A significant goal of the 107th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association is to continue to attract a much wider range of anthropologists. The 1999 long-range goals noted that applied and practicing anthropology were not well represented in the Association and that this should change. When President-Elect (now President) Setha Low approached me to be Executive Program Chair, she pointed out that the annual meeting is the point at which the discipline of anthropology meets anthropologists and the public. It would be my job to enhance the work that had taken place over the past eight years to be more inclusive. In my role as chairman of the AAA/SfAA Commission on Applied and Practicing Anthropology between 2001 and 2005, and as President of the SfAA in 2001-2003, I had ample opportunity to talk widely with applied and practicing anthropologists. It was no surprise to hear that they feel unwelcome at the meeting. Their experiences ranged from deliberate snubs in conversations (solvable only over the very long run by the entire discipline) to their observation that there were few sessions of interest to them. Innovative approaches to this latter condition have been well under way in the Association. For example, last year’s Employer Expo was a success in the eyes of those with whom I spoke.

The meeting theme was the place to start to build a more welcoming environment. After a great deal of thought and then helpful conversations with Setha Low and members of the Executive Program Committee, I chose “Inclusion, Collaboration, and Engagement.” I wrote in the January Anthropology News that “Inclusion, Collaboration, and Engagement are ideas that have been central to anthropology throughout the discipline’s history and they are particularly important today. Anthropologists, scholars in other disciplines, and the general public have begun to recognize that anthropology has a great deal to contribute in this era of globalization. Still, our discipline remains a mystery to many and we are often not approached when social science information is needed. Moreover, anthropologists are conflicted about whether and how to participate in important public debates. While there are the myriad attempts to develop a public interest anthropology, we are also wary of activism and public engagement, particularly as we recall government influence on anthropology during times of war.”

I wrote more columns in Anthropology News in subsequent months; the last was in November. There was none in October. The May column was written by Shedra Amy Snipes, Barbara Rose Johnston, and Miriam Anne Frank. Two columns elaborated on aspects of the theme: collaboration and engagement. Others were more oriented toward what would happen at the meeting in San Francisco.

There was a positive response to the theme. Practicing and applied anthropologists were excited and actively contributed to the program. Of greater interest to me, however, were conversations with more academically oriented anthropologists who reexamined their interests to discover that they too felt comfortable organizing their work within the boundaries of the theme. Presidential
and Executive Program Committee sessions typified the theme best because they were organized to do so, but many other sessions were also related to the theme. Another strong point was the degree to which Sections co-sponsored events. This had been discussed at the Section editor meeting with positive response. The practice improves the quality and quantity of communication across sub-disciplines. Nearly all of the two-part sessions invited by the EPC had co-sponsors for the second session. There was a keen interest in altering the traditional session of 5-7 papers/discussants for 15 minutes each. Frequently the desire was to promote more discussion in a session. Hopefully, some session organizers were able to reduce the number of papers and allocate more discussant time. High tables did not seem to catch on this year. Some were organized but since all sessions are divided by the software into 15 minute time slots, we will not know about discussion until we attend sessions. There seem to be few roundtables as well—even though there is the incentive that the session does not count against a Section’s session limit.

The Executive Program Committee was composed of twelve anthropologists including Faye Harrison, last year’s Executive Program Chair and President Setha Low. Committee member Shedra Amy Snipes is a recent PhD graduate and was able to provide a student perspective for our deliberations. The membership crossed all four fields and half of the members have full time positions in academic institutions. The remaining members are practicing anthropologists employed in and out of government. One member is an independent contractor. I am a full time academic in a health science school. Most members consulted with, organized, and/or participated in 22 invited sessions. T.J. Ferguson and Barbara Rose Johnston exerted a great deal of influence. All together the EPC invited 31 sessions (both Presidential and EPC sponsored). In addition, we sponsored five undergraduate student sessions, most of which were posters. In my position as chair, I co-organized one session and consulted with most organizers as they prepared and revised their proposals.

The San Francisco meeting attracted a large number of submissions. We expected this because the city is usually very popular. Members submitted 4178 papers, about 900 more than the 2007 meeting in Washington DC. We received 697 sessions in contrast to 583 in 2007, but were able to place only 585 of these sessions due to space limitations at the Hilton. Lucille Horn located a few extra rooms/times as we scheduled the program. Of the 112 sessions not accepted, 18 were rejected by the Section editors and 94 by the scheduling committee. As noted below, the scheduling committee used Section editor rankings for all decisions about placement. Of the 4178 volunteered papers, 168 were rejected before we began putting the schedule together. There were 673 papers in the sessions that were rejected. In 2007, 106 papers were rejected and only 31 sessions were rejected. There were 278 special events in 2007 and 272 this year. There were 121 sessions created by Section editors from volunteered papers in 2007 in contrast to 149 sessions created for the San Francisco meeting. It should be clear that the AAA Section editors play the pivotal role in creating the annual meeting. I agree with Maria Vespari’s report that these members should receive more training, more support, and “perhaps a meal.”

A key issue over many years has been the time and day placement of sessions. This long history means that there are numerous stories of power and friendship and therefore lack of perceived equity. Like EPCs before us, we made an earnest attempt to be fair. The system seemed to work well. There were four participants: an EPC member, next year’s program co-chair, Lucille Horn,
and me. We began with four packages of sessions identified by organizer, title, reviewing
Section (or the EPC), amount of time (single or double session), and likely audience size. This
information was on cards as was true in the past. EPC member Charles Cheney took the four
groups of sessions (EPC invited, Section invited, Section evaluated as ‘A’, and Section evaluated
as ‘B’) in this order and distributed sessions across days and times. In this way we hoped to
spread sessions out over all five days. We were able to place all invited sessions and all the ‘A’
sessions. We were not able to place any ‘B’ sessions. I put a post-it note on a day/room/time
and then gave the information to John Jackson, the next co-chair. He recorded the action.
Lucille recorded decisions for later insertion to the data base. Except for the name of the
organizer we did not know whether powerful or popular people were involved in a session. We
had requests to put two part sessions next to each other and at least one request from an
international Presidential Session for a Saturday early afternoon spot so that the public could be
invited. Even with these safeguards, we made mistakes. The most frequent was to put a double
(3.5 hours) session into a single time frame. We received concerns from some members who
were double booked or who had undesirable times or days. It is not yet electronically possible to
pay attention to track individuals. All the double booking concerns were resolved through
cooperation. Those who worried about their placement in the week recognized the even
handedness of the distribution system. There was only one case of very unfortunate, yet
accidental, treatment. One long-time member has been placed on Sunday for five of the last six
years.

It has been an honor and pleasure to carry out this task over the last two years. The incredible
support offered by Lucille Horn and Carla Fernandez has been outstanding and Lucille’s
corporate knowledge is irreplaceable. It was exciting to work with a broad range of
anthropologists to craft sessions that reached out across our discipline and into public spheres.
Finally, working with the Executive Program Committee was rewarding. The members of this
group are: Charles Cheney, Mari Clarke, TJ Ferguson, Lance Gravlee, Faye Harrison, Suzanne
Heurtin-Roberts, Barbara Rose Johnson, Marjorie Kagawa Singer, Bill Leap, Setha Low, Amy
Snipes, and Linda Whiteford.