Approximately 40 individuals gathered during the American Anthropological Association’s Annual Meeting in Minneapolis to attend the Public Policy Forum organized by AAA’s Committee on Public Policy (CoPP). Attendees included AAA past presidents, members or representatives of various sections (including the National Association of Student Anthropologists [NASA], the Society for Medical Anthropology [SMA], and the National Association of Practicing Anthropology [NAPA]), as well as former members of the Committee on Public Policy.

The purpose of this forum was to explore possible mechanisms AAA could create in order “to enhance communication and cooperation between sections, interest groups, other elected committees, task forces, the AAA Public Affairs Office, and other parts of AAA on policy issues that cross-cut particular domains, thereby encouraging links among their individual efforts” (see the CoPP page on the AAA website). The forum also built on a survey that the CoPP carried out in 2016 to assess sections’ policy-related activities and needs. CoPP member Chip Colwell presented the survey’s key findings:

- There is a broad spectrum of public policy activities in the AAA sections. Several sections are not regularly engaged in public policy issues; however, even these sections do at times (now or conceivably) deal with public policy issues. Some sections are deeply involved in policy.
- Most respondent sections would like to be more effective in the public policy arena, and would like to see more coordination within AAA.
- CoPP should work to better coordinate efforts and communication within AAA, and provide expertise and strategies to the sections.

Discussion among Public Policy Forum attendees identified key challenges that arise in the policy-making process. One attendee expressed frustration, recalling that at an earlier moment, CoPP spoke out against proposed reforms to welfare policy that were subsequently enacted. Several attendees voiced their concern that policy-making is often ideologically driven rather than evidence based. Nonetheless, participants stressed the importance of communicating anthropological knowledge regarding Muslim communities, immigrants, women’s reproductive access, and other such issues. Communications can be made more effective, participants
commented, by building coalitions and sending key messages to multiple levels of government, including federal, state and local. One experienced participant remarked that effective policy work requires both a “long slog” and a “crisis response,” and that AAA should build capacity for both of these. Doing so requires forging relationships over time, but also being nimble enough to respond to new developments and grass-roots issues. The role played by AAA was made even more important after attendees reported their own campuses had clamped down on anything that appeared political. AAA could collect accounts of such restrictions while also educating its members about policy work. Generally speaking, Forum attendees advocated being proactive instead of merely reactive, and developing the skills to go beyond advising to actually advocate and lobby.

Attendees also suggested that, with the AAA’s formation of its Members’ Programmatic Advisory & Advocacy Committee (M-PAAC), which will subsume the work of eight existing AAA committees including CoPP, it will be necessary to have a grass-roots mechanism through which members can communicate with the new committee.

In light of these challenges, Forum attendees identified a number of promising mechanisms to facilitate the policy work being carried out by AAA sections, members, and interest groups. One set of mechanisms focused on AAA structure. Attendees suggested restructuring the CoPP or MPAC so that there is representation from sections. It would be possible, for example, for each section to have a policy position (like treasurers or secretaries) responsible for meeting annually at AAA and for reporting to CoPP or M-PAAC on policy activities. The Society for Medical Anthropology could be a good model, as it actually has a policy committee and a policy page. It was noted that task forces and interest groups bring people together across these boundaries.

A second set of recommendations focused on communication and outreach. There could be a policy list serve (perhaps consisting of sections’ policy representatives), and M-PAAC or CoPP could put out press releases on issues of concern to members. Information about these issues could also be communicated to AAA’s representatives to the United Nations and to the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA), as appropriate. A NASA member pointed out that few student AAA members are even aware that CoPP exists. NASA is creating a guide about the AAA for campus anthropology clubs, and could also do outreach about policy issues. CoPP or MPAC could take responsibility for mentoring these clubs to introduce them to AAA and to policy work.

Finally, a third set of recommendations focused educating AAA members about policy work – a responsibility currently under the purview of CoPP. Training sessions teaching AAA members how to lobby could be helpful. CoPP or MPAC could send members templates on how to respond to particular pending bills. Form letters with space to fill in the blank for individual
comments would also make it easier for AAA members to communicate their concerns and expertise to policy makers – and, the NASA representative noted, students might be particularly inclined to support such work. One caveat raised by a Forum participant was that individuals cannot speak on behalf of the Association unless authorized by the AAA’s executive board.

The Forum concluded with a commitment to circulate a report summarizing the discussion and to repeat this event next year. Rachel Chapman, the CoPP chair, agreed to raise the issues discussed during the forum at a AAA committee chairs meeting, particularly focusing on the importance of advocating for social science research funding, and conveying anthropological knowledge on such policy issues as income inequality and climate change.