

AAR Presidential Futures Task Force Report to the Board

In response to our 2020 charge from American Academy of Religion (AAR) President José Cabezón, we, the AAR Presidential Futures Task Force members, have consulted with an array of members and constituents to identify key concerns and recommendations for the future. Based on this input and our review of the available data reflecting levels of AAR membership and participation, we have developed the following findings and recommendations for the board.

With these recommendations, we wish to highlight three arenas of AAR activity that members have told us are particularly valuable, while upholding the AAR mission and embodying its values. These arenas potentially offer the most significant benefits for members. However, they have also been characterized as 1) less available to certain members than to others, or 2) currently structured to serve some members' needs more than others. The recommendations that follow “double down” on these three arenas as areas that should receive concentrated attention and resource investment. At the same time, we recommend structural and programmatic changes to these areas to increase their impact. The following recommendations do not constitute a list of “to do” items for the board or staff, nor are they criticisms of the organization’s work to date. Rather, they build on areas where the AAR already has a strong record of providing valuable resources and opportunities and suggest ways in which more members could gain access to those resources and opportunities.

Our recommendations reflect two foundational and critical activities members consistently expect the AAR institutional structure and programming to support:

- 1) Fostering increased connections between individuals; among and between communities of scholars with similar research and pedagogical interests; and between scholars working in a wide range of professional settings, including but not limited to universities; and
- 2) Expanding what constitutes “scholarship” in the guild.

The AAR as an organization creates spaces - physical and virtual - for members to foster community and grow professionally. It must do so with limited financial, physical, and personnel resources. Some of our recommendations will require reallocating financial resources or identifying new revenue streams in order to include more members in those spaces.

We see our task as identifying places where strategic intervention will make meaningful change for the most people while staying in line with the AAR’s mission and scope. Recognizing that the AAR cannot meet all the needs of all its members, we start from the premise that all members should have easy access to and receive meaningful benefit from the community and professional opportunities the organization exists to foster.

Members consistently told us that three areas have historically held the most value for them: 1) the annual meeting, 2) employment services, and 3) publication/award activities. Most members initially engage the AAR through these areas. In addition, virtually all members who interact with the AAR navigate these arenas at some point in their professional experience. Finally, most AAR members identify

the annual meeting, employment services, and publications/awards as the areas of the most potentially beneficial engagement and as areas with the most potential for innovation, particularly in expanding access to all members.

Member feedback indicates that the annual meeting, employment services, and publications/awards activities currently vary widely in their impact based on an individual member's access to the area and the range of programming/activity offered in each area. Specifically, tenured and tenure-track faculty working fulltime in university settings are positioned best to benefit from current AAR structures and programming, while contingent faculty and scholars working in non-university settings benefit less. In addition, certain members (e.g., scholars of color, LGBTQ+ members) find participation challenging and, at times, dangerous. As a result, the current structure fosters connections and supports professional scholarship for certain members more effectively than for others. We believe there are systemic and historical explanations for this misalignment. However, given the current demographics of the AAR membership (and projected demographics), it is time for change.

As a bottom line, the task force believes that the foundational question AAR leadership must address is this: how do we continue to offer high-quality experiences for tenure-track faculty working in colleges and universities while also strategically expanding and facilitating access to benefits for the full range of members, including those serving in other roles and/or in other occupational settings?

The overarching recommendations below were developed as a suggested initial response to that fundamental question. The text boxes interspersed throughout quote member feedback we received during our assessment.

Annual Meeting

“A case could be made that supporting the field itself benefits everyone, and that one of the ways to do that is by maintaining robust intellectual engagement across the various disciplines. But that’s likely cold comfort to someone who finds him/herself on the outside of the academy still wanting to engage, but not having the institutional support to do so. Are we willing to let those members go? Is that what we say by how we deploy our resources? If you are not engaged in the traditional forms of scholarship then the AAR is not for you?”

Overarching recommendation: The AAR creates spaces for scholars to develop and to disseminate their work and to create community. The annual meeting fully supports these activities by providing physical space for convening scholars and by delimiting the current relevant areas of research, pedagogy, and public engagement in its programming through the work of the individual program units and the Program Committee. We recommend that the board focus on increasing the participation, representation, and visibility of members who currently face obstacles to in-person participation in the annual meeting. These obstacles include financial challenges, impediments to physical travel to the meeting, participation limitations caused by members’ work as contingent faculty or in positions outside academia, and programmatic limitations faced because of identities (e.g., racial, gender, religious) or research interest (e.g., engagement with sensitive social or political issues).

Sample specific actions:

- Include a hybrid component either in the form of a separate mini-meeting in the spring or as the first one or two days of the annual meeting.
- Create a roommate search platform or social media space to help members reduce their conference expenses.
- Incorporate panels or roundtable discussions highlighting contingent faculty on pedagogical methods and case studies.
- Increase the AAR leadership opportunities for contingent faculty, keeping their unique professional situations in mind (e.g., limited funds for research and travel, high teaching load, professional instability from year to year).
- Replace the “institutional affiliation” designation on name tags with research interests or professional areas in order to highlight members’ professional activities rather than their employers.
- Direct the program committee to prioritize program units/sessions that elevate participation of, leadership development of, and issues attentive to traditionally underrepresented members and communities. (Make available in 365-friendly format to increase access, viewership.)
- Include signage at the meeting highlighting non-academic professions.

Sample 365-friendly elements:

- Support listservs for year-long global scholarly engagement.

- Create an archive of sessions (captioned) available for access throughout the year.
- Offer teaching workshops virtually or in “pop up” locations that focus on developing anti-racist and inclusive pedagogical strategies, archived for virtual access.

Desired outcomes:

- Annual meeting program that reflects the membership in its demographic foci, professional activity, and scholarly interests.
- Increased professional diversity on the board.
- Annual meeting designed not as a stand-alone event but as a large hybrid expression of ongoing conversations and community.

Employment Services

“Given the precarious state of higher education, especially the relatively low priority assigned to progressive aspects of religion, graduate program leaders will need to think long and hard about the ethics of admitting students when there is a reduced and shrinking job market. That is a hard reality, and invites both administrators and students to think outside the PhD--to teaching--to tenure box. While there has been lots of lip service about this, the norm, however subtle, remains in place. Those who do not get tenure-track positions are made to feel second or third rate. This is not a new problem (cf. the last two guides for women in religion in which these issues were front and center) but it is one that takes on much greater urgency in the Covid era.”

Overarching recommendation: Although there are currently year-round resources available, until 2018 the primary focus of the employment center was to facilitate interviews at the annual meeting. Many colleges and universities began reconfiguring this interview process in recent years, and it seems likely that they will continue to conduct preliminary interviews online after doing so for over two years during the pandemic. The traditional employment center may ultimately be reimagined as an employment and career development services arm of AAR, offering services throughout the year, in person and virtually. The task force proposes adapting the employment center into a 365-employment service that can provide mentoring and professionalization opportunities as well as job market preparation and networking opportunities. This might require a reallocation of effort away from traditional AAR programming to provide more robust offerings through a reconfigured employment/career services program.

We see an opportunity to use the virtual space to expand opportunities in a wider range of career tracks and professional skills through programming developed by members and partners. The employment center would continue to support members in academic settings, while also reflecting the changing landscape of the job market. Professionalization offerings should address academic and administrative leadership, as well as new opportunities for members to share and develop skills through workshops geared toward job searches and professional milestones both inside and outside of the academy.

This shift would include creating partnerships with employers from organizations outside of the college and university (non-profit organizations, governmental departments, media outlets, publishers, data analysis firms, etc.) and utilizing the diverse set of skills AAR members can offer each other.

Sample specific actions:

- Create a career center exhibit space at the annual meeting where a wide range of employers can recruit AAR members. This will involve pro-active outreach to employers beyond universities.

- Create a PR campaign highlighting religious studies PhDs professionally active in a wide range of professions. Make available to department leaders to share with deans/provosts/boards of trustees, etc.
- Create new partnerships with non-academic employers and invite their presence on job postings and AAR networking opportunities, including annual and regional meetings and the AAR website.
- Provide spaces for AAR members to share their job experiences pertaining to marginalized positions in the academy (LGBTQ+, racial and ethnic identity, etc.)

Sample 365-friendly elements:

- A website or social media space where faculty who are not already advising graduate students can signal their willingness to read students' works in progress, discuss research methods and sources, or give career advice.
- Highlight interviews with newly graduated PhDs accepting non-academic positions in the newsletter.
- Workshops and/or webinars for specific professionalization needs, such as administrative leadership and department chairs, creating a RELS major, minor, or program at your institution, specific issues in pedagogy (such as the Inclusive Pedagogy Webinar series introduced this year).
- Create social media spaces or listservs hosted by AAR for marginalized members to field questions and share resources with each other.
- Offer examples of non-academic resumes and explanations of the difference between CVs and resumes. (This could be done at very low expense. These resources exist at many of AAR members' institutions. The role of the AAR website would be to aggregate and foreground the resources.)
- Provide alternatives to the traditional PhD advisor-based mentoring with workshops focused on developing mentoring networks. Make available in 365-friendly format.

Desired outcomes:

- Increased awareness of religious studies PhDs' skill strengths and versatility among non-academic employers and increased job placement.
- Diversified career planning and skill development for graduate students.
- Expanded professional development opportunities for members in all career stages and positions.
- New partnerships between AAR and non-academic employers.
- Increased mutual aid and support for marginalized members.

Awards and Publications

“The global pandemic has not only disrupted publishing timelines and access to resources but also placed demands on faculty that compete with research (family obligations, health challenges, increased pedagogical attention, etc.). There has not been enough wrestling with our identities as scholars at this moment: What does it mean to be a responsible, productive scholar during a pandemic? In a time when racism is at the forefront of national discourse, health disparities are exacerbated, and our understandings of “workplace” are shifting, what should our priorities as scholars be?”

Overarching recommendations: As the largest scholarly society dedicated to the academic study of religion, the AAR currently sponsors awards and creates publications that strongly informs what counts as valid scholarship and scholarly activity in the guild. Members who received these awards and are published in the *JAAR*, for example, gain prestige and increase their chances of employment and further publication and funding opportunities. Many members do not have access to these opportunities due to limited time and mentorship. Many members are working more than one job or jobs with intense course loads that do not allow time for research and writing. There is also a strong voice of support among AAR members for addressing the financial needs of members who are struggling, without requiring merit-based scholarly assessments.

The AAR can acknowledge a diverse set of scholarly activities by highlighting social activism, pedagogical innovations, and public scholarship in the publications it sponsors, as well as by increasing the profile of existing, but marginalized, publications and organizations through its website. We also recommend expanding the types of awards AAR offers to include opportunities for religious studies scholars and students to work with non-academic organizations. In general, we recommend developing AAR grants that have their findings linked to or funneled for publication consideration.

Sample specific actions:

- The AAR currently designates one board seat for a contingent faculty member. Consider restructuring the board so it reflects membership percentages (including a wide range of scholarly positions in university and non-university settings). Also consider providing honoraria for service work or a reduction in dues or registration fees.
- Increase available funding by developing public partners. For example, create a funding category where we ask institutions to cultivate public partners and reward those institutions with free advertising or reduced fees for presence at the annual meeting.
- Support collaborations and partnerships between editors and journals. Pursue mentoring through research publication (co-publishing with scholars and publishers).
- Solicit senior scholar volunteers to guide PhD and early career scholars
- Create rewards for other kinds of work, including justice work and non-traditional forms of scholarship in the study of religion.

- Include basic needs for housing and food in awards, rather than just professional development and scholarship.
- Publish alternative forms of scholarship in the *JAAR* (see, for example, the *JAAR* CFP for a special issue regarding care during the pandemic).

Sample 365-friendly elements:

- Highlight non-traditional forms of publication such as blogs and open-source publications on the AAR website.
- Create an award that subsidizes graduate students preparing for diverse career paths through internship opportunities in non-academic professions (publishing, arts, government, non-profits, legal).
- Provide materials for academic program leaders to educate deans/provosts/boards of trustees about value of religious studies education, as response to reductions in faculty and programs across the country.
- Publish an online year-in-review focusing on religion in the events of the past year and contributions from scholars working with the public. This could be done through the *JAAR* or the AAR website or affiliates (e.g. *Reading Religion*).
- Produce a pamphlet for graduate student orientations pointing grad students to AAR resources.

Desired outcomes:

- Enhance the professional profile of members working in contingent faculty positions or outside of university settings and amplify their contributions to the field and AAR administration.
- Provide financial assistance to members in need and make existing resources more accessible to all members.
- Expand and diversify publications created and amplified by the AAR.

Proposal For Moving Forward

The task force recognizes that our work was a necessary first step in assessing the developing needs of AAR members. Based on our experience during this process, we offer the following suggestions for next steps in implementing and refining the recommendations:

1. Issue a public one-page executive summary of the report that will engage a wide range of members and encourage their participation in the implementation of its recommendations.
2. Create individual working groups to address each recommendation.
3. Gather and publicize statistics on current job placement of Religious Studies and Theology PhDs and MAs.
4. Look at models from other professional organizations (ACLS, APA, Wabash).

Appendix: Review Process and Findings

Charge

In 2020, AAR President José Cabezon appointed a Futures Task Force to conduct “a strategic assessment of the impact of the [COVID-19] pandemic and exacerbated issues on the AAR and its mission, taking into account the current landscape of higher education.” The AAR mission statement (2017) - to foster excellence in the academic study of religion and to enhance public understanding of religion – had been developed in part as a response to these seismic higher education and cultural changes. The AAR had been founded in fundamentally different contexts for higher education in general, religious studies education in particular, and individual and community senses of “belonging” across the United States.

For those considering careers related to religious studies education, these changes included a decrease of humanities departments and majors as well as tenure-track positions in colleges and universities, heightened awareness of inequities in the administration of departments, and changing population and higher education enrollment demographics, to mention a few. On top of those long-term shifts, negative effects of the pandemic were (and continue to be) extensive and are disproportionately felt by the most vulnerable among AAR members: students, untenured faculty, and contingent faculty. The pandemic also exacerbated and further laid bare deeply entrenched cultural challenges plaguing members and publics.

In recent years, moments of reckoning have developed around longstanding issues such as racism, gender discrimination, environmental concerns, Islamophobia, white nationalism, and immigration. In this context, the AAR must reimagine itself to serve its members and to equip its members to provide informed, timely, and empowering education in multiple venues around the globe. The task force was formed to launch that reimaging process, providing information and broad recommendations to the board of directors that would inform future decision-making. Specifically, the Task Force was asked to identify concerns and opportunities laid bare by the pandemic and dominant cultural forces at both the organizational and individual member levels.

Organizational

The pandemic created immediate operational and financial challenges in 2020. Perhaps most dramatically, the 2020 annual meeting was shifted to an online format, requiring extensive last-minute planning by staff members who themselves had shifted to remote work. Shifting the annual meeting had significant financial impact on the organization, both in terms of membership renewals and conference registration. Across the country, the pandemic accelerated trends brought on by changing demographics in the field, political policies, and economic and cultural conditions, all of which reverberated in the AAR. The structure of the guild, member benefits, central office operations, finances, and communications all faced challenges. The task force identified strengths of the existing configuration of these areas, possibilities for adaptation, and assessed to what extent they reflected the values and mission

of the AAR. Over time the task force focused its attention on three arms of the organization: the annual meeting, employment services, and publications and awards.

Membership

The task force began analyzing AAR member professional needs by identifying specific cohorts within the guild, specifically program units, status committees, and other cohorts constituted by AAR members, along with external publics that partner regularly with the AAR. The task force took this approach in part because the AAR office had collected input from these constituencies that could inform initial conversations. Keeping in mind the context of the changing landscape of higher education, the Task Force considered scholars working in college or university settings, considering the current state of teaching, research, and publication demands and opportunities as well as the wide range of academic employment profiles. In addition, the task force considered the needs of scholars of religion who are working outside of academia (e.g., nonprofit organizations, NGOs, the media, health professions). Finally, the task force considered how the AAR as an institution participates in public arenas and interfaces with external communities and organizations. Moving forward, it is crucial that the organization and activities of the AAR be designed to support members in a wide range of professional settings, not simply scholars in traditional academic faculty positions.

While foundational structural adjustments at the leadership and administrative levels could certainly address both of these needs, we decided in conversation with the current board members to concentrate on recommendations that could be implemented quickly and produce the most value for the largest number of members. In doing so, we prioritized what members consistently told us they valued, and what the board identified as needing immediate attention based on the political, social, and economic pressures the guild is facing.

Strategy

In reviewing the communication from members and the available data, we quickly recognized that the immediate effects of multiple crises – the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic and emotional reverberations, police violence perpetrated against black Americans, as well as rising tensions in the national political landscape over immigration, voting rights, gun violence, and the status of marginalized communities – were not new challenges to AAR members, but in fact brought existing issues into relief. Although the pandemic and political demonstrations of the summer of 2020 increased their visibility and exacerbated their effects, the challenges of isolation, loss of professional identity, gender inequity, racism, geopolitics, and so forth have been central to the experience of many members, former members, and potential members, for a long time. The economic consequences of reduced enrollment at many universities and colleges during the pandemic also accelerated the loss of religious studies faculty positions and departments, which has been a growing concern for the last two decades.

A map of various constituencies naturally arose from the anecdotes we collected and from the types of AAR membership available – professional, retired, and students. However, our conversations among ourselves and with a diverse group of members made clear that members all come to the AAR with intersectional and multiple identities and professional roles, which change over the course of participation in the guild. Since 2019, professional members have been able to specify types of employment, including applied religious studies positions, independent scholars, and full-time contingent, part-time contingent, tenure-track, and tenured faculty. Membership data for the last three years indicates that tenured and tenure-track professionals represent approximately 35% of total AAR members. The categories of applied religious studies, independent scholars, and contingent professionals together account for approximately 28% of AAR members, with students making up roughly 25% of members. The needs of graduate students differ from those of adjunct professors, museum curators, professors with young children, and retirees, just to name a few.

Furthermore, because responding is optional, we do not have comprehensive demographic information that accurately reflects racial and ethnic diversity among AAR members. Over the last six years, with response rates ranging from 52-88%, approximately 30% of the members reporting identified as non-White. This number does not encompass those members who themselves or whose subjects of study belong to groups of marginalized status, including women and gender fluid or gender nonbinary persons, LGBTQ+ individuals, and persons with disabilities, to name a few.

Making some attempt to generalize these multi-faceted and fluid constituencies, we asked where particular types of members find value in the AAR. We then interrogated those strengths and asked where certain groups had more access to these assets than others and why. In short, we took a people-centered approach and focused on individuals as constitutive of our guild. The result of this perspective was a mutually agreed upon strategy based on universal design. In its application to physical space, universal design is a strategy that works to facilitate all individuals' physical navigation as well as sensory and mental access to environments. In applying it to the assessment of the AAR, we intended not only to acknowledge the diverse membership of the organization, but more importantly to unequivocally state that fostering the participation of all members will strengthen and enrich the guild. Drawing on disability studies and the premise that if you design infrastructure in a way that focuses on people with disabilities, then you design it in a way that works for everyone, we framed conversations by asking how the AAR could support the study of religion in various professional settings by expanding its primary audience to include graduate students, contingent faculty, historically underrepresented scholars in our discipline, and scholars unequally burdened by care work (including childcare, eldercare, social justice care, community care, and student care).

Key Findings

Connection

Early in the process, task force members recognized that “connection” (sometimes framed as “community” or more narrowly as “networking”) was the primary benefit members said they gained from participation in the AAR. Because the connection they describe is multifaceted and encompasses

intellectual identity, personal growth, and professional stability, members forge connections (or fail to) through many different interactions with AAR. In ongoing conversation with the board, it became clear that the key to AAR's continued vitality was preserving, expanding access to, and diversifying ways for the full range of AAR members to connect with one another in meaningful ways. The task force recommendations prioritize "connection" as the highest professional benefit that the AAR members create and share, the most significant benefit that must be provided. Our analysis and recommendations focus on how members forge connections successfully through AAR programming. In addition, our recommendations identify where work needs to be done to increase access to that connection for our all of our members.

The broad recommendations focus on areas where AAR leadership and staff can increase opportunities for members to build connection through participation in the annual meeting, employment services, and publications and awards by foregrounding the diverse positions, professional needs, and desires for connection that our membership includes.

Expanding the definition of scholarship

Benefits from the annual meeting, employment services, and publications/awards programming are disproportionately geared towards and accessible to certain members based on their positionality, including gender, race, institutional affiliation, and professional status, among others. These factors influence the types of scholarship that AAR members produce as well as their ability to devote time and resources to research and service. Many of our colleagues see activism and community organizing as inseparable from their roles as scholars. Religious scholars pursue a wide range of careers in which they produce not only academic writing, but interactive museum exhibits, government policy recommendations, therapeutic services, and more. Expanding the definition of scholarship entails recognizing diverse types of knowledge production and communication as well as cultivating avenues for success in those areas. Through its programming and publications, the AAR shapes the field and determines the kinds of activities and publications that count as scholarship.

Broad Themes

Several themes arose from our review of members' input. One is the interdisciplinary nature of religious studies and the increasingly wide range of professions pursued by religious studies scholars. Applied religious scholars employed in a wide range of fields bring unique skills and perspectives to the guild, and the AAR has the potential to capitalize on this diversity by tapping into the arenas of the creative arts, journalism, government policy and administration, and the non-profit sectors, as well as academic departments outside of religious studies. Such efforts could increase membership retention by welcoming professionals trained in religious studies who continue to engage intellectual questions relevant to the field, but whose career objectives do not fit easily into the programming structure of the annual meeting. Retaining and supporting these professionals would also enrich the graduate student experience of the AAR, giving them with diverse models of success and networking opportunities. AAR must address the challenges facing graduate students preparing to enter the job

market, providing them with networking opportunities and the chance to explore possible career paths and acquire training that is not typically provided by their religious studies departments and advisors.

Another central theme that arose from these sessions was the surprisingly isomorphic relationship between two realities. On the one hand, we constantly returned to the sheer diversity of experience our interlocutors revealed, and thus the absence of a “typical” or “traditional” member. On the other, we found that the personal and professional needs and challenges facing many of these people were shared – from the senior tenured professor to the graduate student. This left us with questions about how to follow our universal design-inspired strategy, focusing on how to account for *all members*’ abilities to pursue goals and adapt to challenges. We very deliberately decided to start with members’ needs (rather than with existing AAR policies or organizational structures), hoping this would highlight places where apparent assets and programming were not available to all or could be expanded in ways that increased accessibility.

Acknowledging the limitations of the task force membership demographics, subsequent meetings focused on the needs of specific constituencies, such as contingent and tenure track faculty, applied religious scholars, marginalized individuals and communities, and graduate students. We started with the conviction that the AAR currently best serves the need of members in fulltime tenure-track faculty positions, which was largely the norm when the organization was launched. Wanting to maintain the value that AAR provides to these members, we also acknowledged the need to enhance the value the AAR offers to graduate students, contingent faculty, and applied religious scholars. This was an attempt to hold ourselves accountable to the diverse needs and resources of the current AAR membership.

However, in doing so, the task force became even more aware of the intrinsic intersectionality of these identities and roles, including professional status, gender, race, and ethnicity. The reality that our members bring multiple identities to the AAR over the course of their training, job searches, and careers was very prominent throughout our discussions. Not only are our individual members’ identities not monolithic, but they change throughout their education and careers due to professional development as well as external economic and political, not to mention personal events.

The majority of members participate in AAR as part of an under-resourced constituency at some point in the span of their membership, as graduate students, during pregnancies, between defending a dissertation and securing stable employment and so forth. This includes a number of combinations of factors and contexts, including graduate students with children, applied religious scholars without research funding or time, and fulltime employed international members in countries for whom membership and annual meeting costs are relatively high compared to their country’s cost of living, and so on.

Therefore, we agreed that to be successful moving forward, the AAR had to concentrate on the identities people brought who were not in the majority broadly construed (in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, etc.) and did not currently hold fulltime faculty positions in the US in order to make ours a more equitable and sustainable organization.

A final theme that emerged from our interactions with members and in subsequent conversations with the board was that our interdisciplinary guild is comprised of a diverse membership with serious commitments to social and political advocacy, often in a way that is inseparable from their careers and intellectual pursuits. Members raised many pressing concerns that inform their participation in the AAR, including policy objections and social identities that inform their decisions to travel (or not) to the annual meeting. Many also suggested significantly expanding the AAR's efforts at shaping higher education policy and specifically developing religious studies curriculum at all levels of education. We want to acknowledge that these are prominent, and often divisive, issues that will continue to be crucial to many of our members. Given the limitations of time and resources, it became clear to the board and to the task force that we needed to identify and prioritize members' professional needs that only the AAR could meet. The AAR cannot be all things to all members. Given its limited resources, the organization will need to prioritize where resources (financial and personnel) are directed. But it is important to emphasize that this aspect of membership identities also intersects with what constitutes scholarship in the guild.

Task Force Organization and Process

The initial members of the task force were selected in summer 2020 by then-President José Cabezón, with input from some board members and the executive director. In creating the task force, the president included faculty at various types of institutions of higher education, faculty at different points in their careers (including graduate students). In addition, the task force included some racial and gender diversity. Over the two years, as a couple of members had to leave the task force, new members were selected by the current AAR president in consultation with the Executive Director.

Membership

The Presidential Futures Task Force Appointees are:

Kathryn McClymond (Chair)

Alice Hunt (Staff Liaison)

Warren G. Frisina

Amir Hussain

Andrea Jain

Lerone Martin

Aarti Patel

Dena Pence

Mayra Rivera

Rohit Singh

Amy Elizabeth Steele

Randall Styers

Matthew Williams

**Most task force members served for the duration of the task force's work; a few contributed for part of the time.*

Timeline

The Task Force began its work in August 2020 and spent the first year gathering information on the needs of various constituencies from current and former AAR members and leadership and other learned organizations. The task force meetings took place virtually on Zoom, and notes were made accessible to all members through a file sharing site. The Task Force met monthly from August of 2020 to August 2021 to review and discuss this information, to brainstorm, and to identify areas of overlapping and unique concerns among its members. Moving into Fall 2021, the task force began to develop broad recommendations for the board of directors. Kathryn McClymond provided regular reports to the board on our progress at each of the board meetings. In conversation with the board, the task force gradually focused their review of data and recommendations on the annual meeting, employment services, and publications and awards efforts. As explained previously, these three AAR activities engage the largest number of AAR members and publics, and they are the AAR activities that members identify as offering the most value.

Input from AAR Members

In August of 2020, the task force solicited input related to their charge from AAR standing committees, working groups, and program unit chairs. The task force also held virtual conversation sessions open to all AAR members in order to learn about their personal experiences of the pandemic and how the pandemic affected their careers. The task force also consulted the post-annual meeting surveys and annual member surveys for data. Throughout the two years the task force continually revisited quantitative and qualitative data to identify priorities and formulate recommendations. The goal was to reflect a wide range of perspectives and concerns of a number of constituencies.

The task force began its work reviewing the charge and initially imagining expansively what the organization would be like if it were formed today. That imagining led to a commitment to taking a universal design approach, growing out of the diversity of AAR's membership and the high percentage of members in nontraditional positions and in currently marginalized communities. From early days we prioritized developing recommendations for changes that would enhance the value of AAR for members in these communities while maintaining AAR's identity as the primary home for academic scholars and college-level education.

It also meant recognizing that many members are not the traditional full-time academics housed in universities. Since 2019 members have been able to specify types of "professional" membership, including applied religious studies, independent scholar, full-time contingent, part-time contingent, tenure-track, and tenured. Membership data for the last three years indicates that tenured and tenure-track professionals represent approximately 35% of total AAR members. The categories of applied religious studies, independent scholars, and contingent professionals together account for approximately 28% of AAR members, with students making up roughly 25% of members.

The next step involved identifying the key issues facing AAR as an organization as expressed by this wide range of members. We worked consistently over time to make sure we were hearing from a wide range of people. Third, we looked for patterns in three areas 1) higher education research/trends; 2)

patterns in data generated by AAR itself (surveys, members demographics); 3) patterns in the qualitative feedback. We used three approaches: looking for patterns in the data gathered; identifying key issues facing the guild; and asking what the organization would look like if it were being created from scratch today.

To further this goal, the task force held a series of listening sessions in April of 2021, open to all AAR members. In these sessions, members drew attention to an array of challenges they faced in engaging with the AAR and identified potential areas of innovation. As we neared the end of reviewing the data in May of 2022, the Society for Biblical Literature also decided to make changes to their annual meeting formats and regional organization. The board again invited members to virtual sessions in which they could provide their thoughts on the events of the last two years, foremost among them the prominent role virtual meetings and presentations have continued to occupy in all of our professional lives. Eleven sessions were made available between May 12 and 23 and were scheduled throughout the day to allow international members to attend at reasonable hours. Several of these were specifically set up for program unit steering committee and status committee members. Information on the Futures Task Force's work and preliminary findings was distributed to members via email with the invitation to register for the virtual meetings. The feedback from these meetings was the final data included in our review.

In reviewing quantitative and qualitative data, the task force heard specific examples of how the AAR fosters connections. Members describe the AAR in terms of:

- Sense of community
- An intellectual home
- Finding a neighborhood
- Inspiration for scholarship
- Getting feedback on scholarship
- Learning new approaches to work
- Accountability
- Spaces for collaboration
- On-demand resources for teachers, researchers, and professionals: webinar trainings, blogs, syllabi, accessible of news and research
- Expanded arenas and media for “acknowledged scholarship”
- Networking
- Interpersonal connections
- Mentoring

The task force's recommendations are geared toward continuing to support these forms of connection, making them widely accessible.

At the same time, AAR leadership and members identified specific challenges the organization must face immediately:

- Revenue streams

- Professionals without academic institutional affiliation lack resources like library access, research funding/time, and physical and virtual venues for events like regional meetings. Some of these overlap with adjunct, contingent, and underfunded faculty.
- For many scholars, the inability to find a job that graduate school prepared them for resulted in the loss of professional identity (and lapsed AAR membership), even when they remained employed in a field that engaged their intellectual interests (libraries, non-profits, legal).
- Members are increasingly expressing their values through social activism and justice work. The goal of social advocacy is one that is difficult to implement at an organizational level due to 1) diversity of views among the membership, and 2) limited resources. Nonetheless, these priorities increasingly factor into annual meeting attendance and public relations, e.g., boycotts of annual meeting locations based on political and legislative positions of the host city/state, objections to award recipients on the grounds of sexual harassment or racism, etc.

Groups and Individuals consulted

Related Scholarly Organizations (RSOs)

Bonhoffer Society
 College Theology Society
 International Society for Science and Religion [3 responses]
 Søren Kierkegaard Society
 La Comunidad
 Manchester Wesley Centre
 Mandell Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies
 Niebuhr Society
 Religious Education Association
 Society for Buddhist Christian Studies
 Society for Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts (SCRIPT)
 Société Internationale d'études sur Alfred Loisy (SIEAL) [2 responses]
 Theta Alpha Kappa

Standing Committees and Working Groups

Academic Relations Committee
 Committee on Racial and Ethnic Minorities
 International Connections Committee
 Committee on the Status of LGBTIQ Persons in the Profession
 Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession
 Committee on Teaching and Learning

Program Unit Chair Responses

Buddhism Unit

Church and the Cities Unit
Law Religion and Culture
Middle Eastern Christianity Unit
Pentecostals and Charismatics
Human Enhancement and Transhumanism
Religious Conversions
Sikh Studies
Transformative Scholarship and Pedagogy
Comparative Theology

Pandemic Stories

Direct accounts of personal experiences submitted to the task force.

ACLS Futures of the Society Board

Reports from ACLS meetings from Alice Hunt that include ACLS suggestions for revising organizations.