

American Academy of Religion – Southwest Region

Regional Development Grant Proposal

June 1, 2015

**How Might the Region
Become a Stronger and More Meaningful Presence
in the Scholarly and Professional Lives of its Members?**

A Workshop to Re-Imagine Our Time Together During and Between Annual Meetings

Purpose & Aims

The Southwest Region of the American Academy of Religion seeks a grant from the Regions Committee to under-write the costs of a pre-annual regional meeting workshop for members to gather for reflection, brain-storming, and planning to re-think not only what we do at the annual regional meeting but also how we might collaborate throughout the year. We aim to expand and enhance the Region's relevance in the scholarly lives of its members. Participants in the workshop will arrive a day ahead of the Southwest Commission on Religious Studies (SWCRS) meeting in March 2016 for a full day of facilitated whole and small group discussions for the purpose of identifying ways the Region might serve its members more significantly and relevantly by strengthening the annual meeting and fostering collaborative work throughout the year among its members.

Because the concerns of the Region are unlikely exclusive to the Southwest, a further aim is to derive from this pilot workshop a design suitable for other regions. This proposal manifests the AAR's emphasis on strengthening the participation of AAR members in their regional meetings. It aims to empower other regions as well as our own by conducting a workshop which could serve as a blueprint for addressing concerns at the regional level in ways that not only re-energize the regions, but in so doing, provide new themes/ideas and approaches for the national annual meeting as well.

Background & Rationale

The idea for a pre-SWCRS 2016 workshop surfaced at the 2015 AAR-SW Business Meeting. Attendees raised questions and concerns that were energizing but simply could not be addressed in the allotted time for the business meeting. Although many were raised, three concerns appear to be particularly salient for the Region to discuss and address.

First, while the Southwest Region of the AAR has realized advances in recent years in the creativity and quality of the scholarly presentations at its annual meeting at SWCRS and innovated some of its programming, annual meeting attendance has steadily declined despite both encouragement from Atlanta that AAR members attend their regional meetings and increased communication about the meeting within the Region. While this is not necessarily a reflection on either the quality of the Region's scholarly presentations or program leadership, it

is perhaps a sign that what has served us well in the past is in need of re-thinking. Because we are committed to the continued viability, not only of our region but of all the regions of the AAR, we want proactively and honestly to assess how we conduct our business at the regional level and how our meetings might be enhanced, invigorated, and made more relevant to the particular concerns of members. This is difficult, if not impossible, if we do not create time and space for focused reflection. This proposal thus constitutes creation of a “liminal arena” that would allow us to go beyond simply doing business as usual based on our traditional program structures and pedagogical orientations.

Second, despite the proliferation of social media, blogs and other online professional networks, it is our experience that scholars in the Region do not know each other as well as they might and are often unaware of the expertise and experiences of colleagues working at institutions in their own vicinities—whether in the same city, county or state—, especially those who do not regularly attend AAR-SW annual meetings. We think that regions are ideally situated to address this concern. For example, AAR-SW members who do regularly attend annual meetings report that they would benefit from working with each other *between* annual meetings by gathering on each other’s campuses, sharing resources and opportunities and, in general, exchanging experiences. Such collaboration could become contexts for encountering new colleagues and even, occasionally, joining in new research undertakings.

Third, the racial, ethnic, social class, and age demographics of higher and secondary education are rapidly changing in North America. For instance, given the steady decline of tenured professors as a percentage of all of the instructors at institutions of higher education in the U.S., there is a growing “generation gap” in our profession, an issue raised prominently at the SWCRS 40th anniversary “fireside chat.” Hence, there is a need to re-think the nature of inter-generational engagement. Senior scholars can be given space and time to mentor younger scholars regarding job opportunities, interviewing skills and publication pitfalls to avoid. Junior scholars can be empowered to introduce their senior colleagues to new teaching strategies and ways to incorporate new technologies in the classroom. We believe that the Region is ideally situated to address this concern. The proposed work, which will bring younger and older scholars together for a full day of discussion, itself constitutes a beginning to foster an intergenerational community of scholars.

The AAR-Southwest proposes to meet for a pre-SWCRS 2016 workshop to discern ways the Region might meaningfully benefit the scholarly and professional lives of its members and foster strong work in the Region. By rethinking what happens at the annual meeting and by creating programs, systems, venues, and mechanisms to facilitate work among its members throughout the year, the Region aims to facilitate collaborative scholarly projects and promote interdisciplinary cross-institutional publication, mentoring, and professional development. A more fully functional AAR-Southwest we believe will better serve the scholarly and professional needs of its members and likely result in more vigorous involvement by more of its members, who in turn will contribute to enhancing its significance.

While it will benefit the members of any AAR region to set aside a full day for discussion, brainstorming, and planning beyond the usual business-meeting topics, and making arrangements

for meeting room and meals is straightforward and readily accomplished, a benefit to emerge from the AAR-SW pre-SWCRS 2016 Workshop will be its design, which other regions might use for their own self-study and strategic planning.

Workshop Overview

Approximately 25 members of the AAR-SW who have responded to the invitation to participate and who together represent the diversity of our membership as much as possible, particularly with respect to discipline, gender, race/ethnicity, and age, will prepare for the workshop by reading pre-workshop materials distributed in advance and by writing initial responses to structured questions. They will arrive at the meeting hotel site (Marriott DFW North) a day prior to SWCRS in time for a working lunch on Friday, March 11, 2016 which will begin the workshop (see *Workshop Logistics* below).

Workshop activities will include the working lunch with introductory remarks by a facilitator, small group discussions, question and answer interviews, whole group discussion, feedback from the facilitator, and completion of an on-site evaluation. Following the workshop, the Region's leadership team will convene for a working dinner to debrief the activities, the on-site evaluations, and in-puts of the facilitator to distill into a draft of a blueprint for future action in the Region as well, ultimately, as a template of the workshop itself for use in other regions of the AAR.

Key questions which will be addressed in whole and small-group sessions will include:

- How might the region build bridges between scholarly discourses in the broader academy and topics and themes specific to regions, thereby increasing the local relevance of scholarly meetings and publications?
- How might the contours of academic disciplines, especially as featured in AAR-SW annual meeting sessions, be re-envisioned to enhance interdisciplinarity, the integration of theory and practice and creative pedagogy?
- How might the AAR-SW facilitate collaboration among its members on multi-authored research projects and creative activities?
- How might intergenerational scholarly communities be fostered? How might older scholars learn from younger scholars about pedagogical innovations that resonate with the needs and skills of the next generation? How might older scholars assist younger scholars in their career trajectories?
- How might members of the Region imagine and concretize a “place” where colleagues can share struggles and successes, hopes and visions, ideas and opportunities, between meetings?

Workshop Logistics

The ideal number of participants will be ~25 AAR-SW members to optimize both whole and small group discussions and work. Invitations will be extended early and several times via the Region's current modes of communication with its members. To encourage participation, workshop participants will receive complimentary SWCRS registration.

To maximize our time together and minimize costs, all participants will prepare for the workshop by reading and thinking in advance, and most workshop participants will arrive to the Marriott by 11a Friday morning. (Flights from the farthest locations in the region permit DFW arrivals by 10a.) The conference hotel will make a meeting room available for the workshop at no additional cost.

The workshop will begin with a buffet luncheon, opening remarks – introduction of purpose, leadership team, workshop facilitator, workshop structure, etc. – and preliminary discussion of prepared observations and reflections. Three sessions for discussion and small-group work will follow the luncheon. The workshop will conclude at 6:30p, allowing participants to make individual dinner plans, go to the 8:30p film, etc. The leadership team will move from the workshop to a workgroup dinner meeting 7-10p.

Schedule for the day:

- 10:00a Marriott arrival
- 11:00-12:30 Luncheon & Workshop Opening: Introductions & Reflections
- 12:30-1:45 Session A
- 1:45-2:00 Brief Break
- 2:00-3:30 Session B
- 3:30-4:00 Refreshment Break (hotel and SWCRS check-in)
- 4:00-5:30 Session C
- 5:30-5:45 Brief Break
- 5:45-6:00 Workshop Evaluation
- 6:00-6:30 Workshop Closing
- 7:00-10:00 Leadership Dinner (Workshop debriefing and action planning)

Session A will be for a focused whole-group brainstorming discussion, Session B will be for small-group discussion and work driven by what emerges in Session A, Session C will be for either more small-group work or movement back to whole-group discussion, and the Closing will pull the day's discussion and work together into action items. These the leadership team will discuss in the workgroup dinner.

Timeline for Completion of Grant

August 2015 – October 2015:

- Workshop planned: sessions designed
- Facilitator recruited
- Workshop invitation/advertising composed

October 2015 – December 2015:

- Workshop invitations distributed to AAR-SW members with full descriptive details
- Workshop invitation and details included in SWCRS program planning

December 2015 – February 2016 (early registration deadline for all SWCRS presenters and presiders):

Workshop registration via the SWCRS registration system

Meeting room reservations and catering arrangements made with hotel with SWCRS assistance

Hotel room and catering numbers confirmed to hotel

Design Workshop materials

February 2016 – March 2016:

Confirm Workshop registrations

Produce and distribute to participants Pre-Workshop materials

Produce Workshop materials

Arrange for media/equipment/services

Workshop, Friday, March 11, 2016 11a – 10:00p

March 2016 – April 2016:

Pay SWCRS for Workshop participant registrations and hotel catering and services

Compose and distribute Workshop report and action plans to AAR-SW members

Compose Workshop report for AAR Regions Committee

Budget (figures assume 25 workshop participants)

Hotel Meeting Room	No cost
Discussion Facilitator	\$
Catered working lunch (\$ per)	\$
Midafternoon break refreshments	\$
SWCRS registrations paid (\$ per)	\$
Hotel services (WiFi)	\$
Leadership Team dinner (8 persons)	\$
	\$4000

The annual subvention generously provided by Atlanta is the Southwest Region's only source of revenue. Recent decisions made by the Region, with encouragement by the Regions Committee, to support the expenses incurred by the Regional Coordinator and the Student Director for travel

to their regional and national meetings, commit most of the \$2500 subvention to funding these necessary expenses. The Regional Development Grant will make the AAR-SW pre-SWCRS 2016 Workshop possible.

AAR-SW Annual Budget

AAR Subvention (paid in August)		\$2,500
Regional Meeting Expenses		
Plenary Speaker Travel & Hotel	\$	
Student Director Travel & Hotel		
Regional Coordinator Travel & Hotel		
SWCRS Graduate Student Lunch		
National Meeting Expenses		
Student Director Travel & Hotel	\$	
Regional Coordinator Travel & Hotel		
Total Budgeted Expenses	\$	
Balance for Discretionary Spending/Saving		\$

This proposal was composed by the leadership of the Southwest Region on behalf of and with the support and encouragement of its members, especially those who regularly attend SWCRS and the annual business meeting of the Region. The AAR’s emphasis on the regions – Atlanta’s encouragement of AAR members to participate in their regional meetings, financial support of the regions, and creation of a strong Regions Committee – undergirds this proposal so that each AAR region might identify substantive and actionable ways to grow in strength, numbers, vigor, and relevance. Figuring out in particular how to foster dialogue, exchange, and collaboration among regional members will be key. We are enthused about what lies ahead for the Region and grateful for this opportunity to think creatively, productively, and collaboratively about that.

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