Minutes
AAR Board of Directors Meeting
November 22, 2019
4:00 P.M. PST (U.S. & Canada)

Present: Kimberly Connor, Kathy Downey, Marla Frederick, Amir Hussain, Alice Hunt, Laurie Patton, Randall Styers, Zayn Kassam, José Cabezón, Kerry Danner, Kathryn McClymond, Leela Prasad, Rachel Toombs

Guests: Whitney Bauman, Maya Rivera, Aarti Patel, Stacy Floyd-Thomas

Staff: Robert Puckett, Elizabeth Hardcastle, Nichole Jefferson

President Patton began the meeting at 4:00 P.M. with introductions and welcome to incoming members. She also invited us to a joint reception with SBL from 6:30-7:30.

Motion 1:

To Approve the Agenda.

Agenda approved unanimously.

Motion 2:

To Approve the Minutes of November 18, 2019.

Minutes approved unanimously.

Welcoming new board members (Patton)

President Patton greeted each new member by special introduction and asked them to comment on their aspirations for service to the AAR. Speaking were Maya Rivera, Vice President, Whitney Bauman, Program Unit Director, Aarti Patel, Student Director, Stacy Floyd-Thomas, At-Large Director.

Finance update (Styers)
Treasurer Styers and Chief Finance and Administration Officer Jefferson distributed the financial statement and offered context to interpret the data. On behalf of the Finance Committee, Treasurer Styers shared the plan to help redress the deficit. Instead of automatically giving all VIP registrants two comped room nights at each annual meeting, the comped rooms will be distributed on an as-needed basis. The VIP message will note that this practice frees up resources for members who lack such institutional support. Concern was expressed about how people might respond and staff agreed to work with key board members around language. Student VIPs will be handled differently. Everyone acknowledged that affordability is an ongoing issue. The AAR staff is continuing to find ways to make the conference more affordable. It was suggested that the AAR needs to think about ways that more privileged members support those more vulnerable. President Patton intends to launch a fund to make this gesture of solidarity in a voluntary ethos. An item will be added to the Annual Meeting registration where members can choose to support this fund and the members who benefit from it. The plan to begin a process of increasing the number of members by 250 a year for the next several years was discussed. Among the ideas set in action: the new membership database will make renewal easier and will have an autorenew feature; the redesigned website will provide easier access to resources and benefits, hoping visibility will generate increase in members; we are increasing the number and quality of benefits, e.g. health insurance, webinars, media training; we hope that developing PUR will engage non-traditional members such as is reflected in RR subscriptions (where 50% of current subscribers are not members). Finally, in response to a question raised at the September board meeting, Treasurer Styers explained that the loss appearing in the September statement was the result of that being a snapshot in that moment. That portfolio now shows a gain, as expected.

Chief Finance and Administration Officer Jefferson explained the pre-audit financials (an audit will be completed, hopefully, before the end of 2019). She pointed out that revenue from membership is down from 2018, a result of a change in our policy for cyclical as opposed to annual renewals, a reconciliation that may take a few years to balance. Annual meeting registration is also down, due to being held at a venue on the West Coast. Staff transitions have also affected expenses. Some financial irregularities are due to timing of when grant resources are deployed. Treasurer Styers pointed out that the most important number is the deficit.

President Patton suggested a member-to-person approach to encourage renewals and new members, with the idea of perhaps creating an AAR ambassador program. All agreed that it is difficult to assess, with given data, the causes for membership decline and lapsed membership.
Incoming Presidential Theme (Cabézón)

Incoming president, José Cabézón announced “The AAR as a Scholarly Guild,” as his theme. He hopes to ask membership to turn internally in considering the role and purpose of the AAR over the course of its history. AAR staff are preparing an archive of past programs as a resource. He is considering exploring the religious affiliation of members by sending out a survey, a plan still being worked out to insure credibility and anonymity. Directors remain concerned about how the members will perceive such a request. Concern was expressed that this survey may not gather data that is most valuable to the organization. Ideas about how to gather information were discussed. The need to work with survey and statistical experts was discussed as was the idea of Incoming President Cabézón doing the survey on his own and, if it demonstrates value, perhaps going back to membership with a more comprehensive survey. This raises policy and other concerns around transparency as well as the notion that this creates a false separation between the President and the Board. Questions were raised about the necessity for an IRB be established. AAR General Counsel will be consulted. Concerns were also raised about staff time and resources.

Preview of annual business meeting (Patton)

President Patton encouraged all to attend and prepared us that the attendance may be more robust than usual. The agenda includes a memorial minute for members who have passed away since the last annual meeting; sharing accomplishments (statements on regions; the work of the Publications Task Force, the creation of the Hiring, Evaluation, and Promotion (HEP) task force, the establishment of professional conduct procedures; the Executive Director’s report; election results; and a vote on the revised bylaws. She also reminded directors that the Business meeting will be a time for constructive conversation about issues raised in recent weeks about affordability, access, vulnerability.

Professional Conduct Procedures Amendment (Hunt)

Small amendment to Professional Conduct Procedures. Executive Director Hunt offered a rationale for having 3 ombudspersons. Elect 3 (rather than 2) for staggered 3-year terms. Electing ombudspersons will be part of the call for nominations next year. 

Motion 3: to approve the change in professional conduct procedures that specifies 3 members serve as ombudsperson in staggered 3-year terms.

Motion approved unanimously.
Notes of interest (Hunt)

Executive Director Hunt explained that she has discussed with leadership the content of her annual review and is consulting with an organizational specialist who recognized the challenge of many moving parts—personnel, function, and labor, etc.—that led to some of the disruptions, anxiety, and miscommunication. This expert will work with staff in the coming year. Executive Director Hunt will be working with the staff collectively around organizational challenges. New staff positions to be filled: Publications/Communications Assistant; Advocate for Study of Religion; and Chief Public Engagement Officer. The $1M Luce grant to support PUR has been signed and we hope to get permission for Laurie to make public announcement; a press release is ready to go.

AM events for board members (Hunt)

Executive Director Hunt encouraged Directors to be at events and be around and available. She also encouraged Directors to support the AAR relationship with the SBL. Events Directors were encouraged to attend include: New member breakfast, the presidential plenaries, the Friends of Academy Reception, the Presidential address and reception after; and the Annual Business Meeting. Alice also reminded us to take note of and appreciate all the committee appointments President Patton made during her term.

New Business (Patton)

Nothing raised at this time.

Honoring outgoing board members (Patton)

President Patton thanked Kathryn McClymond, Rachel Toombs, Leela Prasad. Incoming President Cabézón thanked President Patton who also spoke warmly of her time as president.

Meeting adjourned at 5:58.
Respectfully submitted,

Kimberly Rae Connor, Secretary