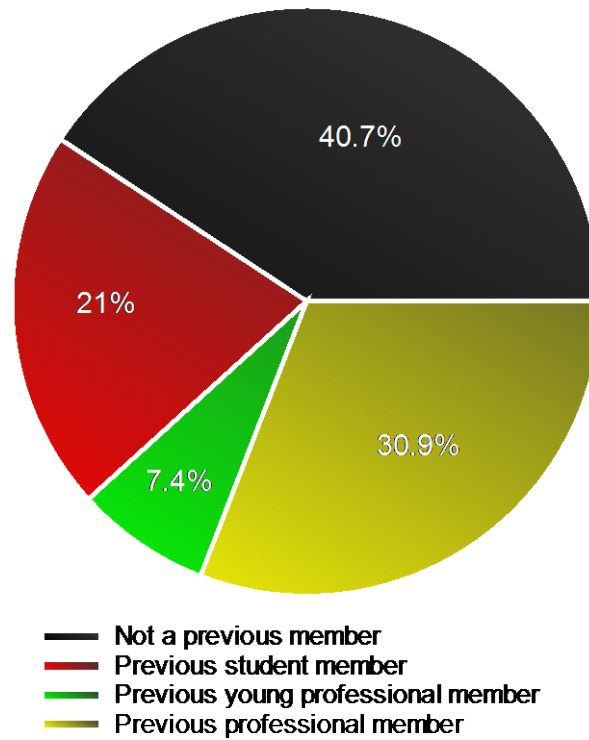


Figure 8. The percentage of non-AFS member respondents that answered the question, “Have you previously been an AFS member? If so, at what level?”

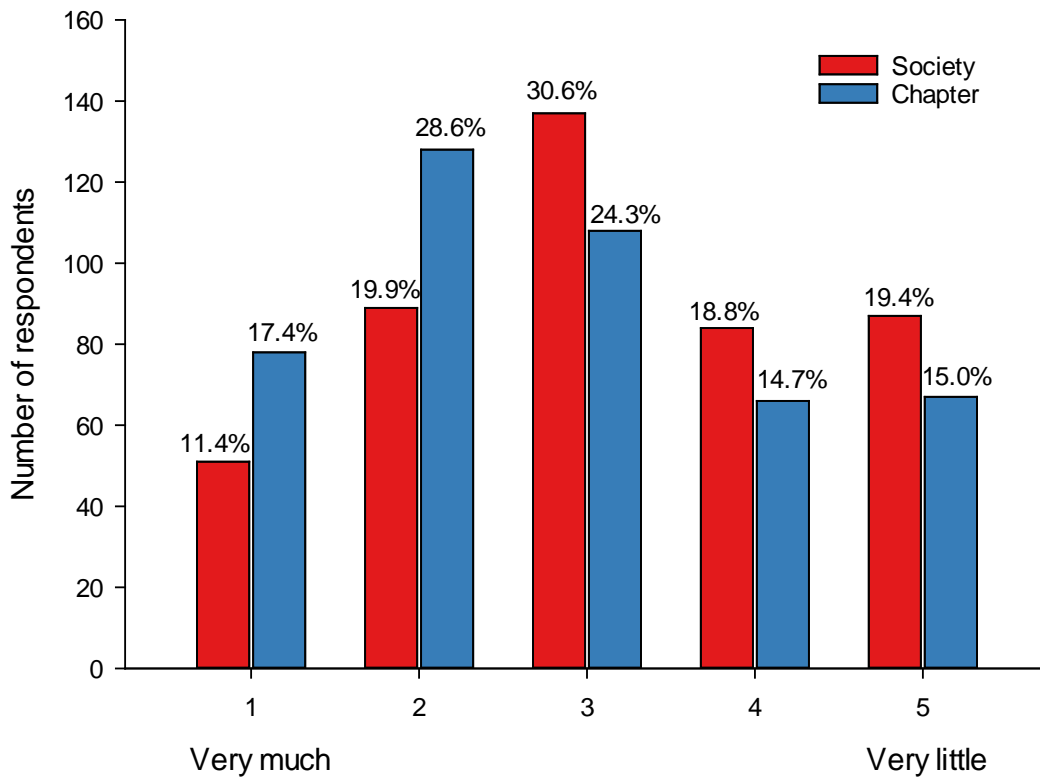


Figure 9. The number and percentage of AFS member respondents that answered questions regarding their perceptions on how much their employer values membership and participation in AFS at the society and chapter levels.

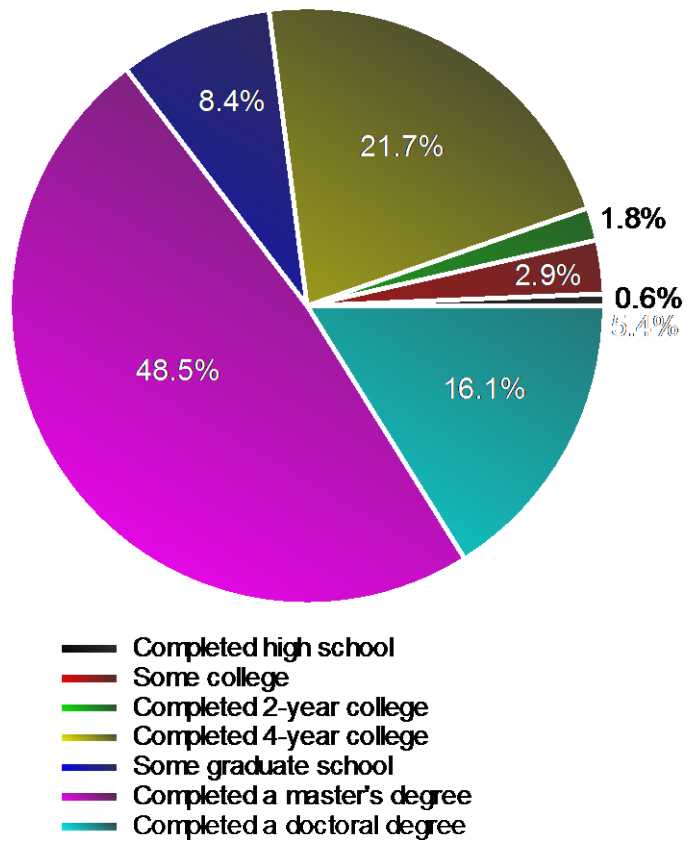


Figure 10. The percentage of all survey respondents that answered the question, “What is the highest level you completed in school?”