

23 October 2020

TO: UMRA Board of Directors

FROM: Organizational Memory and Continuity Task Force

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RE: **Memory/continuity measures**

Executive Summary

This report outlines steps taken, underway, or proposed in UMRA's effort to improve its record-keeping and knowledge/skills-retention in the face of annual turnovers in leadership. These include:

- Expand number and variety of UMRA documents stored on website
- Reaffirm commitment to annual paper document submission to the University Archives in Andersen Library
- Coordinate document submission processes for website and U Archives
- Clarify responsibilities and timelines for document creation, updating, web posting, and placement in U Archives
- Create a policy library (a collection on the website of board-approved policies) and a set of position toolkits (collections documents that can serve as useful guides or templates or sources of historical information concerning the position)
- Add a Board policy outlining document format guidelines
- Initiate succession planning for leadership positions
- Encourage research and writing on UMRA's history

Introduction

In any volunteer-run association, and especially those made up of retirees, turnover is rapid and organizational amnesia problematic. Past policy decisions are easily forgotten; how-to expertise is lost as positions turn over; large gaps occur in written records; organization of those records that do exist is often haphazard; and important documents may reside only on individual members' hard drives. The sudden death, disability, or resignation of a key figure can cause disarray.

As one of UMRA's major initiatives during the past year, our task force has been developing processes and guidelines to improve continuity from one UMRA leadership cohort to another and reduce vulnerability to sudden death, disability, or resignation of a key figure. Many of the recommendations in progress reports and updates drafted during the course of the 2019–20 UMRA year have already been implemented, at least on a trial basis; others are still pending.

Our task force has identified and attempted to address four interrelated process areas:

- *Paper and electronic archiving:* Key documents relating to organizational continuity and history are collected and preserved in appropriate structures. UMRA's paper archives are preserved in the collections of the University Archives; electronic documents are preserved in a form that is both hierarchical, and searchable on the UMRA website.
- *Annual update of the full website:* Because the above processes involve some of the same materials, performing them together reduces the overall effort.
- *Continuity.* Easily available information about the organization's activities and processes supports continuity by allowing members and leadership to build on what has gone before, and to refer to previous actions and policies as new issues arise.
- *History:* The documentation in the archives and on the web also provides the raw material for the organization's history. Creating a document that organizes the raw material into a continuing history is a task we hope will be undertaken by a researcher or committee in the near future, and may be an ongoing task in the long term.

As we worked, we have kept two principles in mind:

- We should build on existing strengths. An extensive paper trail spanning UMRA's entire existence resides in the University Archives. A good deal of history is available on our website, especially in the form of past newsletters and Board minutes. Our annually-updated Operating Manual helps pass on procedures and division of labor from one cohort to another. Orientation sessions for new Board members are a helpful recent addition. All of these features will be retained in the enhanced system described here.
- The new or revised components of the system should be as user-friendly as possible. The net benefit to UMRA's operations should exceed any additional workload.

The remainder of this report outlines the task force's recommendations and the current status of each.

Materials to Be Gathered and Uploaded to Website

Documents currently on UMRA website

- *Recommendation*: Continue posting all of the following: Bylaws; UMRA-UMN MOU; Operating Manual; Minutes (Association, Board); organizational diagram; list of current personnel; annual finance reports; newsletters; “From the President” newsletter columns; event slides; UMRA history (currently available only for first seven years); historical lists of officers, board members, Forum speakers, and Workshop facilitators.
- *Status*: Implemented.

Existing materials not on UMRA website

- *Recommendation*: Create and populate website sections for the following items, which previously were produced but have not been accessible on web: Board meeting packets; annual reports (from officers, committee chairs, chairs of special interest groups, representatives and liaisons, newsletter editor, webmaster, database manager, etc.); biennial leadership retreat reports; member survey results; membership directories (with login required); Executive Committee minutes (password-protected); and other appropriate materials as they arise.
- *Status*: Mostly implemented in summer 2020, although stragglers are still dribbling in. Members will be encouraged to search their hard drives for relevant materials from earlier years and to submit them to the webmaster when found. At some point in the future, earlier newsletters and other key documents in the University Archives might be scanned and added to the website.

New materials to be added

- *Recommendation*: Create and populate website sections for Board-approved UMRA policies and for position toolkits
- *Status*: In progress. Some policies from recent years have been located (through review of recent minutes and meeting materials) and posted, and new policies will be posted following Board approval. Key UMRA leaders have been developing and submitting toolkits for their positions, and others are still coming in. They include such items as text of recurring emails, how-to guides to positions, workflow calendars, and the most recent version of a document that needs annual revision. It will likely take several years of additions and refinements before the toolkits realize their full potential value.

Process for Gathering and Posting Documents

Document ownership:

- *Recommendation*: Identify an unambiguous “owner” for each document, with the understanding that submissions for website and Archives will be accepted only from that owner.
- *Status*: Implemented, including assignment of responsibility for those documents whose ownership is not intuitively obvious (e.g., Operating Manual, Bylaws, list of current

Personnel). An Excel spreadsheet entitled, "Document Update Roles," lists owners; the Operating Manual will list documents each role is responsible for creating or updating.

Division of labor for system administration and maintenance:

- *Recommendation:* Specify responsibilities for system administration and maintenance.
- *Status:* Implemented and included in "Document Update Roles" spreadsheet. Key positions: 1) the UMRA webmaster serves as Web Document Coordinator, who manages annual update cycle, collects documents, and uploads documents to the website; 2) the UMRA historian occupies a parallel role vis-à-vis collecting and printing of documents and placing them in the University Archives; 3) the Communication and Outreach Committee, as part of its charge to oversee the website, serves as the Process Owner to assure that document collection and updating occur as intended and to adjust process as needed; 4) the UMRA president serves as the Project Sponsor, who backs Coordinator as needed to assure documents are submitted.

Timeline/frequency for document production/updating:

- *Recommendation:* For each document, specify access (public vs. login required) as well as schedule for creation and updating.
- *Status:* Implemented; information is laid out in the "Document Update Roles" spreadsheet.

Document submission process:

- *Recommendation:* To minimize workload, integrate or coordinate closely the processes for submitting documents for the website and for the U Archives.
- *Status:* This summer there was some confusion about where to send submissions; UMRA's archivist and webmaster will clarify process for next year, including division of responsibility between them. Instructions for annual document submissions will go out in June. For positions that turn over July 1, instructions will clarify that it is the outgoing position occupant who is responsible for the annual document submissions during the summer.

Format for uploaded documents:

- *Recommendation:* Post all documents selected for UMRA website either as PDF files or as web pages.
- *Status:* Implemented. To avoid using documents from people's hard drives, where provenance may be unknown, PDFs on the website will serve as "official" source documents for any future rounds of updating, with the exception of position and committee Toolkits, which will be posted as PDFs but may also be kept by the owner in Word or other format and updated as needed. (Also, newer versions of Microsoft Word can open PDF documents and convert them to Word for editing. Moreover, when needed, the webmaster has offered to help owners to convert documents from PDF to an editable format updating purposes.)

Other

Document format guidelines

- *Recommendation*: Develop Board policy concerning format for drafting documents.
- *Status*: In progress. Task force has proposed standards for Board consideration at its October meeting.

Possible cooperation with University Digital Conservancy

- *Recommendation*: Explore advantages and disadvantages of uploading some of UMRA's historical documents to the University Digital Conservancy (UDC) website, which is part of the University Archives.
- *Status*: Conversations have just begun.

Succession planning for key positions

- *Recommendation*: For selected positions—especially webmaster, newsletter editor, and database manager (but also for committee chairs and other key leaders)—identify individuals who have the relevant skills and interests to possibly assume the role in the future. To the extent possible, provide opportunities for these individuals to learn important details in advance of transitions.
- *Status*: Little progress to date. We hope implementation will begin during the 2020–21 UMRA year.

Recovery of UMRA history

- *Recommendation*: Encourage UMRA members or teams of members to undertake research and writing on UMRA's history. (Currently the sole history covers only the first seven years of the organization's existence.) This might be an appropriate project for a (post-COVID) PDGR proposal. For example, a grant could fund an undergraduate research assistant to scan selected documents in the Archives and arrange them in electronic folders for researchers' use.
- *Status*: Work not yet begun.

Future structure for execution and oversight

- *Recommendation*: Devise a new structure to replace both this task force and the History Committee.
- *Status*: Our task force is still grappling with this and will welcome thoughts from the Board. Here are issues:
 - Should there be a merged committee?
 - Should there be two or more separate working groups (e.g., webmaster and archivist for coordinating document submission process, another group working on UMRA's history)?
 - Should a specific group (e.g., Executive Committee) or a specific person (e.g., a recent past president) be charged with assuring that organizational processes, memory, and continuity are valued and sustained?