Reconnect, Repair, Restore:
A More Thoughtful, Transparent, and Trustworthy NWSA

by President Heidi R. Lewis

Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................. 2
The President ............................................................... 3
  Statements .................................................................. 3
  Membership Communique .......................................... 3
  Presidential Address .................................................. 4
The Board ........................................................................ 4
  Compliance ................................................................ 4
  Composition ................................................................ 4
  Committees ................................................................ 5
  Counsel ..................................................................... 5
The Office ........................................................................ 6
  Assessment .................................................................. 7
The Membership ............................................................ 7
The National Conference ............................................... 8
  Locations .................................................................... 8
  Themes ...................................................................... 8
  Special Sessions ........................................................ 9
  Committees ................................................................ 9
Conclusion ....................................................................... 9

1 This strategic plan was developed after the President conducted one-on-one meetings with the Interim Director and each member of the Governing Council, starting with the Vice President on November 3, 2023 and ending with the Treasurer on December 20, 2023. This plan does not make reference to the names of current office staff or board members, which might be interpreted as depersonalizing at “best” or dehumanizing at “worst.” However, it is meant to facilitate a shift from an individualistic approach to one that clarifies and centers our roles and collective responsibilities.

2 Footnotes and table of contents headings may be clicked for easier access.
“NWSA has emerged from the turmoil and hardship of the past several years a much stronger organization. . . . We are ready to meet new and different challenges.”

—Vivien Ng, “A Message from the [Inaugural] NWSA President” (Conference Program, 1994)

INTRODUCTION

From crossing the academic picket line and undermining our commitment to BDS to relegating members with disabilities to the margins to operating in ways that are inconsistent with organizations of similar scope and size, especially blurring the lines between President and Executive Director, the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA or the Association) has understandably lost a lot of respect and trust. NWSA leadership needs to reinvigorate our longstanding commitments to transparency and accountability.

As I noted during our post-conference Governing Council (GC or the Board) meeting last year, we are a progressive nonprofit organization, but we are also “an institution that deserves to be resisted.” Even when we do excellent work, we should welcome questions and concerns that aid us in thinking carefully about who we claim to be and what we claim to do. Since I have ex officio status on all NWSA committees and chair the GC, Executive Committee (EC), Membership Assembly, and national conference, that absolutely starts with me. Since my leadership will be as collaborative as it is transformative, this reinvigoration will also be guided and advanced by the GC and NWSA staff (the Office), namely the Interim Director.

This two-year plan is meant to be a living document that outlines some of the main ways I aim to galvanize a recommitment to the multivocal and multidirectional intellectual traditions central to our field, those that necessitate our attention to “structures and modes of power as they are mediated by gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, class, caste, nation and citizenship, age, and ability.” Together, we will do so in thoughtful, transparent, and trustworthy ways while also recognizing that serious engagement with the theories and politics that inform our work do not mitigate our ability to do harm.

It’s time for NWSA to reconnect, repair, and restore.

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3 I do not mean to place blame squarely with the immediate past President. While she bore justifiably pronounced responsibility for the Association as President and Executive Director, I can and should be uniquely held accountable for that decision, as I served as Secretary on the GC during that time. Similarly, I sincerely regret not calling for her to step down when she crossed the academic picket line in 2022. But as Jay-Z astutely raps during “Lost Ones” (2006), “Time don’t go back. It goes forward.” From here, then, I aim to slow down and think more carefully.


Last Updated January 22, 2024
THE PRESIDENT

Statements

Many of our colleagues and comrades appreciate NWSA statements for the ways they provide leverageable and credible solidarity. However, we do not have the capacity to produce statements of support for every person, program, or department that requests one. Additionally, the Board wants to ensure our time, energy, and labor are committed to routinely realizing our mission, vision, and values in other creative, sustainable, and proactive ways. During my term, our approach to statements will follow recommendations from the Association’s former Committee on Academic Freedom (2019) by focusing primarily on supporting intellectuals in our field “who find themselves under politicized attack from both within and outside the academy.”

Still, we recognize other kinds of pressing matters may also warrant the Association’s attention, such as the violent suppression of Tigray protests this past fall or Texas Governor Greg Abbott recently signing SB4, which authorizes state officials to arrest and seek deportation based on the mere suspicion of migrants “illegally” crossing the border. In these cases, a member of the GC or the Office may ask constituency group leadership if members have the capacity to draft a statement that would be reviewed and signed by the EC. For example, a caste apartheid statement might be drafted by the South Asian Feminist Caucus. Constituency group leadership may also initiate statements by sending requests to the Office and copying the President.

Membership Communique

I will collaborate with the Office to publish a President’s Blog. There, I will acknowledge the stolen land on which I write, the stolen and exploited labor that enables many of us to do our work, the myriad crises impacting our communities, and appreciation for members, including the constituency groups, who are routinely impacted by them. The blogs will not replace statements but will have similar impact. They will also serve other important functions like giving members a chance to get to know me, updating them about forthcoming NWSA initiatives, garnering excitement about the conference, and having some fun. Communique will also feature spotlights of the GC, constituency groups, members, and NWSA partners.

5 Of course, most things can and should be addressed by more than one group.
Presidential Address

Starting this year, I will give a Presidential Address on Thursday night. The address will focus on the conference theme and state of the field and be followed by a discussion with local activists moderated by the Interim Director. The address will later be published on the website and in other spaces like the NWSA Newsletter.

THE BOARD

Compliance

Recently, the EC authorized the Interim Director to conduct research then procure the services of For Purpose Law Group (FPLG), which specializes in Nonprofit and Tax Exempt Organizations, Social Enterprise & Business Law, and Estate Planning & Charitable Giving. Many have been frustrated with NWSA's outdated bylaws and lack of clarity about board praxis. In collaboration with the Interim Director, the Secretary will work with FPLG on a number of related initiatives, such as reviewing and making recommendations on the bylaws, Code of Ethics, and Conflict of Interest policy; developing annual disclosure, document retention and destruction, and whistleblower protection policies; and developing handbooks for major Association functions, such as elections and the annual conference.

Composition

Per Article IV of the bylaws, the GC (not the President) appoints one of its members to serve as Member Liaison. While the bylaws do not delineate specific parameters regarding who should occupy this position, it will not be a member of the EC since the Liaison cooperates with officers regarding member concerns and conflict resolution. To prevent exploitation to the extent possible, the Liaison will not be one of the caucus chairs or co-chairs.

Ordinarily, the Interim Director would communicate with past Lesbian Caucus chairs and/or members in an effort to revitalize the Caucus and ensure they occupy their rightful seat on the Board. Since relationships between the Caucus and GC are frayed, I am also participating in those efforts. The Office will run an election for Lesbian Caucus Chair this summer (standard NWSA election season).
Committees

Per Article VI of the bylaws, there are three standing GC committees: the EC, which attends to personnel (chaired by the President); the Finance Committee, which attends to fundraising (including institutional and corporate partnerships) in addition to financial oversight (chaired by the Treasurer); and the Elections Committee (chaired by the Vice President), which is also attentive to leadership opportunities and development (including recruitment and relevant institutional partnerships). The Finance and Elections committees should be comprised of the six remaining GC members: each Member-at-Large and the Women of Color Caucus Co-Chairs (or the Women of Color Caucus Chair and the Lesbian Caucus Chair).\(^6\)

Given the recent leadership transition, we recently dissolved the ad hoc Membership Committee prior to the end of the standard two-year ad hoc term (Article VI). This can, of course, be revisited after the new Member Liaison has an opportunity to collaborate substantially with the EC and the Office.

Neither standing committees nor the Member Liaison are expected to submit reports to be discussed at every GC meeting. They should, however, submit a brief report (no more than two single-spaced pages) to be discussed, if necessary, at Membership Assembly and that should be filed with the Office. If standing committees or the Member Liaison want to discuss their work during GC meetings, they should submit a request to the President no less than 15 business days in advance, along with any relevant documents (no more than two single-spaced pages). Standard time for updates and discussion will be approximately 15-20 minutes, but additional time may be requested.

Counsel

Each immediate past President serves on the GC for one year following the end of their term. Additionally, current presidents have communicated with previous ones for many understandable reasons, such as learning the role, developing institutional knowledge, seeking support when the Association is under scrutiny or threat, and maintaining a commitment to intergenerational collaboration. For those reasons and more, it is important to maintain appropriate relationships with former GC members. However, continuity should not only be maintained through relationships with past presidents, and it should not only be maintained through relationships with the most recognizable ones, those still heavily involved with the Association, and/or those to whom current GC

\(^6\) Until the Lesbian Caucus seat on the GC is filled, each Women of Color Caucus Co-Chair will serve on the Finance and/or Elections Committees. When the Lesbian Caucus seat is filled, one Women of Color Caucus Co-Chair should serve on either the Finance or Elections Committee.
members are closely connected personally and/or professionally. The contours of these advisory relationships should be clear, consistent, and agreed upon by all members of the GC and the former GC members who aim to be supportive.

To support these efforts, I am developing an advisory committee comprised of three former GC members, including at least one past President, who are willing and able to: provide guidance in ways that are conversant with institutional memory without necessitating genuflection, to lend support when the Association is under scrutiny or threat, and to offer assistance with outreach efforts, leadership development opportunities (including recruitment), and fundraising. Committee members will serve for the duration of any given president’s term. For the sake of checks and balances, the committee would not only have a relationship with the current President. Excepting conversations about outreach, leadership development, and fundraising, committee members would meet once at the national conference with the EC and the Interim Director. Additional requests for advisement require a GC vote. If the vote passes, the President will consult with the GC on the agenda and report back. Advisory Committee members will not serve on any other NWSA committees and will not hold voting power.

THE OFFICE

As noted by the Interim Director, “The Office is the administrative anchor of the Association.” Per Article V of the bylaws, the Office works under the direction of the GC but is empowered to continually innovate, recommend, and initiate activities consistent with the Association’s mission, vision, values, and scope. While the GC is visionary, we work with the Office to develop and realize our values, mission, and vision. Whenever appropriate, we do so alongside the membership, including constituency groups.

No member of the GC needs to communicate with the Interim Director through the President or any member of the EC. However, all members of the GC, including the EC, should most often communicate with the Interim Director rather than other staff unless otherwise directed by the Interim Director. It is also appropriate for GC members to ensure any requests are congruent with office functions, duties, and responsibilities. Clarity about that will be provided by the Office to the extent necessary and possible.

7 The website and past conference programs only list past presidents and former chairs and co-chairs. Moving forward, both will list all past officers. For example, when you click the current Treasurer’s picture on the website, you would also see a list of past treasurers.

8 Committee makeup should be appropriately attentive to race, date of service, and former position on the GC. In other words, any given committee should not be comprised of three past presidents or three white women or three people who served on the GC within the past four years. Other aspects of committee composition to consider might include areas of intellectual specialization and relationships to the academy.
Assessment

Per Article V, the EC conducts performance reviews of the Interim Director that will be reported to the GC. Hence, members of the GC should direct questions and concerns regarding the Interim Director’s performance to the EC. Since the Interim Director conducts performance reviews of other staff, questions and concerns about the latter should be directed to the Interim Director.9

The Membership

The GC and the Office will facilitate sustained membership engagement throughout the year via short and long-term initiatives connected to the forthcoming conference theme.10 In support of sustainability, each GC member (excepting caucus chairs) will organize and facilitate one short or long-term program.11 Short-term (90-minute or 2-hour) initiatives include webinars, workshops, and teach-ins. Long-term (1-hour) initiatives are hosted throughout the year (bimonthly or quarterly) and situated in one of three new NWSA Community Spaces: Critical Communities (including, but not limited to, discussing books, music, or TV shows), Creative Communities (such as scholarly writing groups and creative writing circles), and Care Communities (focused on wellness and mindfulness).12

The Office will also coordinate Feminist Frequencies, a podcast series hosted and facilitated by the Interim Director. The first episodes will feature the President and focus on the state of the Association and the national conference, October will focus on conference lead-up, and December will recap the conference. Other episodes will feature the GC, constituency groups, other members, and NWSA partners.

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9 Soon, the EC will review and potentially revise assessment protocols for the Office, which will include more frequent but fair processes, as well as 360-style processes for the Office to address questions and/or concerns about the GC.
10 Since conference themes are comprehensive, facilitators should not spend inordinate amounts of time, energy, and labor developing initiatives outside their areas of specialization. In collaboration with the Office, facilitators may determine audience, which may be as open or closed as necessary but appropriately attentive to undergraduate students, graduate students, activists, contingent faculty, artists, independent intellectuals, tenure-track faculty, Women’s Center staff, nonprofit professionals, K-12 teachers, and mid-career and senior scholars, for example. Facilitators will also collaborate with constituency groups to extent possible.
11 Caucus chairs and co-chairs are already giving substantial time, energy, and labor to sustained membership engagement via caucus leadership.
12 Long-term initiatives will typically require anywhere from 4-6 hours annually. So, at least two GC members will facilitate quarterly programs and at least three will facilitate bimonthly ones. If a GC member is interested in hosting a monthly long-term initiative, which would require 12 hours, they will converse with the Interim Director about sustainable, feasible ways of collaborating with other NWSA members, especially constituency group leaders. Facilitators may also coordinate with other NWSA members for teach-ins, which should also be discussed with the Interim Director.
In collaboration with the Treasurer, the Interim Director will determine a sliding fee scale for webinars and workshops and a donation structure for Community Spaces, teach-ins, and Feminist Frequencies. Most of the collected fees will support NWSA operations, while other portions may support other groups or organizations. The Office will manage scheduling and advertising (in collaboration with facilitators), as well as registration and payments. The Interim Director will also develop a survey for all engagement initiatives with results to be discussed by the GC during the November and/or January meeting.

The National Conference

Locations

Per Article IV of the bylaws, the GC determines national conference locations. The Interim Director will communicate with the GC when it is time to make those decisions for future conferences. Per Article V, the President provides content leadership, which entails selecting the conference theme and related plenaries and presidential sessions.

Themes

Our theme for 2024 (Detroit), “The Journey not only the Arrival, Critical Connections not only Critical Mass: (Re)thinking Feminist Movements,” honors Grace Lee Boggs via two of her quotes. Planned special sessions include one plenary addressing the state of the field in conjunction with celebrating the 45th anniversary of our first conference and another centering the occupation of Palestine, as well as presidential sessions analyzing the U.S. presidential election; imperialism, war, and occupation; and others celebrating the 45th anniversaries of Audre Lorde’s The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House (and her 90th birthday) and Norma Alarcón founding Third Woman Press; and the 50th anniversaries of Lorelei DeCora Means founding Women of All Red Nations, Rev. Dolores Jackson founding Salsa Soul Sisters, which was reconfigured from NWSA’s Black Lesbian Caucus, and the end of the Farah Strike led by Sylvia M. Trevino.

To uplift indigenous theorizing and postcolonial critique, as well as Kiera L. Ladner and Leanne Simpson’s This is an Honour Song: Twenty Years Since the Blockades, our theme for 2025 (Puerto Rico) is “An Honour Song: Feminist Struggles, Feminist Victories.” Planned highlights for plenaries and presidential sessions also include a lot of anniversary celebrations—20 years since Amina Wadud’s Friday prayers; 35 years since the Oka crisis

13 “We are beginning to understand that the world is always being made fresh and never finished, that activism can be the journey rather than the arrival”; and “Movements are born of critical connections rather than critical mass.”
amplified by the aforementioned collection) and the first Disability Pride March led by Yoshiko Dart; 45 years since the founding of Kitchen Table Press and Magdalena Mora and Adelaaida R. Del Castillo’s *Mexican Women in the United States*; 50 years since Fatema Mernissi’s *Beyond the Veil*; 55 years since Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Black Woman*, 45 years since *The Salt Eaters*, and 30 years since her transition; as well as a celebration of Jessica Pabón-Colón’s *Rican Feminisms*.

**Special Sessions**

Plenaries and presidential sessions will not always focus explicitly on the aforementioned anniversaries, but each will be organized and facilitated in a way that honors them. In other words, the presidential session honoring the Farah Strike may not focus explicitly on that critical moment in herstory, but it will focus on Chicana resistance. Additionally, nearly all members of the GC will moderate plenaries and presidential sessions so they have an opportunity to be seen and heard on “main stages.” Those GC members will be introduced by the President, who will also situate the event as congruent with the anniversary being celebrated.

**Committees**

Per Article VI, the Interim Director will reinstate the conference committee honoring and uplifting the local. The Office will also coordinate other initiatives in collaboration with the President and GC.

**CONCLUSION**

While this plan does not aim to be exhaustive, it is collective and comprehensive. Barring any egregious errors or major questions and concerns, I ask that we do our best to understand and rally behind it at least through the rest of this year. After our GC meeting at the upcoming national conference, I will conduct another round of one-on-one meetings that may lead to revisions. Until then, I ask for and would sincerely appreciate your continued patience, wisdom, support, and encouragement.

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14 Also per Article VI, the Interim Director may convene appropriate program committees related to various NWSA activities, such as the national conference, pre-conferences, and awards. Neither chairs nor members of these committees sit on the GC by virtue of this service.