

Results of the 2010–2011 Regions Task Force

The AAR Regions Task Force, which was charged with the responsibility of evaluating the structure, purposes, and functions of the AAR's ten regions, concluded its work in March 2011 and submitted its final report and recommendations to the AAR Board of Directors. The Board unanimously approved the Regions Task Force recommendations and accepted the Operating Agreement for Regions at its April 2011 meeting in San Francisco, California.

The Task Force, chaired by Brian K. Pennington of Maryville College, was appointed by former AAR President Ann Taves to address a handful of specific challenges:

- *the heightened federal scrutiny of nonprofit organizations as a result of the Sarbanes–Oxley Act of 2002;*
- *the tremendous variability in regional structures and in regional relationships to other learned societies, such as the SBL; and*
- *the absence of a uniform understanding of the relationship of the regions to the AAR as a whole.*

Highlights of the recommendations include incorporating all ten regions as LLCs in the State of Georgia; adding a student representative to all regional boards; allowing members to choose the region to which they will belong; and providing additional support from the AAR office in Atlanta.

The full report submitted to the Board of Directors is reproduced below.

FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

REGIONS TASK FORCE

Submitted to the Board of Directors,

April 2011

INTRODUCTION

Regionally Elected Directors have noted for a number of years that there are persistent questions about the purpose and function of the Regions in the structure of the AAR. AAR regions have diverse organizational structures, different relationships to the SBL and other academic organizations, and varying success with yearly regional conferences. Increasing use of the internet for making academic and social connections as well as challenges that the economic downturn have presented to academic meetings led to questions about the viability and sustainability of the regions. To explore these issues, the AAR Board of Directors authorized the creation of a Task Force on the Regions. The Task Force was formed in spring 2010.

CHARGE TO REGIONS TASK FORCE

The Regions Task Force will study the regional structures of the AAR in order to assess the overall health of the regions and their contributions to the work of the AAR and the study of religion. It will make recommendations to the AAR Board of Directors regarding how the AAR and its regions might organize and govern themselves so as to best serve their members. The Task Force will: a) evaluate the regional structure of the AAR as a whole and the variable structures of the AAR's ten regions, including the regional relationships between the AAR and other scholarly societies such as the SBL and ASOR; b) assess the regions' contributions to the work of the AAR; c) study the role of the regions in light of the likely reorganization of the AAR Board; d) assess the resources expended on and the goods obtained through the work of the regions.

TASK FORCE ROSTER

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TASK FORCE MEETINGS AND PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

The full Task Force met at the following times:

May 10, 2010 by WebEx

June 23, 2010 by WebEx

August 2, 2010 at the Chicago Holiday Inn O'Hare/Rosemont

Oct. 6, 2010 by WebEx

Oct. 29, 2010 at the Atlanta Hyatt Regency, in conjunction with the Annual Meeting

A subcommittee of the Task Force charged with writing the first draft of the final report met Feb. 24-25, 2011 at the Chicago Holiday Inn O'Hare/Rosemont. In addition, the Task Force chair and the AAR executive staff remained in ongoing communication about task force concerns.

The chair met with AAR Executive staff in Atlanta July 2010 to collect documents and data for the task force.

The AAR engaged an attorney who met with the Task Force on Oct. 29, 2010 to collect information for writing a first draft of the LLC Operating Agreement included in this report. AAR

Executive staff and the Task Force chair responded to early drafts of the agreement.

The Task Force consulted with the Regionally Elected Directors to receive feedback on its draft recommendations on Oct. 29, 2010.

The chair of the Task Force and the AAR staff representative to the Regions Committee met with the Regional Coordinators (formerly REDs) Mar. 10–11, 2011 at the Atlanta Marriott Century City to review the penultimate draft of the final report and recommendations.

Subcommittees of the task force were formed to study:

1. Structure of other ACLS societies: Elizabeth Say
2. Degree-granting institutions and their grad student populations in the regions: Scott Kline and Tony Pinn
3. Role of regions for graduate students: Amy DeRogatis, Laurie Lamoureux-Scholes, Elizabeth Lawson
4. By-laws of regional groups: David Weddle and Brian Pennington
5. Online regional seminars and online journal for regional papers: Doug McGaughey

Data on the regions was collected through regional surveys of those attending regional meetings in 2010.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY OF TASK FORCE DELIBERATIONS

Among the topics that the task force discussed, the most pressing involved the primary questions: do the regions enhance the work of the AAR and promote its mission? The task force considered this question and returned to it many times over the course of our deliberations. As a committee we determined that the regions play a crucial role in the intellectual, professional, and social lives of AAR members. We agreed that there are important ways the AAR could enhance regional participation and showcase the work of regions on the national level (through many of our attached recommendations), and we believe that the present opportunities afforded by regional meetings are valuable and should be supported.

One of the challenges presented to us when looking at the 10 regions is the immense diversity with regard to the organizational structure, membership, leadership, and financial stability among regional groups. Another consideration is the varying relationship between AAR regional groups and SBL regional groups. This diversity is seen in such matters as the venues for the meetings (college campuses versus hotels), the number of attendees at regional meetings, the ratio of graduate students to faculty who participate in the regional meetings, regional groups who ~~are~~ participate in commissions alongside those who do not hold annual meetings, and the disagreement about geographical boundaries between regions. Particularly striking is the wide disparity in financial reserves that spans from no reserves to, in one region, a balance of over \$40K. Given the diversity among the regions, we sought to create structures and procedures consistent with Georgia association law by means of an Operating Agreement that would reconfigure each region as a Limited Liability Corporation which would allow a measure of flexibility for each region to maintain its own culture.

In an effort to promote the visibility of the regions the task force discussed the necessity of enhancing communication between the regions and the national organization as well as communication with the membership at large. Specifically, we concluded that any opportunity to promote the work of the regions through email, visits by AAR representatives, and through AAR publications should be pursued. For example, we recommend that national Program Unit steering committees encourage applicants whose abstracts were declined to resubmit to the regional meetings. Furthermore, we would like to see a booth at the national meeting that provides information about regional groups and their meetings. We also hope to identify potential AAR leaders at the regional level and to educate them and support them in those roles with the help of representatives from national organization.

The Task Force closely examined the appropriateness of the regional boundaries as they are currently configured. This conversation has been generated by one or two specific boundary dispute but also related to our larger concern regarding whether individuals ought to be able to elect regions to which they will belong and whether those people might also serve as officers in the regions in which they do not reside. After much deliberation we concluded that the regional boundaries should remain intact but that individuals should be allowed to identify with the region of their choice. Once a member has identified a regional affiliation, that person may stand for election. We anticipate that such cases will be rare but that the opportunity to belong to a region of one's choosing may be meaningful in some instances. In the event that many AAR members choose to join a region in which they do not reside, the question of regional boundaries should be reconsidered in the future.

Findings of Task Force subcommittees (see Appendices 10–13):

Regional By-laws: A comparative study of all extant regional by-laws revealed important gaps and deficiencies, most significantly that some regions have not been governed by by-laws or were not incorporated in any way. These problems have been addressed in the Operating Agreement included with this report.

Other ACLS organizations: As we compared the AAR's regional structure to the structure of other societies, it was clear that our patterns conformed to other ACLS bodies and that, in fact, the AAR is at the leading edge of the ACLS in terms of a rationalized structure. One finding that stood out was that AAR membership dues and conference registration fees remain significantly lower than those of other comparable organizations.

The role of the regions for graduate students: There is disparity among regions in graduate student attendance at annual meetings that varies depending on the number of graduate institutions in the regions and the willingness of graduate faculty to promote regional participation. Graduate students benefit from networking and professionalization opportunities; the chance to be recognized for competitive regional awards is an important incentive for graduate student attendance. It is also clear that the regions can do much more to promote graduate student professionalization and career preparation.

Regional location and enrollments of graduate degree granting institutions: Learning that the AAR did not possess a directory of graduate institutions and in order to understand the regional distribution of these programs and their graduate students, the task force conducted a partial survey of those institutions that grant graduate degrees in religious studies fields and disciplines. It is clear from this data that the presence of PhD granting institutions in a region contributes to the vitality of the regional meeting. The task of collecting a comprehensive directory was far more than this task force could undertake and lay outside its charge, but believing that this information will be useful, we turn this list over to the AAR for further development into a complete listing of these institutions.

Online seminars and a "Best of the Regions" journal: One Task Force member conducted a pilot online seminar as a potential model for regional collaboration that might be developed independent of regional annual meetings and conducted a study of the viability of an AAR peer-reviewed online journal for highlighting the work being done at regional meetings. Both show promise for enhancing and promoting the regions. Appendix 14 details some of the findings, but anticipating significant technological developments at the AAR and mindful that the journal, in particular, would require identifying a committed editor who could work with that technology, we defer making a recommendation on these possibilities until the capabilities of the proposed Biosphere platform and the new AAR website are known.

RECOMMENDATIONS

By-laws and Operating Agreement

1. The AAR Board of Directors will approve a template of an Operating Agreement that reconstitutes the AAR's ten regions as Limited Liability Corporations.
2. Following new by-law ratification, reorganize REDs into an AAR standing committee and name the Regions Director to that committee as chair and ex-officio member [already complete: In the by-laws ratified at the 2010 Annual Meeting a Regions Committee was constituted that consists of all Regional Coordinators (formerly REDs) and will be chaired by the Regions Director].
3. Include Regional Coordinators (formerly REDs) in the AAR leadership summit [accomplished: in the by-laws ratified at the 2010 Annual Meeting].
4. Revise all regional by-laws to ensure student representation in regional governance [substantially accomplished: the Operating Agreement that reorganizes regions as LLCs contains this provision].
5. Revise article 8 section 2 of the AAR by-laws to delete the phrase "who reside within the geographical area" to allow AAR members to elect their regional affiliation. At the point of becoming a member or renewing membership, individuals should be informed of their region by virtue of residence and be given the option of electing membership in an alternate region.
6. Incorporate all regions in the state of Georgia [substantially accomplished: the Operating Agreement that reorganizes regions as LLCs contains this provision].
7. After much discussion, this Task Force recommends that current regional boundaries remain in place. The MAR/NEMAAR boundary as well as the existence of two separate regions in that geographic area of North America should be revisited in two years to assess whether the efforts currently underway to revive NEMAAR have been successful.

Support and development of Regional Coordinators

1. Move towards holding leadership summit at a time other than the Annual Meeting to encourage committee members, including Regional Coordinators, to think of their work for the AAR as ongoing throughout the year.
2. Provide the Regional Coordinator a travel stipend to be used for regional or annual meeting to attract qualified and able candidates. Continue to include Regional Coordinators in VIP registration and housing for the Annual Meeting.
3. Ensure that the Regional Coordinators meet together at least once a year at the Leadership Summit and more frequently when feasible or necessary.
4. When the AAR conducts its anticipated survey of the membership, consult with Regional Coordinators so that some survey questions collect information about members' perceptions of and participation in the regions.
5. Revise and republish Regional Coordinators manual to take account of revised AAR by-laws and board action on this Task Force report.

Annual Regional Meetings

1. Increase awareness of and attendance at regional meetings by publicizing them at the Annual Meeting through such means as staffing a prominently placed booth that highlights speakers, themes, meeting dates and locations, etc.
2. Ensure that one staff member of AAR attends a meeting of every region, including the business meetings, at least once every three years in order to communicate the state and initiatives of the AAR to the regions as well as to remain informed about what is happening in the regions.
3. In the planning of every regional meeting, the AAR will facilitate conversation among regional officers, site representatives, and exhibitors to ensure that liability coverage extends to all participants at the meeting.
4. Regions should explore potential for alternative programming that will enhance the meeting and better reflect the needs of the membership (online seminars, plenary speakers, book discussion, workshops, technology discussions, etc.).

Finances and Records

1. Require full disclosure of all financial activity of every region and of any consortium or commission to which a region may belong or which it may sponsor. The national AAR office will provide a template and guidelines for the annual financial report, due by July 31st, to include a closing bank statement and receipts.
2. Develop policies that maintain a culture of financial prudence in each of the regions. While it is outside the charge and expertise of this task force to devise such policies, we urge the AAR to direct its staff to work with Regional Coordinators to devise uniform policies about budgeting, expenditures, reasonable cash reserves, and so forth.

Support for the Regions by the National AAR Office

1. Institutionalize means by which the work of the AAR such as that of standing committees and task forces is accomplished in and through the regions. Standing committees should be charged with the task of exploring how to accomplish their objectives or implement their initiatives at the regional level.
2. In publications and communications, emphasize the role of regions as important component parts of the AAR and foster greater appreciation for the contributions of the regions.
3. When papers are rejected for the AAR Annual Meeting program, the rejection notification will encourage the author to submit the proposal to his or her regional meeting.
4. The board will designate \$100,000 in the investment account, the earnings from which will augment regularly budgeted funds available for Regional Development Grants
5. In consultation with the Staff Representative to the Graduate Student Committee, the AAR will consider the financial implications that serving on the Graduate Student Committee and as Regional Student Director will have on those who serve in those

capacities and will develop appropriate policies and procedures to address those implications.

CONCLUSION

It is clear to this task force that the regions have the potential to be a strong voice and advocate for the national organization. To facilitate this end, the national organization and the regions should build on their current practices of collaboration to further support and sustain the regions. We believe that the recommendations we have provided lay the groundwork for pursuing that goal and for building a stronger and more effective American Academy of Religion.

