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2012 SAA Leadership Orientation and Forum

When I was a standard rank and file member of SAA I paid little or no attention to the role of council representatives. They made quick announcements at section and roundtable meetings urging us to submit proposals for the next annual meeting, rotated on and off duty, and faded into the sunset only to be replaced. And then in 2010, I was elected to be chair of a little mob called CPR--Congressional Papers Roundtable and this view changed dramatically.

For a small group, CPR has always had big plans to do big things--we host an annual preconference workshop, develop publications, grow future leaders, and talk loud and often...we are small, but mighty! As the new vice chair/chair elect with an ambitious agenda and a lot of questions, I quickly realized that my council rep and the SAA staff did much more than just make announcements.

During my tenure as a leader of CPR, we asked a million questions about Drupal and what we could and couldn't do with it, asked our council representative to speak about SAA's strategic goals as CPR began its strategic planning process, asked for financial support (we didn't get it but we got some good ideas) for our big 25th anniversary event, voiced concerns and ideas for adding media content to our Web pages, inquired about bylaw changes processes, invited our representative to participate in a q and a at our roundtable meeting instead of making a quick announcement, and finally, made him walk a mile.

You may not ask your council representative and SAA staff to do all of these things, but I'm here to tell you that you can expect them to do this and more! Many of the details of the relationship between section leaders and SAA leaders is spelled out nicely in the leadership manual and other documents on the SAA Website so I'm going to focus on a few qualities that should be the hallmarks for great council representatives.

- **Patient**

You should expect your council rep to address your questions both big and small with equal attention and good humor. You will have dumb questions—questions where you feel stupid even asking—and there will be tough and complex questions where there isn't a precedent and the answer will take several people to answer—your council rep should function as part of the team of mentors and experts who are there to support your efforts to lead effectively. I guarantee that at some point you will wonder, “Do we have to vote on this, or can I just act,” or, “If we do this, do we need to revise the bylaws? How do we do that exactly?” If your colleagues in your section or roundtable or unsure, your council rep is your “go-to” person and as such you have right to expect them to be patient and helpful. In most cases they have been in your shoes before so they understand your confusion *and* your reticence to ask for help.

- **Determined**

You should expect your council rep to take your more complex requests and queries seriously and to follow through with the necessary groups or individuals to bring the matter to resolution. Often questions that arise in sections and roundtables require input from several entities. Your council rep should let you know how he or she plans to carry the matter forward, an estimated timetable for doing so, and who they think can help resolve the matter fully.

- **Honest**

You should expect your council rep to be candid and respectful when you seek his or her opinion on SAA matters. Similarly, you should expect clear and honest explanations for actions taken by SAA leadership from your council rep. Transparency is vital to the health of any organization because it builds cohesion and trust.

- **Responsive**

Although SAA council reps should always keep section and roundtable leaders informed about activities and decisions and seek input as needed throughout the year, the SAA council rep should make some effort to make sure that the lines of communication go in both directions. What concerns and initiatives are important to sections and roundtables? What does council need to know about section and roundtables? What are the possibilities for alignment and collaboration?

- **Knowledgeable**

Does your council rep know something of the history of your section and roundtable? Does he or she know what the current challenges and opportunities you face as leaders of your respective groups are? Does your council rep know who to contact about problems or questions that arise? Does your council rep know the procedures and rules that govern SAA activities? The answers to most of these questions should be “yes.” If you find your rep doesn’t know as much as you would like about your section or roundtable, take some time to share some key information with them. Encourage them to monitor your listserv, read your newsletters, and if time permits attend your section meetings for longer than to just make announcements. If time doesn’t allow, make sure they receive a copy of minutes or a highlights report from meetings where substantive decisions are made.

- **Fair**

Understand and accept that your section and roundtable is not the only responsibility of your council rep. Each council member has several sections and roundtables to attend to over the year and at the SAA conference. This means that your rep may not be able to spend as much time as he or she would like at your section or roundtable meeting. If you want to have your representative spend more time with your section or roundtable at the SAA meeting, ask well in advance and come up with a back-up plan if that isn’t possible. One idea to consider is to host a Skype session with the Council rep for members to ask questions. Or, do a brief survey among members to gather questions for the council rep and ask him or her to address the most asked questions in an article in your newsletter.

These are but a few stellar qualities that describe an excellent council representative. In almost every case they also describe a great section or roundtable leader. To get the most out of the relationship it is vital to recognize that you and your council rep and the staff at SAA are dependent upon each other to succeed and flourish in your respective roles. Together, you can do great things!