

Sandra Reed, Marshall University

The SECAC Binary

I have been a member of SECAC since 2002. In that year, the conference was in Mobile, Alabama. I was a new dean at the time and attended the annual Saturday morning SECAC Members' Business Meeting, which is open to all members to receive updates and vote on important matters. I attended the meeting in order to announce the interest of the Savannah College of Art and Design in hosting SECAC in a future year. Nine years later, in 2011, I chaired the conference in Savannah and in that same year was voted to serve as SECAC's state director for Georgia.

After that first business meeting in 2002, Don Van Horn approached me. He had just become the first vice-president of SECAC, which he made clear to me is a nine-year leadership commitment. Three years of service as first vice-president provide training, followed by a three-year presidency, and then a three-year past presidency. This latter position has an advisory role and provides support to the president. That SECAC leadership involves a nine-year commitment impressed me deeply. It symbolized collegiality and continuity and, as I readily found, also constructive adaptation to the new ideas and changing needs of the membership. I sensed immediately and correctly that SECAC is an organization where an individual can make a difference, yet the manner and extent of that difference is checked by the continuity of leadership and the decades-old identity of the organization. As a corollary to this, on one hand each SECAC meeting must remain recognizable to its membership and fulfill its primary mission, which is to promote professional interchange and foster inspiration. On the other hand, within and beyond that mission, what wonderful and unexpected variety we experience each year.

At that 2002 meeting Don Van Horn was forthright and transparent. He stated without reservation that he supported convening SECAC in Savannah *and* that it would be a hard sell for SECAC to meet at an institution at that moment under AAUP sanction. At key intervals prior to SECAC 2011, he helped me to prepare to address questions from members and from the Board of Directors about SCAD, but at more than one juncture he also reminded the board that SECAC does not exist to sanction other institutions. Don emphasized to everyone that the practical need for commitments from host schools was a factor as well.

SECAC is an organization of tradition. At the same time, it is one that continually evolves. This binary of tradition and change is a source of SECAC's appeal and importance to many members. It certainly has been important to me. Another binary that empowers SECAC is the benefits of being an organization that not only fosters conversations among people in the same profession, but one that also brings together art historians, studio artists, graphic designers, and art educators on common ground. For myself, I have participated most frequently as either chair or presenter at one of our joint sessions. This year, for instance, the session that I am chairing, titled "The Studio Art Doctorate," considers a type of degree that merges some characteristics of each discipline.

My presentation today reviews my personal experience of the dualities of tradition and change, including their ramifications for those of us within SECAC whose primary field is art history and those of us engaged principally in making art. Looking ahead, it also seeks to encourage members to share their ideas for the future of SECAC. In the spirit of the title of Gauguin's masterpiece *Whence Come We, What Are We, Whither Are We Going?*, which harkens both to reflection and to future possibilities, as I continue with my comments here I ask that you

ponder your own vision for the future of SECAC. If you could add something to or change something about the organization, what would it be? Near the end of the presentation, a colleague will collect your responses to three questions on the sheets of paper handed out now, to be read aloud at this session's conclusion. The questions are these: (1) What program or opportunity would you like SECAC to develop? (2) What is your vision for the future of SECAC? and (3) If you could change one thing about SECAC, what would that be?

A long-time SECAC member, Gulnar Bosch, endowed a fund to provide financial support to offset travel expenses for graduate-student presenters at our yearly meetings. The terms of the award were written in such a way as to exclude studio-art members whose presentation consisted of participation in the SECAC Annual Juried Exhibition. To redress this limitation, in 2007 I presented a case for expanding eligibility for the award to artists whose work was selected for inclusion in the members' exhibition. This conversation led to my collaboration with board member and art historian Pamela Simpson as a two-person sub-committee on the preparation of revised and more inclusive language. The Bosch Awards description now provides travel funds for select graduate students "whose papers or works have been accepted for juried presentation." The corollary to this added benefit is that these same members now must register for the conference in order to attend the exhibition reception featuring their work and the accompanying juror's talk. Effectively, therefore, with its greater inclusiveness the Gulnar Bosch grants have enhanced the number of conference registrants.

In another regard, studio artists had it better than the art historians. Our organization has offered the SECAC Artist's Fellowship since 1981, originally known as the SECAC Exhibition Grant. Responding to the economic realities of inflation, the funding for this award was increased from \$3,000 to \$5,000 commencing with the 2012 recipient, making it one of the more generous individual artist grants available. The terms of the award afford latitude for how the funds are used, and the grant itself links a unified decision by the three members of the selection committee to a presentation of work(s) by the fellowship recipient for the benefit and enjoyment of all SECAC members at the subsequent conference. Moreover, the parameters of the award are such that tremendous openness and flexibility in regard to the nature of the work displayed at the grantee's resulting exhibition has long been the rule. The presentation of *Lethe*, a single ambitious piece by John Douglas Powers at SPACE 301 in Mobile during the SECAC meeting in 2009 was a memorable showing. This eight-foot-square work was made of wood, steel, aluminum, electric lights, electric motors, and a two-way mirror. The exhibition by Carol Prusa at the Arkansas Arts Center at SECAC 2005 in Little Rock was another remarkable result, a compelling installation of stunning large-scale silverpoint drawings.

Of note, Carol won the Artist's Fellowship a second time last year. In the fellowship's forty-two-year history, she is just the third member and the first woman to do so. If you weren't able to attend the reception for her fellowship exhibition and the SECAC Annual Juried Exhibition last night, you will want to be certain to view both her work and that of fellow members before you leave Sarasota. Carol's new pieces involve LED lights and have taken on increasingly sculptural form. A personal note here: I first met Carol at Drake University when she was a graduate student and I was in the BFA program. So typical of our organization, SECAC meetings have been the place for us to reconnect on a regular basis.

Almost everyone in SECAC knows Bill Levin, if not from his long-term membership then from the endowed grant he established last year, the William R. Levin Award for Research in the History of Art. This new award encourages and recognizes research in art history to a level

parallel to the Artist's Fellowship. He exemplifies one of the ways that SECAC has thrived: when its members see a need, they will fill that need if they can. Thank you, Bill, for making this significant award available annually and in perpetuity to a fellow art historian—or possibly two or three art historians dividing equal shares of it, should the three-person selection committee so decide. This award makes SECAC a stronger organization.

Technology has affected SECAC and its members, and not surprisingly its overall financial picture. In part as a money-saving measure, the year 2008 proved pivotal in that for the first time no slide projectors were provided in the presentation rooms at the annual meeting: henceforth all members were mandated to give their presentations using digital files rather than slides. Online registration came to SECAC in 2006 through Memberclicks, and although some members choose to continue to pay by hand-written check, the use of credit cards is a convenience members expected and are indeed choosing. The change was inevitable despite the fact that online registration and credit card fees cost SECAC more than \$10,000 annually. However, attempting to balance this expense, the *SECAC Newsletter* that currently costs \$1500 to produce and deliver in print, formerly issued three times each year, has been reduced to twice annually and in 2015 will move fully—and solely—online.

If you have not yet written down your ideas for SECAC's future, please take a moment to multi-task and do so. We'll read these out in a few minutes.

Continuing with the subject of finances, it is the intent of SECAC to remain affordable in order to ensure vibrant participation even by individuals from institutions that cannot fully fund participation in conferences. And yet, to provide the services that are expected and to ensure viability, dues have steadily risen, as has the conference registration fee. It is a commonplace that dues and registration are the two main costs to members of any organization such as ours. At SECAC, membership dues were increased to \$35 in 2001 and are currently \$70, with retirees paying only \$45 and students \$35. But compare this with the College Art Association's basic individual dues, which are now \$125, albeit with a new \$90 discounted-dues level for part-time instructors.

Conference registration rates vary also from one organization to another, and often when dues are low, registration fees are high. For instance, Foundations in Art: Theory and Education's (FATE) basic dues are a very affordable \$50 for two years—impressive and welcoming—yet registration for its biennial conference in 2015 is \$325, on a par with that of the national CAA, whose fee will jump from \$170 in 2014 to \$330 in 2015, with part-time faculty registration set at \$185. SECAC will remain a bargain; like CAA, our cost for early registration in 2014 was \$170, yet this will increase by a mere ten dollars in 2015, while students and retirees will pay only half of that. With these figures in mind, we might ponder how it is that SECAC has grown to become a dynamic organization of national scope with steadily increasing international participation. Certainly our vitality derives not only from our inclusive organizational persona but also from the fact that—plain and simple—participation is an excellent value.

With that said, it is useful to consider a bit more deeply SECAC's conference-fee structure, specifically the pragmatism that occasionally necessitates alterations to it. This year, 2014, the policy determining fee schedules was revised for the first time since 2006, so the change was long overdue. Previously the conference registration rate for students was capped at one-third of the regular rate, but for the past several years—try as we might—it has not really been financially feasible to hold to such a low threshold. The new policy increases the student

registration fee from one-third of the regular rate to one-half, so the policy in this regard is just now catching up with financial realities.

Conference hosts are obligated to supervise annual meetings based on a self-sustaining financial model, which highlights another crucial binary, the one between SECAC as an organization and the host institution. Each year the conference director, working in conjunction with the host institution, must present a budget that aims for solvency, and then all aspects of that budget must be approved by the SECAC Board of Directors. For the first decades of SECAC's existence, the director of the annual meeting was the president. In 1984, these positions were separated, and the presidency was defined as a three-year position, as noted earlier. There are constructive checks and balances at work here among these three centers of authority—conference director, host institution, and the Board of Directors with its president—all of them overseen and tempered by the SECAC administrator, a stewardship role that was filled for many years by Anne Thomas and currently by Rachel Frew.

What more might be done to enhance organizational solvency? Part of the answer lies in making it easier for small and large voluntary contributions to be made online at the time of conference registration and/or membership payment. I believe that many persons who in the past have given to SECAC, having found inspiration and a second home within it, will continue to contribute if they are prompted to do so, as will new donors, especially if specific areas of need are identified and designated. For instance, consider how much you might give at the time of registration if you were prompted to donate specifically to support student travel to our meetings or to provide funds to subsidize registration in cases of serious financial hardship.

Lastly in regard to financial challenges, SECAC has been fortunate to have masterful administrators for conference planning and year-round management. In her 2001 historical reflections titled "Fifty Years and Counting"—available on our organization's website—long-term SECAC Administrator Anne Thomas asked these questions: "How long will a part-time staff be adequate?" and "How long can SECAC function out of a home office?" In the minutes from the 2006 Board of Directors meeting, then-President Don Van Horn is recorded as saying that he believes within five years SECAC will need to move toward a full-time administrator. We have passed that hypothetical deadline. In last year's minutes, President Floyd Martin began a discussion about the need to plan for a full-time administrator in the future by acknowledging the full-time responsibilities and part-time pay and benefits of our present administrator, Rachel Frew, and that "SECAC likely needs to move toward supplying benefits...." Generally the cost of health insurance and other benefits are considered to be in the range of thirty percent of an employee's salary. As a professional organization, we need to provide professional compensation for our administrator. If fundraising is needed to ensure that a full salary is paid, I would say that it is time to put our money where our mouths have been since 2001.

A different yet inevitably related major change for SECAC has been its development into an organization with national scope. In 2009, a committee was formed to update our mission statement to reflect this. The statement now reads, "SECAC (Southeastern College Art Conference) is a non-profit organization that promotes the study and practice of the visual arts in higher education on a national basis." Additionally, the SECAC internet homepage notes that, "The conference regularly draws participants from the United States and other countries. Individuals who present their research or creative work at an annual conference gain national exposure." The most recent data from our SECAC administrator validates this: 32.9% of SECAC regular members reside outside of the original group of twelve Southeastern states that

founded the conference: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. Even more dramatic, fifty-seven percent of student members reside outside of this region. Why is publicly trumpeting our national scope important? Because it calls attention to the fact that SECAC meetings attract participants on a national level, thereby establishing the merit and high regard of presentations given by members at those meetings within the framework of promotion and tenure applications.

In line with this development, a change to the SECAC constitution was proposed and approved in 2013 to allow the annual conference to be held outside of the Southeastern region. The constitution now reads, "Normally, an institution of higher learning in the Southeast will host an annual meeting, but at times meetings may be held without a host institution or outside of the Southeast." In 2015, for instance, SECAC will meet outside of its home base and without a host institution in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 2017, SECAC will meet outside of the Southeast again, in Columbus, Ohio, with the Columbus College of Art as our host. These changes are necessary as SECAC has "outgrown many of the smaller communities where member institutions are located" (Thomas) and allow SECAC to meet in attractive locales that are able to provide session rooms and housing for more than five hundred presenters and attendees. To this end, SECAC has engaged Eisenman & Associates to identify locations, solicit bids, negotiate contracts, and manage hotel arrangements.

As conference director in 2011, like most, I began several new initiatives: a time-slot reserved for informal meetings of members with their state directors, mentoring appointments, Pecha Kucha sessions, Project Share sessions, among others. Some of these initiatives stuck, and others did not. I have continued to shepherd the mentoring program that is now in its fourth year. More than one hundred members have received one-on-one professional mentoring. The chance to hear the stories of individual members, to review CVs of mentees and mentors alike, and to pair individuals in a relationship of trust has been a privilege. The comments made by those who participated include these five:

- "I will go into job applications and searching for [jobs] with another layer of awareness that I did not have previously."
- "I have new ideas for how an art history curriculum can be developed."
- "I learned a good deal about a job market I hadn't yet considered."
- "As a result of the mentoring session, I will have a stronger job application."
- "I think I got some good advice about self-presentation, and it definitely gave me some things to reflect on."

SECAC moves forward even as it honors its past. In 2013 a motion was made and unanimously approved to establish the Award for Outstanding Professional Achievement in Graphic Design, and reflecting this, President Martin appointed a formal committee to draft a statement for standards in that area, which was discussed by the Board of Directors at the 2014 meeting. There are various other initiatives now under consideration. The role of art education within SECAC—that is, scholarship that has the processes of teaching and learning as its subject—was considered by the board in 2013 as well. A change of name for our juried publication, the *Southeastern College Art Conference Review*, was under consideration, too, until this year's meeting when the proposed new title, *Art Inquiries*, was adopted beginning with the 2016 issue.

Before reading the proposals that have been made by the audience in answer to the questionnaire and engaging in some brief discussion of them, let us acknowledge that the shape and purpose of our organization is up to us. Even as you are thrilled to see your SECAC colleagues for an annual reunion and to enjoy the brief time together, remain open to new members' needs, and beware of giving the false impression that our deep friendships—governed by traditions of their own—are little more than exclusionary cliques. SECAC is about empowering one another through the exchange of real knowledge and achieving a perfect balance between our rich past and our confident, expanding, and ever-responsive future.