

Taking a Look at MARAC Leadership and Vacancies

Chair

The fall 2014 draft of the proposed revision of the MARC Bylaws included changing the name of the head of our organization from Chair to President as a way to better represent – particularly to external audiences – this leadership role as distinct from heads of our various committees and caucuses, as well as to reduce confusion and ambiguity. In comments at the fall 2014 town hall meeting in Baltimore and in the survey distributed to members after the fall meeting, several members argued against changing the title of MARAC’s leader to President despite this rationale. In response to this feedback and in a nod to MARAC tradition, the current proposed revision returns to the term “Chair” to denote the elected head of MARAC.

Article 4 describes the duties of MARAC’s officers, and the primary responsibilities of the Chair are enumerated in article 4.3. This listing provides potential candidates for Chair with a basic understanding of the requirements of the office, something which is lacking in the current constitution and bylaws. We believe that this improved clarity and increased transparency will allow members to be better informed about what the Chair of MARAC (and indeed, each of the officers) does on behalf of the membership. These clearly defined activities will also help potential candidates who naturally want to understand what is expected of them before agreeing to sit for election.

During the town hall, one member expressed the concern that recommended changes to the position of Chair were a movement away from the intention of MARAC’s organizers in 1972. Also at the town hall, a few newer members of MARAC expressed an interest in a summary of the evolution of governance in the organization. The MARAC Archivist spent time researching the early years of MARAC in order to respond these questions. The Archivist’s conclusion was that there have been no dramatic changes to MARAC governance, but only nuances of change over time. The following paragraph is paraphrased from the Archivist’s email message reporting out his findings:

The early constitution stated that the Steering Committee was the governing body of MARAC, but at the same time the Chair was described as the person who would organize and run Steering Committee meetings and was ultimately accountable for the work of the organization (this latter point having been made by Elsie Freeman Finch). MARAC’s correspondence files demonstrate that the early MARAC Chairs did, in fact, direct the work of the organization. By 1985, the MARAC constitution dropped prefatory language about the Steering Committee running MARAC; it listed its officers and then described other MARAC Steering Committee members. Finally, there was a statement made in 1989 that the MARAC membership assembled in a business meeting was the highest authority of the Conference, a fact which no member would dispute.

Chair-elect

The renamed officer Chair-elect is proposed to take the place of the current Vice-chair, but with changes to the responsibilities of the office. The Chair-elect, as the name implies, will rise to the position of Chair, providing a clear succession. It will not surprise many members to learn that it is often very difficult to find members willing to stand for election as Chair. While there are no eligibility requirements for serving as Chair other than being a member in good standing, finding members who feel they are qualified or prepared to step directly into the role of Chair can be challenging. This proposed change will see the organization electing a Chair-elect annually who will essentially have a year to be brought up to speed on the current activities of, and issues before, the Steering Committee. MARAC will gain a reduction in barriers to running for the organization’s highest office as well as a leader who will have

had the opportunity to observe and participate in the work of the Steering Committee for a year before taking over the responsibility of leading MARAC.

The major responsibilities of the Chair-elect are enumerated in Article 4.4. These responsibilities include making appointments to committees, supervising the activities of committees by communicating with chairs, and preparing to assume the office of MARAC Chair. This role of guiding and closely monitoring the activity of the organization's committees should position the Chair-elect to feel confident that he or she is prepared to lead the organization in due course.

The responsibilities related to overseeing MARAC's semi-annual meetings, which currently rests with the Vice Chair, will become the sole responsibility of the Chair of the Meetings Coordinating Committee, who will also serve as an elected officer of MARAC.

Vacancies

The proposed revision to MARAC's Bylaws includes a significant change in how vacancies in any elected Steering Committee position are filled. The current MARAC Bylaws call for the Vice Chair to assume the role of Chair in the event of a vacancy in the organization's highest office, but they also call for the Chair to appoint a replacement to fill a vacancy in any other Steering Committee role (including Caucus Chairs, Members at Large, etc.) until the next regularly scheduled annual election.

The proposed change for filling a vacancy in the office of Chair will, unsurprisingly, have the Chair-elect assume that office. A vacancy that occurs in any other Steering Committee role will be filled by an election held within 30 days of the position being vacated. Given the speed and efficiency with which the Nominations and Elections Committee can now work through electronic communications and online balloting, the membership deserves the opportunity to decide who should fill an empty seat to serve on the Steering Committee.