AERA Position Taking and Policymaking Processes Guidelines
American Educational Research Association

This document on position taking and policymaking processes was adopted by the Council of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in January 2005 as the guidelines under which the Association operates. It was prepared as a report by the Government Relations Committee and the Social Justice Action Committee at the request of Council to provide guidance to Council in executing its responsibility for policymaking and position taking on behalf of AERA. It also aims to make more widely known and accessible to all AERA members how the Association executes its policymaking function. To this end, it examines three domains of policymaking—mission-oriented policy, public policy, and governance policy. For each, it addresses how policymaking and implementation unfold and offers procedures and recommendations to facilitate policymaking and its effective implementation by AERA.

Background

The American Educational Research Association is the national scientific and scholarly organization dedicated to advancing education research and the sound application of research for policy and practice. As a research association, AERA has a primary responsibility to its members to support and promote policies and programs that advance education research and its tools, resources, and infrastructures. The Association as a body may also wish to address larger questions of public policy beyond the domain of policies relating to the advancement of education research and its support. Lastly, while typically more internal in its thrust, the Association has an obligation to conduct its own business as an organization in accordance with policies and practices that reflect its members’ commitment to just, equitable, and transparent procedures. An explication of these three “policy domains” is discussed in the following sections.

The first of these policy domains—education and advocacy on behalf of education research and education researchers—is central to the purposes of the Association and includes those activities that individual scholars and students can and should expect from AERA as the national research association. The Association needs to be well positioned and highly credible to give voice and visibility to the field and to policy issues essential to its continued advancement. In short, this is the domain of “mission-oriented” position taking. The key issues are often less about policymaking (because policy is often clear) than about the strategies, priorities, and mechanisms that best position AERA to act.

The second area pertains to advocacy on social or public policy issues beyond AERA’s explicit mission to advance education research. This domain is a complex one for scientific and research associations and often generates controversy if not carefully addressed. It is certainly the case that associations like AERA have educative responsibilities to disseminate knowledge—to make research known, useful, and usable to its primary consumers (practitioners and policy makers involved in education) and to other external communities (e.g., the media, policy makers with a broader portfolio). In terms of advocacy, however, there remains the issue of how a research association determines that, as an organization, it also wishes to take a policy position on an issue. Part of the complexity of “public policy position taking” relates to the fit between a research society’s mission and judgments about whether an advocacy role may diminish its credibility among its members and with larger publics or may affect its success in its primary mission.

The third arena of policy—ensuring that AERA governs and administers itself coincident with value commitments befitting a scholarly association—is an often less visible but highly important domain of policy and position taking. It is a matter of good practice and good policy that AERA conducts its operations and business affairs consonant with sound science and research policy as well as social policies that reflect the values of a democratically elected and governed membership organization. While often viewed as more internal in purpose, the domain of “governance-oriented” policy has external aspects insofar as it may affect potential members’ (or research communities’) perceptions of AERA or have consequence for how AERA works in relation to other external organizations, businesses, or communities.

For each of these policy domains, responsibility for policymaking and position taking rests with AERA Council. As stated in the By-Laws (Article IV, Section 2), Council is the legislative and policy-determining body for the Association. Council sets the policy directions and positions of the Association. Members, Committees, Divisions, Special Interest Groups, and the Executive Director may recommend policy, but only Council has the authority to set policy or take policy positions on behalf of the organization. Implementation of AERA policies and policy positions rests with the Executive Director who is responsible for accomplishing the policy goals and objectives of the Association.

This report provides guidelines and recommendations for position taking in each of these three domains as well as procedures for proposing and establishing policies on behalf of the Association. The impetus for the report came from the occasional circumstances that arise when AERA might wish to consider using the imprimatur and advocacy capacity of the organization to address issues of social policy outside of the research mission and purposes of AERA. The Government Relations Committee and the Social Justice Action Committee, jointly charged with preparing this report, thought that the issue of taking policy positions could best be addressed within a broad framework of how AERA position taking unfolds and is implemented by AERA.
Mission-Oriented Policy and Position Taking

The AERA operates with a fundamental set of policies and positions that flow from the tenets of sound research, openness of inquiry, and a commitment to the advancement of education research. In most instances, AERA policy is widely known and shared throughout the Association by virtue of its being based on foundational principles of research, including as set forth in the Code of Ethics, or deriving from a body of policies and positions that AERA has taken over the years. The work of the staff is central to implementing established policies, committees are key to advising on this function, and Council provides broad and essential oversight. Also, there are instances where policy is uncertain or new policy needs to be crafted to advance education research and foster a supportive environment for it. In such circumstances, Council’s role in policymaking and oversight and the Central Office’s role in implementation and bringing issues to the fore all come into play. The following sections address both sets of circumstances and offer recommendations as to how they should unfold.

The Implementation of Mission-Oriented Policy and Position Taking

Like other scientific, research, and learned societies, AERA seeks to promote public policies that facilitate the advancement of research (including public investment in research, training, and infrastructure for this field), that promote the quality of scholarly inquiry (e.g., academic freedom, peer review, open competition, access to data), and that ensure the integrity and ethics of the research enterprise (e.g., as set forth in the AERA Ethical Standards, conflict rules, and guidelines for the protection of human subjects). The Central Office has the responsibility of working to promote and protect education research—seeking to advocate for public decisions (whether legislative or executive) that enhance the education research enterprise and to resist policies and decisions that can impede or erode the capacity to pursue research.

AERA’s work in the domain of mission-oriented policy and position taking is primarily directed to the national level. As a matter of priority setting and scope of work, typically education and advocacy on behalf of education research and the education research community are aimed at national policy and the federal system of research and development (R&D). There are occasions when state-level actions or higher education policies at the state level may threaten undertaking quality education research or the capacity of education researchers to do their work. While monitoring state-level issues is beyond the day-to-day capacity of the Central Office staff, AERA’s distributed membership across the United States and academic institutions and its networks of ongoing interaction with higher education associations and other research societies usually provide “early warning” signs about issues with potential for having a major impact on research and the well-being of the field. For example, elimination of certain state-level education data collections or deaccessing their availability for public use would be a topic where AERA mobilization at the state level might be a wise strategy. As with issues at the national level, AERA policy on such matters is often clear, only requiring from staff a careful cost-benefit analysis of whether the situation is sufficiently compelling to invest in staff time and Association voice. At other times, either the policy or the application of policy to the state level may be uncertain requiring that the matter be brought to Council for policy clarification.

While policymaking resides with Council as the legislative body, implementation of policy necessarily resides with the Executive Director who is accountable to Council for effective and responsible implementation. In areas where policy is clear, implementation activities led by the Central Office vary depending on issues and circumstances. Achieving AERA goals may require public and visible actions (e.g., submitting letters, organizing letter writing efforts, testifying, preparing op ed pieces) or behind-the-scenes work. A situation or opportunity may need only actions from the Executive Director and/or others on staff or may require the appearance and presence of or presentation by the AERA President or others with appropriate expertise. Part of the measure of the capacity of a professional staff is its success over time in judging situations wisely, in creating or identifying opportunities for the advancement of the field, and in being vigilant in observing or averting challenges to sound science and scholarly policies. Implementation of extant policy, however, needs to occur through a process of setting priorities and plans that are shared with and supported by Council. (See further the section below on Implementation, Planning, Accountability, and Reporting.) Also, even within the domain of extant policy, the Executive Director and/or Director of Government Relations typically seek input from the Government Relations Committee and keep the Chair of that Committee and the President briefed on issues of high salience and profile for education research and for AERA.

Promulgation of Mission-Oriented Policy and Position Taking

Even with mission-oriented issues, there are times when AERA’s position on science or scholarly policy may be uncertain, unknown, or unclear. However less frequent an occurrence, such issues must be addressed by Council as a matter of organizational governance prior to AERA taking any action. The Government Relations Committee notes that, along with the Executive Director and her or his staff having responsibility for implementing policies, they also are accountable for bringing to Council issues that required policy and position taking.

A number of illustrations clarify the contexts where policy is absent or may need to be specified. For example, while in science there are general norms supporting the value of data sharing by scholars to allow for verification of findings, testing rival hypotheses, or permitting examination of other questions, AERA has not yet articulated a formal policy commanding data sharing to education researchers, supporting federal data sharing policy, or requiring data sharing for articles published in AERA journals. A second example calling on Council to refine policy might be taking a position on the potential balance in a funding agency between institutionally-supported research and field-initiated studies by individual researchers. A third area might involve developing an explicit position (versus AERA’s framing questions or offering comments) on the redefinition of proposal criteria by a federal agency to increase
the weight given to intervention studies or to applications. For a final example, while it is well within extant policy for AERA staff to submit questions to be asked of nominees for appointed positions, based on established AERA policies regarding commitments to education research, Council action is required before the Association would take a position on the adequacy of specific candidates to meet the research standards enunciated by AERA.

In instances when Council needs to craft new policy, the issue itself or advice about it may come to Council from the Government Relations Committee, other committees, staff, division or SIG officers, members, and so forth. It is recommended that when new policy articulation is needed, Council seek the advice of the Government Relations Committee and other committees that may be relevant (e.g., Research Advisory Committee) and do so in a manner that would allow for timely consideration.

Implementation, Planning, Accountability, and Reporting

As noted above, typically scientific and scholarly associations represent their disciplines or fields or take mission-oriented positions on issues that flow from foundational principles (e.g., opposition to rescinding federal awards that have been made after competitive, peer review) or a history of actions in a domain (e.g., support for federal funding of education research). Central Office staffs have the responsibility and obligation to be knowledgeable about these issues and to develop and employ strategies most promising for accomplishing goals. AERA staff often takes action in collaboration with other national research associations or organizations, including informal coalitions such as the Federation of Behavioral, Psychological, and Cognitive Sciences or the Consortium of Social Science Associations. Such activities, if not integral to an annual plan, should be reported as information items to the Council, available but not expected for action. The Government Relations Committee should also receive routine updates, with the chair of the Government Relations Committee and the AERA President being kept informed about particularly salient issues as they occur. Also, as noted above, in all areas of ambiguity or where new policy is needed, the Executive Director should bring matters to the President or Council for policy determinations, and she or he is accountable to Council for doing so.

Over the past several years, the Executive Director and staff have routinely briefed Council on implementation of Association policies, and issues that require Council action have been brought to the Executive Board and Council for its consideration. The Government Relations Committee and the Social Justice Action Committee recommend that a further step be instituted: that the Executive Director provide an annual plan and report on AERA policy matters and position taking. The document should include three major sections: First, key goals and priorities should be set forth, taking into account short- and long-term objectives. Second, there should be a summary of activities of the previous year, including routine and extraordinary actions, how they were handled, and with what outcomes. Third, the document should include a plan for the coming year, identifying policy issues, planned steps, and outcome indicators. Each year a draft report would be discussed first by the Government Relations Committee at its Spring meeting to obtain recommendations. Then, Council would consider the planning and implementation report at its June meeting.

The current Executive Director has instituted the inclusion of program reports for all programs in the agenda books for the June meeting. These documents typically include reporting on the prior year as well as setting forth salient arenas for initiatives and activity. Formalizing this planning and reporting on mission-oriented advocacy is recommended as an additional vehicle for briefing Council on actions and activities undertaken in light of AERA policy, as well as gaining the wisdom of Council on overall thrusts and emphases being pursued.

Public Policy and Position Taking

Part of the Mission

As noted above, as part of its mission, AERA has a role in and responsibility for strengthening appreciation of the value of research to policy and practice and encouraging these links. Integral to AERA’s programs and initiatives are activities that seek to foster and promote the dissemination of sound science and its use. These activities are undertaken not to endorse a particular policy position or practice but to serve the public good by making relevant research accessible.

The Annual Meeting is one venue for doing so through sessions that are designed to communicate important research to non-technical audiences and through those specifically directed to presentations that enable participants to flesh out the links between research and researcher’s policy views. Sponsoring or co-sponsoring seminars, participating in Congressional or media briefings, or holding routine events for education policy makers and staff (e.g., the monthly Educational Policy Forum luncheon held in DC) are other such vehicles. The Brown Lecture in Education Research recently introduced, is an exemplar of such activities. At least two of the AERA journals, the Educational Researcher (ER) and Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis (EEPA), are directed to bringing education research to audiences, including those primarily engaged in policy and practice. ER is freely disseminated on the AERA website. And, Research Points (RP), introduced in 2003 and also available freely on the website, is a 4-page product directed to bringing education research to bear on topical issues salient to education policy makers (and the media). Print copies of RP are also distributed to targeted audiences of persons engaged in education policy, those reporting on education issues, and those seeking to shape or promote sound policymaking processes in education.

The above activities are all part of AERA’s implementing its role in promoting the sound use of scholarship in policymaking. AERA’s training programs emphasize this responsibility as well as seeking to develop a talent pool of researchers better prepared and situated to produce knowledge of use and relevance to education policymaking and practice. The Association also on occasion undertakes projects that initiate or synthesize research addressed to important issues of social policy. For example, the conference convened by AERA and led by Kenji Hakuta on research on diversity in higher education produced the book, Examining the Evidence on Racial Dynamics in Colleges and Universities that subsequently provided part of the important base of knowledge for the University of Michigan affirmative action cases.

These examples point to a commitment within AERA to expand the visibility of education research and foster the use of research in policymaking. AERA’s purpose as convener and disseminator of research well situates it to take on this role. The
Government Relations Committee and the Social Justice Action Committee recognize and appreciate that this function is different from a policy or position-taking function (and thus outside of the charge of this report); yet both Committees encourage AERA's taking more of a leadership role in initiating programmatic activities that synthesize or stimulate research in important domains of education policy. They think that AERA could serve the public good and enhance its reputation as an organization by developing program initiatives on important matters of public concern. In the context of this report, both Committees believe that more intentional activity of this genre could make more of a contribution to the policymaking process and to the credibility of education research than the occasional position taking that AERA might also pursue. Thus, they encourage Council, relevant committees, and the Executive Director to consider such programming as it planned for the years ahead.

**AERA's Taking Policy Positions**

The question remains about the conditions and contexts under which AERA as a research association may wish to speak to major question of education policy. Consistent with the prior AERA effort in 1995 to establish criteria for taking policy positions (with recommendations adopted by Council), this report recommends that AERA adopt policy positions only on issues of compelling significance for education and learning—where there is a solid foundation of research knowledge, widespread agreement in the research community on its policy implications, and a powerful moral reason. Both Committees recognize that the Association places its credibility at risk in making social policy pronouncements because, when it adopts the role of advocate, however sound and desirable, it leaves to one side its mission-directed role of serving to convene, communicate, disseminate, produce, and enable translation of research. Nevertheless, both Committees believe that there are issues so compelling and fundamental to what matters for education that AERA would be derelict as an organization if there were not processes and procedures in place to enable Council to exercise the full weight of AERA's voice on these rare occasions.

**Procedures for Evaluating Proposed Policy Positions or Actions**

Council has sought this report in part because it has observed that it has had no standard procedure for considering an issue, nor a process or criteria that would assist it in assessing whether AERA should speak. The one recent example of a successful process involved the decision to file amici briefs in the University of Michigan affirmation action cases. In that instance, Council considered the issues before the Supreme Court to be so fundamental to equality of access to education that Council believed that AERA should inform the Court about the research if there were sufficient empirical basis for doing so. The then AERA President appointed an ad hoc committee to examine the research evidence for such a filing. This procedure allowed Council both to consider taking a position in a research arena whether or not Council members themselves have specialized expertise and to make a determination that any such position is based on sound scholarship. (Note that AERA followed a similar process of having a committee craft a position on high-stakes testing based on the 1999 Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing and a National Research Council report. In 2000, Council adopted this position.)

Because there have been no clear rules or procedures for taking policy positions that go beyond AERA's specific mission, we propose the following, in part based on recent successful experiences: That an independent panel be convened by Council, and, consistent with the real time frame, be asked to formulate a position about the wisdom of alternative actions. At issue is the strength of the research findings or other credible data related to a topic. The panel would report back to Council on the strength of the knowledge base and on recommendations for a course of action. If time constraints require Council to confer between meetings, a procedure for doing so or for delegating a final decision could be set forth. The Government Relations Committee and the Social Justice Action Committee concur with this recommendation.

In recommending a timely panel appointment and review procedure, neither the Government Relations Committee nor the Social Justice Action Committee believes that Council is required to invoke this procedure on every issue that is raised to Council for possible position taking by a Division, SIG, Committee, or member. It is recommended that Council seek the advice of the Social Justice Action Committee and the Government Relations Committee on matters that could lead to a public policy position (if these Committees are otherwise not involved in the recommendation). Under any circumstance, Council needs to undertake an initial screening and determination as to whether a concern that may be expressed about an education issue (outside of education research policy) is sufficiently compelling and consequential that AERA should weight the research evidence and potentially act. Both Committees recommend that a simple majority rule should be invoked to initiate the process of establishing a panel to assess whether the research basis is sufficient for Council to take some form of action. This initial review may dispose of an issue by Council without convening a panel. It is the role and responsibility of Council to make this assessment.

If Council decides to convene a panel, the AERA President has the authority to make appointments. Panels should have the task of evaluating the scientific, scholarly basis and appropriateness of any proposed policy or action so that Council is confident in the research basis underlying its potential position. Panels should also have the latitude to consult with other field experts who may help to clarify or illuminate the research evidence and data. Panels can recommend actions for Council to consider that may vary from the positions that have been raised initially. Panel recommendations are advisory to Council. As with all matters of Association policy, Council is solely responsible for decisions of the Association regarding public policy positions. Both Committees recommend that Council retain the two-thirds majority rule for taking public policy positions that was adopted by Council in 1995.

It is expected that taking policy positions related to education will be rare. The review process specified above requires a sufficiency of research evidence to commend Council's moving forward. Nothing in this set of recommendations limits, however, Council's capacity to issue policy statements on behalf of the Association on monumental matters of public significance (whether inside or outside of education) where no organization committed to fundamental principles of humanity and human value could in good moral conscience remain silent.
Governance-Oriented Policy and Position Taking

AERA as a membership association has an affirmative obligation to operate its own functions and monitor its own behavior in accordance with the research policies it supports, its code of ethics, and a commitment as a democratic organization to the values of equity, equality, and transparency. AERA has a history of endeavoring to do so. For example, AERA uses peer review in its publishing functions (both journals and books), the selection of papers and symposia for the annual meeting, and the allocation of fellowships and grant support (through the AERA Grants Program, the AERA-IES Grants Program, and the Minority Fellowship Program). Also, AERA through its Council has issued policies and taken positions related to matters of social justice, equity, and access throughout the organization’s governance structure and programs and has procedures in place for assessing progress and problems (e.g., each Division has a Affirmative Action Officer, and the Affirmative Action Council receives annual reports on the operations of divisions in meeting diversity goals). AERA also has several justice-related committees that address social justice issues internal to AERA and to the field of education research. Also, AERA’s Social Justice Program focuses on diversity issues in education research, initiatives to build a diverse talent pool of researchers, and the need for education research on underserved populations. AERA is also an equal opportunity employer committed to fair practices in the treatment of employees.

AERA Council is responsible for establishing policies that set a framework for operating the organization according to the principles it supports. Over time research organizations like AERA need to examine policy issues (as are appropriate to changing conditions and circumstances) that may affect their own operations as well as the views they espouse related to research. Recently, for example, the Publications Committee proposed conflict-of-interest rules for deliberations on editor selection processes; the grants programs administered by AERA also follow recusal rules when considering proposals. Council has not yet, however, articulated conflict-of-interest rules that guide other areas of AERA decisionmaking, selection, or appointment. Similarly, as noted above, AERA has not yet addressed such issues as data sharing. While any entity within AERA may propose policy on these or other topics, it is only Council that can adopt policy with respect to AERA’s own operations.

AERA may also make policy determinations as to how it wishes to conduct its business in relation to external organizations, institutions, or communities. Such policies require Council consideration and action and cannot be set by any other entity within AERA. For example, in January 2004, Council adopted policy on advertising in AERA publications or products, mailing list rentals, and exhibits at the Annual Meeting. Implementation of this policy was delegated to the Executive Director and her or his staff, but the articulation of this policy rested with Council. Similarly associations like AERA may have policies that guide where annual meetings may be held. Any such policies may be presented to Council from members, Committees, Divisions, SIGs, or the Executive Director, but only Council has the authority to set such policy on behalf of the organization. While typically in associations such policies are few in number, it is within the province of Council to make them.

In the governance domain of policymaking, AERA relies heavily on committees for framing policy issues for Council’s consideration and for implementing and advising on policy. The Social Justice Action Committee, the Affirmative Action Council, the Publications Committee, and the Annual Meeting Policies and Procedures Committee are just some of the AERA committees that have core responsibilities in this domain. The Publications Committee, for example, has charge of reviewing the Publications Manual and proposing new policies to Council to guide publications. Similarly the Research Advisory Committee and the Annual Meeting Policies and Procedures Committee may recommend policies to Council that would affect the conduct and quality of the Meeting.

Conclusion

The Government Relations Committee and the Social Justice Action Committee recommend adoption of this report and the procedures set forth herein to guide the Association in policymaking and position taking. The Committees believe that adoption of this report will serve the Association and its members in advocating strongly and effectively within its mission and role, will help guide AERA in its internal decisionmaking processes and will provide a sound and expeditious basis for allowing members and entities within the AERA (including Council itself) to consider positions and actions in the public policy domain.

Both Committees consider the report and the recommendations to be compatible with policy guidance enunciated by Council in 1995. In their recommendations, they point to where they believe AERA should primarily place its emphasis; that is, on policymaking and position taking within the mission and purpose of AERA. They also specify the conditions and processes for AERA taking positions on matters of public policy. Importantly, the report also emphasizes that policymaking flows from Council and implementation of policy rests with staff, with a process of annual reporting and planning by the Executive Director to Council. The Government Relations and Social Justice Action Committee believe this report and accompanying recommendations offer a framework that can effectively guide the Association. Nonetheless, Both Committees recommend that the report and recommendations be examined in 5 years to assess whether this guidance is meeting the Association’s needs and goals.