

Senior Think Tank Notes
Pittsburgh, PA
November 4, 2016; 1:15pm

Moderator: Jack Seymour

Present: Trenton Ferro, Elena Soto, Lynn Westfield, Elizabeth Nolan, Margaret Ann Crain, Peter Gilmour, Matthias Scharer, Susanne Johnson, Helen Blier, Maureen O'Brien, Kathy Winings, Jack Seymour, Burton Everist, Norma Cook Everist, Jos de Kock, Betty Tamposi, Randy Litchfield, Dean Blevins, Tom Groome, Bill Meyers

The meeting opened with Jack noting messages received from members who could not attend the Annual Meeting. He offered an update on Bob O'Gorman's recovery after his open heart surgery. Each participant then introduced themselves with name and location.

Business Items: Two business items were discussed first.

1. Creating a mentoring process: At the suggestion of the Board, the possibility of creating some type of mentoring process was raised to the group. The proposal focused on how can the Senior Task Force can seek to mentor younger scholars. Further, what would the mentoring process look like? Might it include activities such as reviewing first drafts of papers to be published, interviewing younger scholars about their careers, other forms of mentoring such as networking? Discussion followed. It was noted that it would be better received if there the process was not based on random assignment but rather started with a list of individuals seeking a mentor that also noted the young scholar's focus. One concern noted the possibility that the mentor might offer advice that conflicted with that of the student's advisor. It was further clarified that this role would not be that of a second advisor to a student. Rather it would be scholars already embarking on their career.

Another participant offered that they felt that mentoring younger scholars supporting through a networking focus would be it would be good as senior scholars know the field better. After further discussion, instead of generating a list of younger scholars seeking mentors or a list of senior scholars willing to serve as mentors, it was noted that it may be better to have a central person acting as a liaison who could make the connection between younger scholar and mentor. In that way, no one's name would be on a list that would become public. There should also be an effort to not duplicate other support resources such as the resource that ATS offers new scholars at AAR, as one example. It was also noted that there are several digital platforms that serve a mentoring function. At the conclusion of the discussion, it was noted that there are 2 issues here: networking support and mentoring support. It was concluded that a starting point might be more informal through the REA Annual Meeting structure.

2. The inclusion of electronic submissions for promotion or tenure consideration: The group was asked if we might form a Task Force to look into creating a document that notes how other schools view electronic submissions for promotion or tenure consideration. It was concluded that a sign up note will go out to everyone for those interested in working on the Task Force.

Senior Scholar Blog Responses on the Mission of Religious Education:

The remaining time focused on the responses that were noted on the REA website concerning the mission of Religious Education as we move into the future. The discussion began by reading from Chuck Foster's initial response. The 3 responses from Maureen, Ronnie and Kathy were then summarized. Discussion followed from the participants. One noted that religious education allows for conversations that go beyond our individual perspectives. Another noted the interplay of the diverse viewpoints and perspectives held by people.

Two points from the conversation were highlighted. First many of our students downplay their Religious Education training for fear that it won't help them in being hired for ministry positions. Second many denominations no longer have departments in Religious Education or Christian Education but have a director of Spiritual Formation or similar titles. Seminaries also are not hiring Religious Education faculty or no longer have a Religious Education department or degree program. Another concern expressed was that the public understanding of the field seems to be based on an understanding of Religious Education as practiced about 60 years ago that confined it to Sunday School teachers in the basement of the church.

Some additional concerns were noted highlighting issues our graduates face today in their ministries that they feel they were not prepared to address. These include ministry with undocumented immigrants and other complex social issues. Along this line, the complexity of educating our students for today's world adds to the challenges facing our field such as addressing quasi-religious philosophies. It was also noted, though, that there are very interesting things happening through the work of younger students and the millennial generation that we may not have noticed because of our concern with what is our center.

Another noted that many groups are focused primarily on teaching about religion. Maybe we are trying to take on too much in our work. Maybe we are trying to be too broad in Religious Education and trying to address all things and all areas. It was noted that we are not primarily here to teach religion per se but to teach how to think, teaching a body of spiritual wisdom, a pedagogy that challenges us to turn toward God. If we think in terms of our outcomes, we will be more effective in addressing the real core of our work. If our outcome in Religious Education is to introduce spiritual wisdom for life, our pedagogy will follow.

Meeting adjourned at 2:15pm.