

12 September 2011

To: Quintard Taylor and WHA Council
From: Karen Merrill, George Miles, and Katherine Morrissey (chair)
Re: 50-Year Report and Council actions

As you know, our ad hoc committee was charged to “assess the nearly 60 pages of comments already made online between January 25 and March 16 by Association members about the [50-Year] Report and more generally about the future of the WHA, [to couple our]... reading of those comments with the specific recommendations of the 50 Year Committee and present both as a vision statement and as actionable items to the full Council.”

We came away from this task impressed with the vitality of the WHA membership and appreciative of the 50-Year Committee’s work.

The 50-Year Report and Membership Comments reveal the Western History Association to be an active and vibrant professional organization. The discussion on the 50-Year Report is heartening and instructive; the Comments identify a membership that is committed to the organization while also worried about its long term viability. Among the key issues of concern: the desire to hold onto existing constituencies and to reach out to new ones in order to maintain a rich and robust group; the WHA relationship with *Montana*; and the roles of the annual conference, online activities, and outreach.

There is, of course, considerable overlap across the Report’s interrelated issues; constituencies are related to membership, finances to governance, identity to publications, etc. Like the members who commented, we found it challenging to separate these matters. Our recommendations, therefore, reflect the necessity of dealing with distinct but related items together.

We have included below a list of ten action items and four discussion topics for Council consideration at the October meeting. In this report we have limited our comments, but we are ready to expand on the items and share our more extensive discussions.

As a “roadmap for action,” this list represents just the beginning of the journey. Mindful that the WHA is in the midst of a search for a new Executive Director, for example, we recognize that some decisions might need to await the establishment of a new institutional home.

Action Items These items come as seconded motions to the Council.

1. We propose the acceptance of the revised WHA mission statement:

“The Western History Association strives to be a congenial home for the study and teaching of all aspects of North American Wests, frontiers, and borderlands and for cultivating the broadest appreciation of their roles in the continent’s past, present, and future.”

2. *We also propose that the Council draft and vote on a more detailed version of the WHA vision/mission statement that might read something like this:*

“The Western History Association’s **vision** is that all Americans share a curiosity about and appreciation of the history of the people and the places of the North American West.

Our **mission** is to foster the collegial study and teaching of all aspects of North American Wests, frontiers, and borderlands.

To accomplish our mission we

- enable collaboration among peoples, institutions and organizations devoted to the study of Western history
- conduct an annual meeting at which scholars and other professionals join students and laypeople to share their research, to exchange ideas, and to develop programs that facilitate further study of the North American West
- publish a journal that employs rigorous peer-review to identify, improve, and distribute original scholarship
- promote public education through active involvement with teachers, museums, libraries, and other venues.”

3. *We propose that the Council draft and vote on a statement about the WHA’s inclusiveness that might read something like this:*

“Just as the North American West has been both home to many different groups of people, with divergent belief systems and cultural practices, and a place in which people have experienced often shifting identities, the Western History Association strives to reflect the richness of our region’s demographics. More importantly, we seek to be an association in which ‘diversity’ is more than an accepted value; rather, we seek to be an association where historians of all backgrounds may thrive in the spirit of mutual respect and engaged curiosity.”

4. *We propose that an ad hoc subcommittee of Council members be designated to activate the task of creating a new logo for the organization. The committee might hold a competition, designate a graphic artist, and present the logo to the Council and membership.*

5. *We propose that the current Committee Teaching and Public Education be identified as a Standing Committee. This Committee will continue its work in promoting western U.S. history teaching, with teachers at K-12, community college, university, and graduate level, as well as those who teach at museums, libraries, and do public teaching in other ways. Its activities have included writing success grants, sponsoring teachers and running workshops at the annual meeting. To facilitate aspects of their work, a member of the Committee will be an ex officio member of the Program Committee and Local Arrangement Committee.*

6. *We propose that the current Committee on Race in the West be identified as a Standing Committee. This Committee will continue its work informing the council and general membership on issues facing scholars of color in our field, promoting excellence in the study of race in the West, and advocating for both an expanded inclusion within the WHA*

and a heightened awareness of racial inclusion in both our field and our association. Its activities have included identifying graduate students and scholars of color, outside the WHA, who are working on pertinent topics and recruit them for programs at our meetings, and providing oversight and advice to the Executive Director, Executive Committee and Council on diversity and race issues. To facilitate aspects of their work, a member of the Committee will be an ex officio member of the Program Committee and Local Arrangement Committee.

7. We propose that the current Committee on Technology be identified as a Standing Committee. This Committee will continue its work in advising the Executive Director, Executive Committee and Council on technology matters, such as website development and other on-line initiatives.

8. We propose that such standing committees, established “to assist in conducting the affairs of the Association,” work with the Executive Director, Executive Committee and Council, report annually to the Council, include at least one member of the Council, and be reviewed every five years.

9. We propose that an ad hoc committee on Public History be established to work with the Executive Director, Executive Committee, and Council in order to explore possible initiatives with western state humanities councils, pursue common programs with centers of western studies, and develop other public history initiatives.

10. Recognizing that the Membership Committee contributes not just to the recruitment and retention of members, but also to strategic planning, we propose that the Membership Committee, in consultation with the Executive Director, explore the relationship between the size of the membership and the association’s operating costs. What, for instance, are the financial implications of increasing membership in each category as well as across the board? Are there inflection points where a change in membership numbers would create particular strains for the association’s way of doing business?

Discussion Items

- **On Governance**

Through our review of the 50-Year Report and Member Comments, several issues related to WHA governance have emerged as clear challenges that require the Council’s focused attention. While there may be other related matters, we have defined three key issues:

- **Need to clarify the decision-making process**

The 50-Year Report suggests a task force to clarify the Executive Director’s duties and authority in the constitution and by-laws.

The decision in the spring of 2011 to make subscription to *Montana* an added-cost option for members suggests the need to clarify the roles of the Executive Committee, the Council and the membership.

- Need to clarify what the relationship is between the Executive Council and the financial oversight of the organization. In particular, what input are Council members expected to have when it comes to key budgetary decisions? What kinds of other financial information – such as that related to the endowment and the use of the endowment – may Council members expect to receive and discuss?
 - Need to define the relations of the various groups, committees, and coalitions to the WHA.
- On Graduate Students

The participation, needs and support of graduate students echoed through both the Report and Comments. Open to discussion are how best to enable their participation in the annual meeting and WHA governance, how to address financial needs, and how to foster a vibrant graduate student community within the WHA.
- On Annual Meeting & Program Committee

Making revisions to the annual meeting format is a shared concern for members, for Program Committee chairs, and in the 50-Year Report.

 - Need for ways to sustain changes in the annual meeting format. While individual program and local arrangement committees have created new initiatives and piloted options, the current structure has not fostered their retention.
 - Need for a relatively structured and formal mechanism for handing down and sharing program committee work.
- On establishing a Funding Campaign

While the WHA is not in a financial crisis, the organization needs an increased endowment in order to accomplish its goals and sustain its future.