



## From the Desk of the President *A Scholarly Society in a Political World*

National elections focus the country on the issues that most sharply divide the public. This year was no exception, and despite AERA's mission as a scholarly society, several of those issues touched the Association and mobilized members to express a range of viewpoints. The AERA leadership found itself in a difficult place as members asked us to take actions or support positions, some of which were directly contrary to ones other members advocated.

The events and issues that sparked these pleas for action (or inaction, in some cases) reflect major social concerns and deserve our attention in our roles as engaged citizens. But the dilemma for a scholarly organization such as AERA is how to navigate the boundary between the world of research that is clearly within our purview and the politics of social policies, which cannot be completely walled off from scholarship in a field such as education. In our deliberations over how to address membership concerns, three Association policy documents<sup>1</sup> have guided us.

The first is AERA's bylaws, the most recent revision of which the members approved in March 2006. The bylaws state that the purpose of the organization is "to advance knowledge about education, encourage scholarly inquiry related to education, and promote the use of research to improve education and serve the public good." This mission statement is the core guidance that the AERA Council and the Executive Director use in all their deliberations about Association initiatives. We make every decision with a recognition that AERA is essentially a scholarly society dedicated to the production and use of high-quality research.

The second policy document is AERA's social justice mission statement, committing the Association to precepts of inclusion, respect, and equal standing for all members. In an organization as large as ours, with its diverse membership, these principles are critical to ensuring that members have an equal opportunity to participate in AERA's Annual Meeting and its other research and training activities and to speak and be heard through its various committee and governance structures.

The final document that has guided our deliberations is a set of guidelines on position taking that the Council adopted in January 2005. These were developed under the wise leadership of Eva Baker, then Chair of the Government Relations Committee, and Michael Nettles, then Chair of the Social Justice Action Committee. The guidelines establish both the criteria and a process for the Council to use in deciding whether to take public

policy positions beyond those directly related to the Association's mission of advancing research. The criteria require "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." The process may involve the Council's convening an independent panel to assess the research evidence and to recommend whether AERA should take a position and what it should be. Whether or not such a panel is convened, two thirds of the Council members must vote in favor of a particular policy stance before it becomes an official AERA position.

The high bar for taking positions on public policies is designed to safeguard the Association's credibility and to enhance its standing when it does decide to take positions, as it did in filing amicus briefs in two recent Supreme Court cases. AERA's position taking is circumscribed by its mission, but this does not mean that it cannot contribute to political and policy dialogues related to education. In fact, the 2005 policy reminds us that AERA has an obligation "to serve the public good by making relevant research accessible." Through the Association's various dissemination and convening mechanisms, members can inform a range of publics about where the research base is robust, where claims are less certain but still sufficiently reliable and valid to guide policy and practice, and where the knowledge base is weak or the findings inconsistent.

It is also important to keep in mind that one of the most significant and enduring contributions that education researchers can make to policy dialogues is through the generation of new ideas that emerge from accumulated research knowledge and creative thinking about the implications of that knowledge. Concepts such as fiscal neutrality, opportunity to learn, school choice, and standards-based reform are just a few examples of ideas that have shaped policy by combining normative theories with empirical evidence. AERA, through its journals, Annual Meeting, and research policy briefs can assist in communicating those ideas, even while not endorsing specific policy positions or practices.

So far, I have discussed how AERA, through its elected leadership and senior staff, deals with the question of position taking in the political realm. But what about how we approach it as individual members and scholars? What we do in our role as citizens is guided by our personal beliefs and philosophies. However, I

would argue that as members of a scholarly community, we can agree on a few shared principles. As AERA members and researchers, we need to participate in a continuing dialogue with each other over issues where there is disagreement. One of these is the role of research and its uses. For example, to what extent should there be clear distinctions among basic, applied, and advocacy research? Do we enhance our contributions to scholarly inquiry and to education policy and practice by engaging in research-based advocacy, or do we lessen the credibility of our work, especially when the available evidence is incomplete or evolving? These are the kinds of questions for which AERA can provide a forum for debate and discussion. Several sessions at this year's Annual Meeting will focus on such topics.

Differences in how we see the purposes of research lie at the heart of our professional identities, but as members of a community that values reflection and civil discourse, we have another obligation. All of us should be prepared to move beyond our usual circles and frames of reference to engage in serious dialogue with those whose views on research, politics, and social policy differ from our own. I personally have learned over the past few months that working to bridge those divides is one of the most significant challenges we face as scholars and citizens. As someone who studies deliberation and teaches students with vastly different political

views, I thought I understood how to do that. However, like many others, I have learned that navigating the road from principles to practice is more difficult than we researchers often assume. Nevertheless, during this period of personal learning, I have been reassured by the considered and thoughtful direction that past AERA leaders have provided in our Association bylaws and policies. These documents guide the current leadership in keeping the Association's research mission front and center while also respecting the diversity of its membership and seeking to serve the public interest through sound knowledge about educational processes and their societal effects.

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#### **NOTE**

<sup>1</sup>The three AERA documents discussed in this column—"Bylaws of the American Educational Research Association," "Social Justice Mission Statement," and "AERA Position Taking and Policymaking Processes Guidelines"—can be found on the Association's website: <http://www.aera.net>.