NWSA Organizational Development:
A View from Within, at 25 Years

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In January 1977, a group of academic and activist feminists from all over the United States gathered at the University of San Francisco to found a women’s studies organization. Speakers at academic women’s studies sessions had called for its creation for six or more years, and a hardy band of dedicated organizers began to plan the actual founding convention at least two years before the 1977 meeting. The objectives were to create a democratic organization which promoted and protected practitioners and programs within the new field of Women’s Studies in public places of power and within the university. An active member since the founding convention, the author describes her experiences in, and offers her observations on 25 years of ups and downs working on the governance of the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA). The essay also comments on the deleterious effects of working within the patriarchy. In conclusion, the necessity for extreme patience when engaging change is evidenced by the length of time it has taken to get to where we are in 2002.

NWSA was founded in a time when there were few, if any, competing theoretical frameworks or feminist analyses. No how-to-begin-feminist-organization manuals were available to the women who provided the initial impetus, not to mention the work to carry it off. Not until the 1990s when sociologists, in particular, began to address these issues, did I take serious note of my own participation in the evolution of NWSA governance. Organizational events take place over time, and are subject to participants’ and analysts’ interpretations; therefore, there will be specifics of any one person’s recall of an event which will differ from another’s view of that event. Because I have always been interested in how things got to be what, and how they are, I learned early to value personal records regarding events in the past. It is still amazing to me to find very contrasting stories about a family event among parents and siblings in therapy. Similar circumstances prevail among unrelated people who happened to be present at a particular event, as illustrated in various individual testimonies about an accident.

I retired in 1998, and am attempting to complete the responsibilities I have assigned myself with respect to NWSA. Since I am not a professional historian, I have chosen to record—often from supporting materials, often from personal recollection—observations and experiences I had from working with the women who, in some senses, crafted the organization.
Had I been a trained ethnographer, I might have thought to systematically collect notes about NWSA governance within some framework and as they occurred; however I did not. Fortunately, I do have some notes, minutes, and correspondence, as well as a fairly reliable memory.

When I began working within NWSA I had no idea I was going to stay involved for the long run, no idea that NWSA was to become a major element in my life and career, nor that I would one day be attempting to chronicle the evolution of NWSA from my personal experience focusing on governance and organizational changes over the period of 25 years.

These, then, are the observations and analyses of one woman, whose membership in the NWSA has been continuous since the founding convention and whose involvement began in 1976, helping to organize even before the founding convention. My involvement has meant, over the years, attending numerous meetings in College Park, Maryland (home of the national office) and around the United States. It has also meant wonderful friendships, hard work, and many opportunities to learn from an experience that has rivaled any doctoral program in intensity and emotional hurdles to overcome.

The Founding Years

In 1973, at the closing session of a conference on Women’s Studies, at the University of Pennsylvania, Catherine Stimpson, a women’s studies pioneer, called for the founding of a national organization that would serve Women’s Studies. At that time there were a few regional groups that had Women’s Studies as a focus, but no representative national organization. In following years, many others echoed her call in both formal and informal settings where women met to discuss the responsibilities of academic women, in particular. During the winter of 1975, another meeting was held in Philadelphia at which debate and discussion began about a women’s studies organization. Major issues debated there, and in other venues, during the following two years centered on purpose, the source of the organization’s voice, and the locus of power.

Those issues manifested themselves in questions about a grass-roots, regional organization vs. a centralized national organization and how to represent women, along with which women and which issues. Discus-sants agreed upon a clear need to have a strong national presence for Women’s Studies in order to validate the emerging academic programs as well as to give credibility to all women’s issues both inside and outside the academy.

Power to influence was not to be limited to within the academy either; the initial planners envisioned an organization that would be invited to national tables where policies affecting women were to be set. This
discussion and debate continued when women's studies academics came together at disciplinary national and regional conferences during that period. I attended several such disciplinary women's caucus meetings with colleagues at both regional and state annual meetings where discussion centered on whether or not the focus of academics should be disciplinary or interdisciplinary. Those early meetings were primarily for historians and English language and literature specialists who were in the forefront of curricular change initiatives directed toward inclusion of women and women's writings in the canon.

In the mid-1970s, the women who conceived of organizing a women's studies national association were inspired by their needs as administrators, directors, and program coordinators of fledgling women's studies programs. My notes from those years record several basic functions that such an organization might serve for the members and their programs as:

- a nation-wide communications network and an opportunity to learn from each other;
- a central repository of information about curricula and research projects;
- a source of empowerment for individuals and programs;
- a means of legitimatization, in that a national organization can make policy statements and can both articulate and defend the field of Women's Studies from ideological attack.

The above list specifies the founders' initial purposes; they were also cognizant of the difficulties entailed in translating an idea into a viable organization. They had discussed the set of problems they needed to confront as they designed the organization.

Among those considered (also from my notes) were:

- political diversity among the extant programs, and what that might portend for mutual support;
- concern about becoming yet another group of academic professionals (perhaps a too exclusive group) which might deprive participants of opportunities for learning;
- concern for how power is to be distributed among the membership of students, faculty, and staff women.

Elsa Greene articulated several relevant questions in an article arguing for a national association:

Granting for the moment that we will be imaginative enough to devise an effective national structure which accommodates ideological differences and minimizes power differences among students, faculty and staff women, how do we establish regional power equity? How do we ascertain that small programs are not dominated by larger programs? Shall we vote as programs; or as individuals? Shall we vote at all? And are community women to be excluded from the association? (1976, 3)
In March of 1976, thirty women from across the country gathered at a three-day session to specifically plan for the organizational meeting [founding convention]. They arrived at a design that answered some of the questions listed above and that was grounded in a basic democratic process. The design contained statements of purpose, program, membership, dues, governance, and structure, as well as suggestions for the conduct of the constitutional convention, description of regions, how to choose delegates, agenda items, and a radical idea for pooling travel costs across all attendees to the convention. They listed questions from which the delegates were able to develop resolutions that were then debated by the assembly. Those that were accepted were to be grouped and turned over for translation into a working constitution.

When, at the 1976 Berkshire Conference on History of Women, Sybil Weir, of San Jose State University, called a meeting of interested persons to describe plans for a national women's studies organization, I was ready to get involved. Prior to that time the Ford Foundation had awarded a grant to support the planning and staging of the January 1977 conference at the University of San Francisco. Weir was soliciting assistance in getting representative delegations from each state/region to attend the founding convention. I was thrilled; there were already many of us in the State University of New York system and the City University of New York system who had been talking about the advantages of having a women's studies organization, but we had not yet gotten beyond talk. We had been meeting since 1970–1971 at various campuses to share concerns and information, as well as to share and discuss ideas. Albany, Buffalo, and New Paltz were the pioneering New York public institutions; they each had more than just one or two courses and seemed, at the time, to be well on their way to building a women's studies program.

By 1977, we were ready to devise an organization, and there seemed to be basic agreement on intentions and goals. That is, there was agreement on substance, but less agreement on the process we should follow. Utilizing a methodology of bringing resolutions before the assembly for debate, amendment, and final approval, we were able to craft the foundation for the first NWSA constitution. We did agree that we were to be inclusive of all women; we agreed to have a national organization, with a subset of semi-autonomous regional groups; and we agreed upon a broadly representative leadership group to be known as the Coordinating Council (CC), comprised of representation from geographical regions as well as subsets of under-represented women in the organization.

In January of 1977, over 500 voting delegates attended the three-day convention at the University of San Francisco (USF), sponsored by San Jose State and the Santa Clara County Commission on the Status of Women. We met to bring to fruition the aspirations of, by then, hundreds (perhaps even thousands) of women's studies students, faculty, and staff. The found-
ing assemblies were held in the USF student union, with delegates housed in the dormitories. Twelve regions were designated within the United States, and 25 people per region were chosen by lottery to be delegates to the convention. In addition, any women's studies program was entitled to have a delegate. I am not sure whether there was screening of delegates within regions to assess demographics after we arrived in San Francisco. I do know that representative-ness was among the goals stated, and that women of color were specifically designated for inclusion. I also remember that we were requested to send as delegates a variety of students, staff, and faculty members. I recall that those of us from New York, as well as other delegations, were asked to convene and get organized according to a format supplied by the leaders.

For many of us, it was a time of near wonderment. We were able to see ourselves as daring to form an organization that did not utilize the old forms. We were being purposefully inclusive of women we saw involved in classes in the academy and in other educational venues. We had no plans to create either a bureaucratic or a hierarchal organization.

I had been asked to serve as one of several parliamentarians for the Founding [Constitutional] Convention Assemblies, as I had identified myself as having considerable experience in bylaws and governance work on my campus. At the conclusion of the meeting of the CC in San Francisco, I agreed to return home to construct the first NWSA Constitution by joining the resolutions created in San Francisco into a coherent document. The agenda for the constitutional work of debating resolutions for inclusion had been set up prior to the San Francisco meeting. We had begun with debate on the preamble and concluded with establishing a method for approval of the constitution in those meetings. Each item to be included in the constitution was written into the form of a resolution to be put before the group as a whole. During the debate on each part, one could amend, add to, or change the item as it came up. It was also possible to introduce additional items; this was done at least once. The Lesbian Caucus, in coalition with women of color, used this procedure regarding the number of seats on the CC reserved for under-represented groups. Each section of the emerging constitutional resolutions had to be agreed upon by a majority of those seated in the meeting. I returned to Oswego with a package of resolutions agreed upon in an order similar to the United States Constitution and the generic model constitution found in many books and pamphlets that address parliamentary procedures. My job was probably best described as editing to reduce excessive verbiage and introduce parallel structures among items to enhance readability, understanding, and utility.

The constitution that emerged from the deliberations of that delegate assembly outlined a nonhierarchical organization comprised of nine task-forces that were to report to a CC and to the National Convention. There
were twelve regions and several other identified subsets: Third World women, lesbians, support staff, and pre-K–12 teachers. Students were to be included in governance, according to the initial constitution, by appointment to the CC. The CC was to designate convening leadership for the taskforces. The CC and the delegates to the National Convention, seated as the Delegate Assembly, were empowered to name additional programmatic taskforces as were determined by need.

The Constitution described the functions of the original CC as:

- being the year-round governing body of the Association which would implement policy made by the Delegate Assembly;
- being responsible for hiring staff for the national office and deciding on the location of that office;
- working with the Taskforces of the Association;
- carrying out the functions necessary to implement policy;
- setting the agenda for the national convention;
- taking other actions necessary to the conduct of NWSA business.

The Constitution directed the CC to meet at least two times per year. Membership of the CC was described as representative, by the twelve regions and by constituency. Regional members were to be elected for staggered two-year terms and were also to be chosen from different constituencies to provide for diversity, other than geographical, on the Council. In addition, the Third World Women’s Caucus, the Lesbian Caucus, and the Support Staff Caucus, formed at the convention, were each to elect four of their members to serve on the CC; they too had the requisite of diversity among the representatives. The Pre-K–12 Caucus was to elect two people, and the CC itself was to choose two students to be appointed to serve. From among its members, the CC was to elect co-conveners annually who were to be responsible for convening meetings and circulating the agenda for such meetings beforehand.

The first meeting of the CC at the conclusion of the San Francisco conference also decided to appoint from their ranks a treasurer, Myra Dinnerstein, of Arizona, and an interim director, Sylvia Gonzales, from San Jose State University, to serve until a successful national search for director could be conducted. The goal was to provide some continuity and leadership with office staff as well as to be a spokesperson for the organization. Another expectation for Gonzales was to be on the lookout for possible grants that could be fulfilled while also benefiting the organization.

The search for a permanent director was completed in August of 1977 and Dr. Elaine Reuben came to work for NWSA in January 1978, to be located at The University of Maryland. The university, through the Women’s Studies Program, hired her part-time, also offering office space and certain amenities to the organization; the national office has remained there since, and the University Library Special Collections houses our archives.
Growing Pains

Almost immediately, as Dr. Reuben began establishing the business aspects of the organization, it became clear that our decentralized, non-hierarchical way of conducting business was on a collision course with the demands of the patriarchal world. In order to conduct routine business and obtain proper nonprofit certifications, we had to incorporate. That required that the organization meet certain criteria established by law in the state of Maryland, as well as meeting some federal requirements. More specifically, we had to develop a set of bylaws that conformed to Maryland state law. As reported in Vol. VI, No. 3 of the Women’s Studies Newsletter, “although the substance of the bylaws is taken from the NWSA constitution . . . the language necessary for incorporation reflects hierarchical conceptions at odds with the basic tenets of NWSA” (Reuben 1978, 2).

Elaine Reuben had sent me a copy of generic bylaws that she had obtained from a lawyer along with editorial suggestions and between us, we cobbled together in phone consultations a document that she submitted to the CC for approval. I had very mixed feelings regarding this intrusion of “the patriarchy” into our attempts to specify governance, while also recognizing the necessity of our, at least, appearing to conform. I’m not sure about how others felt as this was transpiring, as I never talked even to Elaine about it.

In my opinion, those tensions between the original concepts—of an appropriate way to organize and govern ourselves using consensus building in a nonhierarchical organization—and the accepted concepts of governance in the larger world, have been the source of some of the continual misunderstandings and struggle within NWSA. We desired to empower everyone by having no constitutionally stipulated leaders. However, as is often the case, we actually empowered nobody. When the larger world, meaning the patriarchy, receives a request to do business in that world, there is an expectation that someone will be designated to be in charge. Since we had no elected officials, such as president, to designate, we named the executive director as the chief decision maker, and set the stage for later problems encountered in differences between and among the governing bodies and the directors.

There were several of us, under the aegis of the chair of the founding convention, Shauna Adix of Utah and I, acting as parliamentary consultants in that convention and again at the University of Kansas, in 1979. Our main tasks were to act as relief when the chair needed a break and to offer assistance to delegates regarding procedures and processes in use to conduct the business of the assembly: presenting, modifying, and passing the series of resolutions that eventually became the constitution. In our facilitating role of expediting the process, we developed several special
parliamentary procedures, the most memorable being a *Stop Action*. Stop Action cards, which when raised got immediate attention from all present, were held by our parliamentary group members, and could be obtained should a delegate present a good reason to do so. Acceptable reasons ranged from a need to inform or gain information to commentary on process or requests to move on. Further, it was not necessary for the chair to recognize that person in order for this to occur. This device was designed to empower each delegate to more effectively participate, irrespective of skill and knowledge of the traditional *Robert's Rules of Order*. This and one or two other parliamentary shortcuts did increase participation of delegates and did lead to empowerment and subsequent willingness of a significant number of people to be involved in the governance of the organization.

The initial organizers had planned to rely on grass-roots support to carry on the goals of NWSA, and further to have the people be the source of accountability for organizational behavior. The concept was that the delegates, who determined policy, were accountable to those they represented, and with whom they worked at home. It was expected that they would be coming from programs that could support their travel to annual conventions, as well as to the CC meetings, were they elected to serve there.

Those expectations turned out to be unrealistic; we could not depend upon campus or community programs to support their travel, and the new organization's funds were less adequate than those of many of the collegiate programs. This situation led to disempowerment of many interested community women, as well as students, whose resources were such that they could not even begin to afford to come to governance meetings. Several different attempts to average travel costs and spread them across all participants in a CC meeting were unsuccessful.

In a report to the CC in February 1980, also noted in the *Women's Studies Newsletter*, Barbara Parker and Marcia Westkott noted problems and suggested ideas for changes that would preserve the spirit of the founding of NWSA, while avoiding some of the frustrating problems we were then facing:

First, how can NWSA combat these problems [racism, class bias, heterosexist bias, and sexism] within the organization itself? And second, how can we use NWSA to help us combat the problems in the settings where we live and work?

To approach both questions, we must think in terms of structure and content. Although the most apparent problem in 1979 was the lack of minority/Third World representation, it is clear that if we do not as an organization make changes to include under-represented ideas and groups of people now, each Annual Convention may generate a similar confrontation resulting in anger and embitterment. These problems should be addressed within the pattern of the programs themselves rather than separated and abstracted by a Delegate Assembly. If the program has this input, then the second question can also be addressed. Workshops and panels can be created to inspire as well as equip
the membership to return to the places where we live and work to effect these changes. (1980, 18)

NWSA was never really able to depend upon the “back home” programs to hold their delegates responsible for their work in the Delegate Assembly because the direct link imagined by the founders was not established. The Delegate Assembly was selected from members at the conference. Some programs did not elect or otherwise choose people because they could not guarantee they would get there. Therefore many delegates had little or no continuing connection to a program “back home,” and many did not even know they could be delegates until they got to the convention. Under those circumstances, those who did know they were delegates, and/or who knew how the system worked, became the source of information and direction for other delegates selected at the convention and individual empowerment, due to lack of knowledge, was considerably diminished. When people lack information about process or content they are more likely to rely on others’ instructions and advice, and can easily be caught up in other people’s enthusiasms and disparagements.

The CC did develop guidelines for the submission of resolutions and recommendations and other actions of the Delegate Assembly that are still published regularly in the conference program book. Further, members of the CC were available to educate the delegates about procedures before and during the assembly meetings. While that was helpful, it seemed that we were always one step from chaos, and on occasions, over the line and into it. Often people came to the Delegate Assembly with concerns that were very worthy of someone’s consideration, but inappropriate or impossible for solution by NWSA. The delegates would insist that the people be heard, and that hearing, along with the subsequent debate, would take so much time that the necessary business of keeping the Association afloat was postponed.

The CC, in time for the 1981 NWSA Convention at Storrs, Connecticut, developed the Speak Out as a forum for people to use, rather than the Delegate Assembly, to talk about organizational or other problems. Because concerns raised by the attendees were so extensive, perhaps due to the conference topic of racism, not only was the first Speak Out a success, it spilled over into the Delegate Assembly meeting time. Chroniclers of the Storrs meetings in off our backs, indicated, to their satisfaction, that both the pragmatists (concerned about the survival of NWSA) and the ideologues (concerned about being true to the goals) had had a meeting of minds and came away committed to the continuance of the organization, while still addressing the issues of increasing our diversity.

Fortunately, embedded in the first constitution was an obligation “to conduct a searching review of the structure of and governance” during the fourth year of the existence of NWSA | Constitution of the National
Women's Studies Association 1977, sec. V, para. 1]. At that time, the problems with a flat, as distinguished from hierarchical, organizational structure were evident, although not well articulated. A Constitutional Review Taskforce was established at the Storrs Convention and I was designated as convener. We completed our review and presented some of the most needed revisions through the CC to the membership for ratification in the following year. Until the major constitutional revision begun in 1990, bylaws and/or constitutional changes accrued slowly and did not effect major change in our manner of governance.

The original CC operated very similarly to a committee of the whole. When we first began in 1977, the CC utilized the process of leadership and recognition of speakers known as the revolving chair. The person who is speaking recognizes the next speaker first from among those who have not yet had an opportunity to speak, and if all have spoken, then one should recognize the person who has spoken least. Those first CC meetings were tape-recorded; each time, before speaking, a member was requested to announce her name in order to help potential listeners follow the author[s] of ideas under discussion. That procedure along with the revolving chair made for a somewhat oddly run meeting to those new to the process. Sadly, those tapes of the very first CC meetings were lost or misplaced; at least they were never sent to the national office for inclusion in the organization's archives.

In addition to the revolving chair, the earliest coordinating councils conducted their business using a modified Robert's Rules, fondly referred to as Roberta's Rules of Order. The CC also used other processes along the way that were designed to maximize access to the discussion and action for everyone. For example, small work committees were utilized to deliberate upon and carry out most of the routine tasks that fell to the council such as finance, personnel, membership, and conference planning, instead of having the CC do all tasks as a committee of the whole. The work groups consisted of people on the CC who were interested or who had knowledge about the topic[s]; it was not unusual for a person to be called from another group to advise on a specific matter. The committees were formed the first evening and met during the extended weekend gatherings of the CC to consider issues and develop recommendations for action. Each group reported back to the whole CC for final decision making during the closing meeting.

The first CC invented the Steering Committee at the 26–29 May 1977 meeting in Milwaukee, having recognized that our business continued in the gaps of time between CC meetings. They designated five people to be elected from among CC membership to serve as a collective executive body during the months that neither the CC nor the Delegate Assembly was convened. Among those, a chair/co-chairs were designated, along with a treasurer and secretary. The NWSA Bylaws were later amended so
that members of the Steering Committee could be elected from the general membership, not just from within the CC itself. This move enabled the CC to draw from a larger pool with respect to particular skills, abilities, and/or knowledge. NWSA continued review of both the constitution and bylaws on a regular basis throughout the 1980s; changes were evolutionary, slowly eroding the nonhierarchical aspects of governance.

In 1983–1984, in parallel with planning the annual conference on the campus of Douglass College, the Steering Committee and the CC concluded that we had come to the point of needing a salaried executive director. We had been relying on the generosity of Virginia Cyrus, our Steering Committee chair, for the routine connection between the CC/SC and the Douglass College people arranging the conference. Dr. Cyrus was strongly in favor of our establishing a professional presence in the
leadership of NWSA. We established a committee, which I chaired, and created, approved, and circulated a job description within and outside the organization. Interviews were scheduled with several women during the conference. I worked with our final three regarding their salary needs and the financial status of the organization to determine if each was able to accept the position. We finally arrived at a very satisfactory agreement among the parties of NWSA, the incoming executive director, Caryn McTighe Musil, and her university, which supplied her with office space, secretarial help, phone, and other services in exchange for NWSA contributing a sum which would buy her release from two courses per semester. Since travel was an important part of her job description, we paid those expenses. This job description placed considerable executive power, with regular Steering Committee oversight, in that office.

We had not had a professional leader in the NWSA office since a budget crisis during 1981–1982 resulted in the director’s termination. Susan Gore, perhaps overwhelmed by all the tasks included in the job, did not do what was needed to move the organization forward. She was not able to keep up with financial records and obligations to the University of Maryland. It took two years of frugality to return NWSA to solid financial standing. Between 1982–1984 we had been running the organization solely with volunteer labor except for our office manager, Carol Combs, and whatever student help she could arrange through the University of Maryland connections.

My experience was typical of this volunteer leadership. In 1982, Alice Stadthaus, then treasurer, convinced me that I should become the treasurer of NWSA. I had served on her finance committee, and had earlier been a member of the committee when Barbara Hillyer (Davis) was treasurer. When the CC called for volunteers for the Steering Committee, I heeded Alice’s advice and took over as treasurer, a post I served in until 1985.

We had begun the process of the institutionalization of NWSA in 1978 by incorporating as a nonprofit entity; we extended that further in hiring a part-time executive director in 1984. Her initial efforts were directed toward making the position full-time and moving from Philadelphia to the Washington area, both of which she accomplished relatively quickly. By the end of her second year, NWSA was centralized at the University of Maryland and an extended period of growth in membership and services was underway. The Steering Committee (SC) and CC had become serious about organizational development, first educating themselves and then appointing a committee to carry out their ideas. In addition to the membership recruitment initiatives, attention was paid to member retention, especially institutional program memberships.

Caryn Musil’s leadership and perseverance was very important during this period. Between 1986–1990, the staff and professional personnel at the NWSA office increased in number, the overall budget increased, a protec-
tive savings plan was inaugurated, and the organization had begun to move towards taking full responsibility for the yearly conference. The executive director wrote several successful grant proposals involving NWSA members and staff. Of course, we were still using substantial numbers of volunteer workers to accomplish major aspects of running NWSA. For example, Nancy Osborne and I edited and published the in-house newsletter, at that time called *NWSA Perspectives*, for nine quarterly issues, 1985–1987. Other individuals and groups tackled committee work and other tasks as needed.

Nearing the end of the 1980s, however, it became increasingly evident that governance procedures were standing in the way of effective management of our resources, fiscal and human. The national office staff had grown enough for interpersonal difficulties to arise, and more seriously, become acrimonious, taking up time that might better have been used to the benefit of NWSA. Two staff people, one a professional and the other her assistant, had grown so out of touch that they stopped communicat-

![NWSA Coordinating Council Meeting, June 1986. From left to right, Bonita Hampton, Marilyn Hoder-Salmon, Helen Moore, Suzanne Hyers](image_url)

Photo Credit: Patricia A. Gozemba
ing. Each woman sought sympathy among other staff members who very likely added fuel to the fire. As the professional was a woman of color and her assistant was not, issues of racism arose within the office discussions. By the time that I became informed, the situation had deteriorated to involve legal counsel for the parties to the dispute, and reports were flying about who had filed suits with state and federal offices. The tasks of office supervision, representing the organization to the public, and grant writing and fund raising, were on the verge of overwhelming the executive director. NWSA was still using the members of the SC as the major consultation resource for the executive director, and they too became involved in attempts to reduce the impact of the intra-office dispute.

Rising from the Ashes

We were in a critical situation entering the month of June, the NWSA conference season. The conference manager had moved her locus of operation to Akron. The executive director was handling the communication with her, while also doing her own work and that associated with the annual meeting/conference in which she had public speaking responsibilities. In addition, the executive director had the serious personnel issue to contend with which was rapidly deteriorating into a lawsuit: a good recipe for exhaustion.

The Steering Committee had been in consultation with the executive director and the corporation lawyer regarding the disposition of the suit before everyone assembled in Akron, Ohio, for the 1990 conference. The lawyer had, of course, advised everyone to not discuss the details of the suit, as that could jeopardize it. When questions arose in the CC pre-conference meeting, the SC members declined to discuss details, as per orders from their counsel. Of course, information leaked out through other channels and the level of emotions rose to include members not otherwise involved. The questions continued, as did the reticence of the principals within NWSA, who continued to respond to inquiry, "our lawyer says we cannot talk about a personnel matter that may be adjudicated."

Suspicions arose among the membership and within the CC. Rumors flew around the conference, sides were taken, impassioned speeches made, and accusations that Caryn Musil, in particular, and NWSA, in general, were racist followed in one of the plenary sessions. That, in turn, interfered with the lesbian awareness program that was to have been held for all conference attendees. In the process of decrying racism, the cancellation of the lesbian awareness sessions raised the ire of even more people.

Finally, communication broke down entirely: some people called a press conference attempting to involve the local and national media in the dispute and women were having confrontations in the conference
meetings, in the hallways, and in the dining halls. I myself engaged in a heated discussion while waiting for a bathroom. Some conference sessions were cancelled and chaos seemed to reign. Events were rapidly spiraling out of control.

Without defined leadership, other than that of the executive director, who had already been verbally attacked in public and essentially disenfranchised, it was difficult to bring order to the situation. When people left that conference there were many who swore that they would never return, and some have held to that assertion to this day. Many were emotionally devastated, some resigned from their governance positions, others left angry, but after a cooling-off period, returned to help reinvigorate NWSA. The threatened lawsuits did not materialize; Caryn Musil resigned as executive director, as did the conference manager. A search was initiated by the SC/CC to replace the executive director and Dr. Deborah Louis was hired.

Fortunately, in the winter of 1990, the SC and CC had decided to seek out and appoint a Governance Review Committee to examine the constitution and the bylaws. The SC chair invited volunteers suggested by members of the CC to apply for appointment to the review and revision task. I had indicated my interest in yet another involvement in the Five Year Review of our constitution. At that time there was recognition among the SC/CC that there were still serious flaws in our way of governing the organization. Members continued to experience disconnection from the larger organization, and did not seem to feel much responsibility for their own involvement. In one sense we had a group that ran the organization and another larger group that belonged but participated only at the conferences, often only to raise questions about the behavior of others. People also sensed a need for leadership elected by the whole membership. The Fourth Constitutional Review Committee was set into motion. Interested people were asked to submit a statement of interest with a list of our background and skills, as well as some ideas about goals and objectives of the task. What follows is an excerpt from the statement I submitted:

I believe it is necessary that we initiate changes. NWSA began as a grass-roots organization. The first set of governing principles were pulled together from the resolutions approved in the first convention in San Francisco. There was little attention from that body to the necessary details of running and governing a national organization. That first became obvious when we initiated the legal steps to incorporate in 1978. Since then there have been several circumstances that have called for changes. Some revisions have been made, but it is time to give the whole structure and procedures a critical evaluation.

I am especially interested in serving on this committee because I am the original “puller-together” of the resolutions into our first statement of solidarity. This opportunity would allow me to have a sense of personal continuity as well as provide some sense of continuity for the committee. I am in agreement
that changes must be made but I also want to be known as one interested in preserving the sense with which we began NWSA. [1989]

I was appointed and also asked to serve as chair of the committee; the other committee members were Marlene Longenecker, Yolanda Moses, Florence Parkinson, Eleanor Smith, Jo Soske, and Laura Torres Souder. We were urged to proceed with appropriate caution and haste. Two of us were able to attend in October 1990 when the CC was meeting in Columbus. We were not able to meet together as a full working committee until January. Having done much of our preliminary work during the fall, through phone and letters, we were able to gather at William Paterson College in January 1991, well prepared for our first meeting. Eleanor Smith, then provost there, was our host. Following is a quote from my summarizing memo sent in mid-December:

While you are going about your business during the holiday season you could give an occasional thought to our charge—they want us to come up with a democratic process and structure for governing this organization that makes provision for a "proper induction" into the governance process for new people, involves the whole membership in major decision making, and empowers people who are agents of the organization. We are not starting with a blank slate, I will bring the notes from the brainstorming work we did at the CC meeting in Columbus, meanwhile put on your own creative-thinking caps. [1990]

The Governance Review Committee worked throughout 1991, other meetings were held in February, May, and June in different locations. In June, we met and held hearings at the Program Administrators Conference in Washington, D.C. Due to NWSA fiscal problems, we were requested not to travel during the fall so we continued meeting through correspondence, and were able bring forth a full draft of our suggestions, in constitutional form, for submission to the CC at their meeting in 10–12 January 1992. In sending the draft copy to the committee in December 1991, I made a special note regarding the need for transition from the old to the new form of governance:

If we were to actually get the January CC’s approval, we could send the document out for ratification in time enough to be able to use NWSA ‘92 for reorganization purposes. We could then convene the first NWSA Assembly and get the standing committees established, with Interim chairs elected in Austin. We could also nominate a slate of officers, leaving the current Steering Committee in place until those elections are conducted. Clearly all of this would need to be spelled out for the membership to see at the time they are considering ratification. This transition does need thoughtful planning, and I am requesting the Governance Reorganization Committee to write me specific suggestions after they have reviewed this document. [1991]

Our committee’s work completed, we were, for all intents and purposes, discharged. My last acts as chair were to convey the draft of the new con-
stitution to the CC at the January meeting, report back to my committee colleagues, and hope for the best. Not surprisingly, our enthusiasm for our product was not matched at the January CC meeting, where serious reservations about the proposed major changes in governance were strongly expressed. I wrote the committee after that meeting to describe my reception and the CC reaction:

Unfortunately, we had very little time for discussion, and too much of that time was consumed with contentiousness about how to ratify it, whether it was to be treated as an amendment or an entirely new document. There was great resistance within the group, which was fed by near hostility from a couple of members.

Underlying most of the debate was a sense of disenfranchisement reflected by those CC members who represent caucuses. Because of the lack of time, and the insistence of some of the opposition, who preferred to dwell on their alternatives to our work, there were few questions asked that might have clarified how we saw the document working. I am disappointed to have to share with you that the CC was unable to accept, or ratify the document. Nor did they consider amending any of the articles so they could ratify it.

At the cessation of the debate [necessitated by the lateness of the hour] the CC voted first to “receive” the document with thanks; shortly thereafter they voted to return it to Committee for revisions.[1992]

Under the old constitution, the SC became the decision-making body between CC meetings. While I have no record of what actually happened, I surmise that after the conclusion of the CC meeting, the SC decided to put the document before the upcoming Delegate Assembly during the 1992 meetings in Austin. For the Austin meetings I was requested, and I agreed, to be parliamentarian again.

The discussion and debate on the proposed constitution in Austin was definitely heated at times; the crux of concern was the issue of representation of caucuses in the new governance plan. Some, of course, felt that without the guaranteed representation that was part of the older constitutions, the relative equity of under-represented groups would be lost. Others seemed to feel that the caucuses, as part of governance, had outlived their usefulness. There seemed to be little objection among the membership present to changing from the grass-roots, nonhierarchal structure to nomination and subsequent election of a president and other officers by the membership. The goal in making that change was to create a more transparent avenue and opportunity for people to seek nomination, and in some cases, be able to apprentice before being thrust into leadership, possibly underprepared for it. Ultimately, there was a wonderful compromise, devised under the leadership of Bonnie Zimmerman and Berenice Carroll that, with a few additional tweaks, was satisfying to all parties and we were able to conclude the session with a viable document. That compromise added the Constituency Council, a representational body
comprised of people elected in the caucuses that met annually and elected some of its members to serve on the Governing Council.

My last set of actions as the parliamentarian for the 1992 Delegate Assembly was to reconcile the amendments and other changes to the draft constitution presented to the Delegate Assembly into a useful and readable document. I was able to quickly conclude our, and my, work. The following quote is from my letter of transmittal to the members of the Steering Committee, and to Dr. Deborah Louis, then executive director:

I used notes taken at the Delegate Assembly meetings about the Constitutional changes/amendments. I have incorporated all of that into this final edition of the Constitution.

I am sending the originals to DL, as I think she needs camera-ready copy to proceed with a mailing to the membership. To save time, I made copies for the SC that I am sending directly to them. I am not sending anything to the Governance Committee because we considered ourselves to be finished last winter. I want to remind all that what I have done just now, was not done because of my having been chair of that committee as much as it was done as part of my role as Parliamentarian of the 1992 Delegate Assembly.

I think that we have a pretty good document, workable, and very likely acceptable to NWSA members, old and new. I am proud that we have gotten ourselves this far, and I hope, pray, beg, [am on my knees in supplication] that we really can weather the economic hard times with this organization intact. {1992}

Indeed, in 1992–1993, our economic circumstances ruled the minds of the leadership who were simultaneously concerned about the transition running smoothly, assuming that the new constitution would be ratified by the membership. As I had been a treasurer in the past, I was consulted by Dottie Painter, then treasurer, for my suggestions to preserve the organization through the fiscal difficulties. I offered her several thoughts in a letter dated 17 July 1992:

You have to have complete financial information, you must get a review from a CPA about the status of things. You should be talking about how to cut expenses to the bone until after the 1993 memberships come in. Probably the only conference to have next year is an enlarged program administrators meeting . . . and . . . You must discuss the probability and likelihood of having to go into receivership. The purpose of this would be to protect the organization for the long run. It would allow you to re-schedule debt. It could mean other problems, so a lawyer must be consulted. . . . I must also re-iterate: you folks are fiscally responsible; therefore it is incumbent upon you to move quickly to get a handle on the situation. If you don’t, you may be held individually liable as members of the Board. Remember, that will not just fall upon you who are left. Very likely all who have been members of the CC since 1990 could be jeopardized. I know that this is not pleasant to contemplate, but it is information that must be incorporated into your decision-making matrix. {1992}
Conclusion

At the conclusion of the 1992–1993 academic year, it was clear NWSA had survived, as she had in the past when fiscal problems threatened. The governance process transition was successfully complete when Vivien Ng, our first leader to be elected directly by the membership, began her year as president of NWSA.7

Were all our problems solved by having successfully negotiated the change from non-hierarchal to a hierarchal leadership? No, but in my opinion, the focus of responsibility on an elected, volunteer president, as distinguished from an employee, to represent NWSA in public seems to have reduced tensions considerably. Now the office manager/administrator reports to an elected officer, who works directly with the Governing Council. Policy is made by those who were elected to do so, and carried out by those who were elected to do so, along with paid and supervised staff.

Since 1993, we have not changed major governance structures or processes—although amendments were made, debated, ratified, and incorporated during the years since. In 1999, changes in the definitions of caucuses and taskforces were made to include an additional subset, interest area groups, and the constitution was also re-ratified. The process seems to be working; the somewhat hierarchal structures seem to facilitate the effective functioning of the organization, and we move along.

The evolution of the governance procedures and processes has been beneficial to NWSA. We remain a democratic organization dependent on volunteer labor to initiate and complete projects, serve within the governance structures, and make presentations at the conferences. The centrality of volunteer labor to run the organization retains aspects of the grass-roots intentions of the founding membership, and the retention of caucuses and task forces as part of the structures has provided a place and a voice for under-represented members in organizational decision making. NWSA has been in a period of relative fiscal and political stability. That is, we have continued dialogue on topics and issues without slipping into a chaotic circumstance. We continue to make consistent additions to our basic membership rolls; our conferences too seem to be thriving, and our budget adequate. While I am sure there will always be some imperfections in our form of governance, we seem, at 25, to be alive and well. I am particularly proud for my association with NWSA over the years. It has been worth the agonizing, for there has been considerable reward and joy for me in my affiliation. Soon it will be time to inaugurate another review and recommendation phase; I know there are good women who will be carrying on in the organization.
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Notes

1. Ferree and Martin (1995) is a particularly fine resource for such analyses, case studies, and history. Robin Leidner (1991, 1993) specifically examined NWSA as an organization.

2. As I was not present, I am indebted to Sybil Weir for this part of the history.

3. For example, a resolution I recall from 1982 regarding the situation between Israel and the Palestinians. NWSA had no jurisdiction, but debated the resolution seemingly forever, bringing into the debate the definition of anti-Semitism, etc.

4. I believe that the University at Buffalo, women's studies group either invented this process or resurrected it from obscurity for their use. We, in the New York region, learned it from them, so thanks should be to UB for a nonhierarchical parliamentary device that facilitates discussion and also promotes a wider participation in the process.

5. Should the reader know where those tape recordings might be, please contact the author who will see that they do get into the archives of the organization.

6. We were again without financial resources. The preferred position of having a year's operating expenses in escrow had been compromised. The membership census diminished to perhaps half of our numbers in 1990, but our expenditures had not.

References


