

Letter from President Russ McDonald, January 2011

The current fashion among administrators and bureaucrats—indeed “fetish” might be the more suitable noun—for educational assessment has become so widespread, so voracious of time and resources, that it threatens to choke out the very pedagogic activity it was designed to safeguard. Most of us have always examined and discussed what we do, but now we dedicate innumerable hours to completing forms, mastering jargon, writing reports, and making recommendations, endeavors that subtract from the time spent doing what we are supposed to do—teach and write. In the U.K., where I am in my fifth year of teaching, the fixation has become, if possible, even more pervasive and smothering than in the U.S., amounting to one more element in a culture of surveillance. I fear we may be asked to develop instruments for assessing our instruments of assessment. Dickens mocks the proliferation of reflexive studies in *Little Dorrit*, as Arthur Clenham consults a government bureau: “If another Gunpowder Plot had been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match, nobody would have been justified in saving the parliament until there had been half a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family-vault full of ungrammatical correspondence, on the part of the Circumlocution Office.”

This weariness with assessment made me less than enthusiastic when, elected Vice-President in 2009, I found that the sitting board had proposed a self-study, yet another chance at assessment, another vehicle not for doing but for talking about doing. I am here to report, however, a Damascene conversion: I have changed my mind, joined the party I persecuted. Having served on the ad hoc committee charged with this self-scrutiny, a group consisting of Peter Holland, Coppélia Kahn, and Paul Yachnin (chair), with Lena Orlin as consultant, I feel an unlikely satisfaction in this process of self-examination and believe the effort spent to have been well spent. We began to gather data in December 2009, proceeded to a weekend meeting for evaluating the data in February 2010, and concluded with the chair’s report in April 2010.

We consulted some 180 members of the organization, some at random and some not, a balance of veterans and relative newcomers; 112 people responded. They were asked to address six questions or topics: 1) timing and location of the annual meeting, 2) the organization of the program, 3) the website, 4) internal initiatives, 5) external initiatives, and 6) additional suggestions. Rather than proceed by the numbers, I’ll re-group the categories. The website was already being reconstructed in-house by the excellent Bailey Yeager, and, although the renovation is incomplete, she is incorporating members’ recommendations for improvement. The internal initiatives undertaken over the past several years—travel grants, dissertation prize—were much applauded. The possibility of external initiatives appealed to many, but few offered concrete, plausible ideas for international outreach or means of broadening of scope. If you have ideas in this department, the floor is still open, as it is in all categories.

The structure of the program, as might be expected, was both praised and damned, with a greater proportion of affirmative than negative comments. As also might be expected, many of the suggestions for altering it were contradictory. Some propose a session with a single speaker, while some abhor such an event. Some favor roundtables; others find them “unfocused.” A number of members want more discussion at the end of a panel, or perhaps later in an arranged assembly. Agreement emerged that the tyranny of the three-speaker panel—twenty minutes each,

little time for questions—can make for staleness, and the committee recommended deliberate variation. Although the procedures for getting onto the program are published regularly, both electronically and in the paper Bulletin, many members are unaware that the finished program derives entirely from members' proposals and is therefore utterly democratic. (Despite our status as professional readers, we often don't read attentively.) Discussion and examination of past programs turned up some surprises. Many members believe, even with the rule allowing a place on the program only every other year, that the conference suffers from The Usual Suspects syndrome. In fact, over the past ten meetings only two members have spoken four times, and none more than that. The seminar system, although a few respondents pointed to the odd glitch or occasional failure, was almost universally praised.

Competing values and needs marked discussion of where and when we meet. Again, although the procedure is frequently publicized, many members don't understand it. Our size and logistical requirements limit us to a very few possible hotels. Some members long for the day when we met at the Four Seasons, at least one member urges that we consider the Motel 6, but most respondents delight in the hotels we occupy and the cities we visit. Timing is more controversial. At present we meet at Easter two years out of three because empty hotels on that holiday guarantee space in appealing cities at an exceedingly low rate. In the non-Easter year, economic reality puts us in a locale generally deemed less attractive: hotels cost less in Bellevue than in Boston. Those who celebrate Easter or Passover (often the holidays coincide) dislike the ratio two out of three; Europeans, contrariwise, approve it because their spring term is usually over by then. Were we to meet every year at Easter/Passover, many members would protest on familial or religious grounds. Were we never to meet at Easter/Passover, many would protest on financial grounds. The current rate is \$130 per room: remove the Easter meetings and we would pay upwards of \$220 per room every year, wherever we went (hoteliers, who confer just as we do, know our rate history). It is telling that the Easter meetings are always larger, and in the survey a clear majority favored retaining the current compromise.

The results of the self-assessment, it is fair to say, were soundly positive. Over one hundred very bright people looked critically at the organization and mostly approved. This affirmation attests to good planning and diligent stewardship over almost forty years. If you were not consulted, we still want to hear from you, either at your own prompting or—gulp—in the next self-study. A major strength of the SAA is its responsiveness, about which more in Bellevue.