

Report to Executive Board, Arkansas Political Science Association
February 22, 2008

At the 2007 annual meeting of the Arkansas Political Science Association, the Executive Board commissioned a task force to address a series of issues pertaining to the future of the association. They pertained to the timing, location, and character of the annual meeting; to the status of our journal; and more broadly, to our *raison d'être*.

I was asked to chair this task force. Joining me for a series of email conversations in late June 2007, were Jay Barth, Mark Mullenbach, Janine Parry, Roby Robertson, John Passe Smith, and Patrick Stewart. In turn, I involved my colleague Doug Reed in my efforts to digest the discussions. I consider us to be a reasonably representative sample of engaged members of our association, reflecting diversity with regard to age, experience, and areas of expertise, and public and private institutional identities as well.

We fairly quickly addressed and moved beyond the issues of timing and setting for the annual meetings. With regard to timing, we acknowledged some dissatisfaction with our traditional February date; but in the absence of a clearly preferable alternative, we are not inclined to recommend abandoning it. With regard to setting, we appreciate the opportunities afforded for on-campus meetings around the state. They enable us to get a better understanding of the campus communities of our colleagues.

We are open to the possibility of pursuing joint meetings with associations in surrounding states. However, we anticipate considerable logistical difficulties in doing so; we would not want to do so annually; and we don't want to see our identity diminished in the process.

The purpose of the annual meeting proved a bit more problematical. We generally agreed that we place a higher value on its social and civic dimensions than its scholarly ones. We appreciate its relaxed ambience. We view it as very useful in introducing and socializing newcomers to our statewide academic community. The meeting's typical array of panels and roundtables on Arkansas politics and government enable those of us in other fields to stay informed and to apply our own insights and perspectives to our particular state setting.

Further, for those of us who focus our research and writing specifically on Arkansas politics, the meeting provides us with a noteworthy opportunities for presentations. Still, we acknowledged that few of us view it as a significant venue for advancing our scholarship. Those who present papers at our meeting beyond the pale of Arkansas politics often do so in a manner akin to that a playwright's "off-Broadway" try-out.

A related set of perspectives characterize our thoughts of the status of our journal. We offer it as a potential publication outlet for our members, as well as a vehicle for publicizing our association to the broader scholarly community. We contend that the scholarship found there is of relatively high quality.

Primarily at issue is whether the journal should have a general or a specific focus. We did not come to complete consensus of this question. For the Arkansas politics and government scholars in our midst, the journal is invaluable as a publication outlet; and we can see little purpose in publishing a journal that did not welcome our work. Yet we generally recognize that a journal focusing primarily on this topic has little appeal or utility for most of our members, who toil in other vineyards across the discipline, as well as for the broader scholarly community. To attract manuscripts and interested readers from Arkansas and beyond, it must operate beyond the confines of state-centered scholarship. However, we recognize that it is rarely a first choice for those seeking publication of their research; and we acknowledge that relatively little credit is typically forthcoming in promotion and tenure considerations for such publications. Turning to more practical issues associated with our journal, we considered the advisability of on-line-only publication as a cost-saving device; and we also discussed joint publications with journals identified with surrounding-state associations.

The next topic we addressed was whether there is, and should be, a broader purpose of the association, beyond hosting an annual meeting and publishing a journal. Some suggested that we incorporate modern technologies to disseminate information and facilitate ongoing conversations on issues and topics of interest to our members throughout the year. We believe that we could be more intentional in enlisting our association colleagues as participants in conferences that we conduct on our own campuses. Along both these lines, we could set up under our associational umbrella communications networks to connect us with each other, but also with colleagues who share our interests here in Arkansas and beyond our borders. Such initiatives might involve developing partnerships with other groups (*e.g.*, Center for Arkansas Studies). We also addressed the costs and benefits of operating more in a manner akin to a pressure group in the political process, engaging in advocacy on behalf of our common interests.

We reconsidered the perennial question of what we might do to enlist interest and participation in our association from government teachers in secondary schools, political scientists in community colleges, academics outside our political science departments, and fellow travelers outside the academic community, most notably journalists, public officials, and political practitioners. Suffice it to say, once again, we failed to arrive at satisfactory ways and means to do so.

Where do we go from here? Endeavors like this typically raise more questions than they provide answers. I don't detect any profound dissatisfaction with our current organization and operation. As state associations go, ours is relatively strong. I believe that while a large number of factors, some idiosyncratic, others systemic, affect participation in any given annual meeting, there is a solid core of members who make attendance at the meeting a priority and thoroughly enjoy the camaraderie they experience. I do wonder whether the current generation or incoming junior faculty members are being sufficiently encouraged and socialized by their elders to identify with and commit to the association.

Our association has been in operation for over thirty-five years. The founding generation has largely passed from the scene, having bequeathed a substantial legacy. I don't want my generation to squander it through apathy and neglect. I hope this report adequately conveys the content of the discussions of the task force, and I hope it stimulates more systematic thought on how to keep the needs and interests of the association relevant to its members and potential members as well.

Respectfully Submitted,

Hal Bass