

Realizing our full potential

A little more than five years ago, the ASOR staff, Susan Ackerman, and I read a couple of books on how a good non-profit could become *great*. We were not talking about how to make ASOR *great again*, but we were asking how we might reach our full potential now that we were clearly out of crisis mode.

The fact that we were having that conversation in 2014 was somewhat remarkable. In 2006, ASOR's unrestricted net assets for operations was around -\$365,000. Membership had dropped to 1,050, and we had trouble paying our bills. Indeed, I supported a proposal to the Board at the November 2006 Annual Meeting that would have SBL run the meeting for us because I (and others) were not confident that ASOR was strong enough to manage our own meeting. I (and some others) thought that we needed a minimalist model because the days had passed where ASOR could handle the financial pressures of office expenses, ASOR-affiliated excavation projects, and operating with declining memberships and registrations at the Annual Meeting.

I am glad that I was wrong in 2006! Not only were we strong enough to manage the Annual Meeting, but our members were committed to seeing us grow and expand in ways that I could not imagine in 2006 and 2007. It has been an honor to be part of that core team considering what it means to be *great* and to carry out our mission.

Today, we are a strong organization. You will notice in our finalized audit that we now have \$568,000 in unrestricted net assets available for operations. Not only is that a positive number, but it's close to a \$1 million turn-around from 2006. Our endowment accounts (both for operations and for fellowships and grants) are approximately \$2 million. Our annual meeting attendance has gone from about 400 people to average between 950 and 1,150 (though we dipped to just over 800 in Denver). Moreover, by the end of this summer, we will have awarded more than \$800,000 in grants, scholarships, and fellowships since 2007. We are now one of the largest sources of excavation scholarships, and we are also growing endowed funds for member research and excavation projects. Our membership is between 1,800 and 2,000 (depending on when we do our "count").

As Susan Ackerman's report makes clear, we are now poised to reach new heights in our new location. We are on the verge of buying our own home, and we are thinking about how we can realize our full potential—through advocacy, through ASOR-affiliated digs, through cultural heritage work, through our publications, and through our annual meeting. Our work is changing the world, and we are deciding what we should do next.

We still face challenges in the running of ASOR. It is a stressful time managing the transition to a new city. Even seemingly mundane tasks like moving our belongings from Boston to Alexandria require attention and energy. We are writing grant proposals while deciding how we can order phones and internet and finish an audit. We are trying to rebuild our staff and ensure that we have adequate revenues after some of our federal grants have ended. Yet, we are planning for how we can be great rather than how we can survive.

Our current big question—the Annual Meeting

Our success, combined with external actions and events, has forced us to face another major question as an organization—the future of our Annual Meeting. As I reflect on this question, three thoughts come to mind: 1) I may be wrong like I was in 2006, and things may turn out even better than I envision; 2) ASOR will continue to be strong as long as we stay focused on our mission and let our Annual Meeting continue to support our members' needs; and 3) we need to ask the questions that P. E. MacAllister often asked in meetings—does this advance ASOR and does this benefit the majority of our members?

Before discussing those three thoughts, I think that it's helpful to outline a few facts and financial figures that should be instructive as we think about the questions that P.E. often asks...

First, we should celebrate that our Annual Meeting has more than doubled in the last decade. People attend our Annual Meeting because it is *the* place where the best scholarship and ideas are presented. We don't get attendees because people are simply loyal to ASOR, but rather because the academic program is critical and worthwhile.

Second, we are in a position of compression because there is no room. Several years ago, we asked SBL and AAR to allow us to make simultaneous proposals to hotels in the cities where their meetings would be held. For good reasons (I would have done the same thing), AAR and SBL decided not to disclose where they were negotiating contracts. They signed contracts through 2031 without ASOR having an opportunity to seek space at the same time. I understand their business decision, but their business decision led directly to a lack of adequate space for ASOR to meet in many of the cities they chose. I want to stress that it was not their intent to exclude us. However, our compression challenge is directly correlated to their contracts.

Third, ASOR has done all that it can, and we continue to do all that we can to find space in the AAR/SBL cities. In some cities it is not possible, and it is often more expensive than choosing other venues that our members might prefer. Arlene Press is working with hotels in San Antonio as I type this report, and we are doing everything that we can to find a solution. However, there is not an easy fix. Moving our schedule to Tuesday to Friday, does not solve the problem despite what some outside of ASOR might suggest. I hope that that situation changes in the next two days, and I will have more complete information to share by Thursday or Friday.

Fourth, there is a financial component to the decision that impacts our members—and is directly related to the fiduciary responsibility that we hold as trustees. As Susan pointed out in her President's report, the use of unrestricted revenue (I prefer that term over "loss") for the Annual Meeting was much more advantageous in Boston than it was in San Antonio. The need for unrestricted dollars to support the Annual Meeting is not simply tied to registrations—the hotel contracts provide a commission and concessions that support the meeting. The "free" reception and shuttle buses in Denver were concessions that we negotiated to help our bottom line and enhance our attendee experience. Some of the offers that we have received for San Antonio involve little to no concessions, room rates \$30 to \$100 a night higher than SBL rates, no commissions, and minimums for food and beverage that approach \$100,000. These are the components of the offers *if* the hotels are willing to offer space for a Tuesday to Friday meeting.

Arlene and I are still receiving proposals, but the ones that we have received to date would require at least an additional \$100,000 in unrestricted dollars to support the meeting. That is possible, but ASOR could not afford some other key programs or staff if we spend those dollars in this way.

Finally, in terms of background facts, I found it helpful to look at the number of people who attend SBL.

- 2009 (New Orleans): 601 attendees at ASOR
 - 110 (18%) also attended SBL
- 2010 (Atlanta): 685 attendees
 - 137 (20%) also attended SBL
- 2011 (San Francisco): 816 attendees
- 2012 (Chicago): 921 attendees
- 2013 (Baltimore): 928 attendees
- 2014 (San Diego): 936 attendees
- 2015 (Atlanta): 877 attendees
- 2016 (San Antonio): 881 attendees
 - 131 (15%) also attended SBL
- 2017 (Boston): 1,148 attendees
 - 161 (14%) also SBL
- 2018 (Denver): 810 attendees

In summary, about 15% of our attendees go to the SBL meeting in addition to the ASOR meeting. I recognize that a higher percentage of the survey expressed a desire to meet with SBL; however, the staff checked the registrations of the survey respondents and found that 40% of all survey participants had not attended the ASOR meeting in Denver. Moreover, 68% of the respondents who expressed a desire for ASOR to “join back up with SBL” did not attend the ASOR meeting in Denver, and 43% of them (who voted to rejoin SBL) had not attended any ASOR meeting in the last five years.

The above comments or reflections help me reflect on the questions about what is good for ASOR and what is good for our members. As I offer my thoughts, I want again to stress that I was wrong in my recommendation in 2006. I may be wrong again, but I think it is my job as executive director to share my assessment with the board.

I appreciate all the work that the ad hoc committee on the Annual Meeting has done. As I think back over the debate of the Annual Meeting from 1997 (Napa Valley) to lively discussions in 2006 and in 2007, the largest problems occurred when members were not adequately included in the conversation. The survey and the work of the committee has ensured that all voices have been heard. I am sure that we are all deeply grateful for their important and hard work

As appreciative as I am, I want to urge the Board to be cautious about the Tuesday-Friday proposal. ~~I will be able to share more concrete data by Friday (the hotels are still responding to our requests and providing written answers when they expressed a desire to say “no” over the phone).~~ [Update as of 4/3/19: I have marked the previous sentence with strike-through because

ASOR received a new proposal this morning. I now have the details that I hoped to receive by Friday.] We are also still holding out hope that something might come through.

~~So far, the responses from the hotels in San Antonio have been the higher rates referenced above. We have not received responses that support the concept of Tuesday to Friday solving the problem. In fact, one of the hotels (the Omni) said that they could only accommodate ASOR if we meet from Sunday through Wednesday (the afternoon before Thanksgiving).~~

New paragraph updated on 4/3/19: Early this morning, I received in an email from Arlene with a promising proposal from The Wyndham San Antonio Riverwalk for our current pattern of Wednesday through Saturday (with the board meeting on Sunday). The Wyndham had previously declined to provide proposals in response to two RFPs. Additionally, Arlene had been in direct e-mail and phone contact with them, but the Wyndham had consistently told ASOR that they could not bid on our meeting because they were holding the space for another (non-SBL related) group. The Wyndham shared that the other group canceled just a few days ago, and that cancellation (non-SBL related) motivated the Wyndham to submit a proposal to ASOR that includes competitive room rates (\$129), commission, and an affordable F&B. We think that the hotel meeting space could work for our Annual Meeting, but we will likely need an overflow hotel for guest room space. A site visit would be necessary to determine if this property is a good fit for our meeting, but the proposal is promising.

While Arlene and I were thrilled to get this new proposal made possible by a cancellation, my comments above about the Tuesday to Friday pattern still hold true. This proposal was made possible by a cancellation, and not by shifting our meeting dates earlier. It is our assessment (Arlene and Andy) that the shifting of dates one day earlier did not result in any viable proposals that would meet ASOR's needs.

To date, the evidence from proposals that we have received indicates the rates for our attendees go down as we move into the weekend before Thanksgiving. This makes sense if one thinks of business travelers. Many weekly business travelers leave home on Sunday or Monday and return home on Thursday. Most of them do not want to travel for work the week of Thanksgiving. I have been told by directors of sales in almost a dozen cities that this travel pattern means that hotel rates start to fall on the Thursday and Friday before Thanksgiving. This rate pattern was confirmed in writing with ASOR's contract with the Westin Waterfront in Boston for 2021—the hotel has offered in writing to reduce our room rate for attendees by \$10 per night if we start our meeting on Thursday night instead of Wednesday night. The hotel offered even greater concessions and rates if we would start on Friday. Please understand that I'm not advocating for starting on Thursday or Friday, but I'm offering concrete evidence that the rates for our members and our concessions go up as we move towards the Friday before Thanksgiving rather than starting a day earlier on Tuesday (nine days before Thanksgiving).

Conclusion

I believe that ASOR will remain strong no matter what we decide about the Annual Meeting. While only 15% of our attendees go to the SBL meeting, I think that it is important to do everything that we can to support them. We didn't cause this compression problem, but we

should do everything that we can to help our members and the Albright Institute. At the same time, I think that we also need to consider what is best for our Annual Meeting and what is best for the 85% of our attendees who do not go to SBL. We also need to consider the boards of CAARI and ACOR, who in general do not attend SBL.

There are ways to prioritize cities and hotels that allow as many people as possible to attend SBL. I also think that the situation may change in just four or five years—San Antonio is discussing building new hotels, and the overall attendance at AAR/SBL may drop in the next decade. My suggestion is that the board consider doing the best that we can to accommodate everyone, but I have reservations about changing our meeting to Tuesday to Friday. Unless the situation changes, such a decision ~~would~~ **might** cost ASOR \$100,000 or more. It is possible to make that decision, but we would need to find new revenues or cut staff and programs to make it work.