

2019 RhetCanada / CSSR Report: President

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Here is my president's report for this year's Annual General Meeting (AGM), delivered in a document and as a series of two social media posts.

Part 1: Tasks and key accomplishments

It has been an honour to serve our society once again as President this year. Our society plays an important role nationally and globally, bringing together scholars and students in the field of rhetoric.

2018-2019 Presidential Tasks

Conference planning and leadership

- Developed our Call for Proposals for the 2019 conference and accepted submissions
- Made arrangements with keynote speaker Roderick Hart (who first approached me)
- Chaired the advisory committee's review of 2019 proposals
- Sent acceptance / rejection emails to those who sent in proposals
- Acted as our Congress Local Arrangements Coordinator (LAC)
- Planned this year's conference sessions and developed the programme
- Invited roundtable panelists, respondents, and facilitators for our 2 roundtables
- Consulted with Congress 2019 organizers to reduce our catering costs
- Planned to speak the welcome, attend all sessions and chair the AGM

Other leadership tasks

- Assisted the Webmaster in the transition to the new RhetCanada website and domain
- Encouraged our Membership Working Group to make progress

- Liaised with our Student Prize review committee Bruce Dadey and David Beard
- Consulted with our Editor regarding our journal's progress and challenges
- Developed graphic designs for our new identity as RhetCanada

Key contributions

Roundtables

In Regina (2018), I instituted roundtable discussions, and this year at UBC I enhanced them. I see the roundtable genre as an important bridging genre between the formal conference paper and the informal dialogue over coffee. It's a space for envisioning our shifting field(s). This year, I issued email invitations so that the roundtable speakers earn academic credit for being panelists, respondents and facilitators.

Website hosting transition

Every three years our association must pay for website hosting renewal, and 2018 was such a year. Renewal of hosting was going to cost a fortune compared to finding a new host, so I shopped around and I saved us at least \$300 CAD. Compared to the fees our association pays yearly to Congress for membership, AV and catering, our website is cheap.

Graphic design

Instead of printing posters, I subscribed to Canva.com's pro service. This is a "drag and drop" user-friendly graphic design platform that saves a lot of design time, offers a huge library of licensed professional content, and makes a professional finished product. It can be used for engaging social media memes. Others can collaborate with a Pro user by using the free version.

Print materials can be a waste if they are merely given to people who didn't ask for them. Too often beautiful printed materials from organizations end up sitting in a pile of papers or falling into the recycle bin. If members want a poster, I recommend they print one. If members want high quality print materials, perhaps we can pool our print orders and share costs.



Part 2: The state of our organization

Our rhetorical situation

The rhetoric of a rhetoric society must adapt to its situation. We may also need to consider playing a role in reshaping our own rhetorical situation by using our rhetoric in the public sphere as public intellectuals. If we are truly experts in rhetoric, I suggest we adapt to and reshape our situation at the same time.

Rhetoric is as alive as ever, and more relevant than ever, but it has been decentralized. The role of the communicator is less visible -- in universities and colleges, in politics, in public communication, and in workplaces.

Why?

Many workers have embedded communications tasks within their roles. Therefore, a lot of communication occurs without supportive mentoring and instruction, and a lot of reasoning occurs without knowledge of good rhetorical theory. People do their best. Many desperately need rhetoric and are flummoxed by the rhetorical demands placed on them. They don't know that they need rhetoric, because people are baffled by the word "rhetoric" and don't know what it means.

What could we do better?

Abstract definitions can only go so far. As a rhetoric society, we can offer "free samples" of rhetorical thought and practice in public, not just in the databases and cloisters of academia. Performing what we do is more powerful than just talking about what we do and claiming it is important.

Many of us do have the talents to move, inform, and inspire within today's online public forums. Not every rhetorician is a public intellectual, but if we care to make our value known, we may occasionally appear briefly in public as a theorist, critic, teacher, journalist or essayist.

Building on strengths

Our journal

Our journal continues to be an important pillar for our society. I am very grateful to Tracy Whalen, our editor. We must consider how to keep our journal alive with rich submissions and a network of able reviewers without overloading the work of the editor.

Website & social media presence

I thank Bruce Dadey for the design and structure of our new website, Shivaun Corry for sharing relevant content on our RhetCanada Facebook page and group, and David Beard and other members for posting, liking and sharing.

Our website, social media, and graphic design costs are money well spent, especially for a society that believes in the power of effective and ethical public rhetoric. Our blog is our newsletter and a primary way in which we engage members between conferences, but it takes a village to run a good blog.

I propose we create a blogging team that would write posts, design images and memes. We can recruit guest bloggers. Ideally, we should not just be sharing other's content but sharing our own content, like

an online magazine, every few weeks at minimum. Think “Conversation dot com” by rhetoricians, for rhetoricians and students and the public.

Without that, we have nothing to say in the public forum, which is paradoxical. Is the role of a rhetoric society merely to share others’ public events and publicly articulated ideas? Are we only good at writing journal articles, books, and dissertations? Our members can write rhetorical commentary on current events and issues, we can interview each other about our careers and recent publications, and we can feature Canadian rhetoric courses and programs.

Challenges

Membership numbers

This year we had a membership development task force. I look forward to their report. It is not an easy task to raise our member numbers in the environment I’ve just described. I believe we can’t afford to have a narrowly Canadian focus nor focus only on full time academics. We must continue to reach out and welcome our international members and presenters as well as student members and part-time scholar-practitioners. These offer growth and sustainability at a time when stable academic positions that include rhetorical study are relatively rare in Canada and academics face increasing workloads.

Finances

RhetCanada has a very limited income at present. We generate little from memberships due to our small numbers, low-cost student memberships, and affordable association fees at congress. Our journal royalties are modest.

Just as publishing companies, news organizations, and universities must think innovatively about their income, so must we. Let’s ponder how we as a group offer value to each other and our society and what we can reasonably ask for in exchange. What members do we want to attract and what activities and services add value to them? What is a reasonable fee for each level or type of activity or service?

At congress, the cost of rooms and AV is minimal, but catering is far too luxurious for a small, low-income organization like ours, especially if we want to fund a student prize and a small honorarium for a keynote speaker. I learned this lesson too late, and then I cut down our catering order as much as I could. Next year we should try no catering, just AudioVisual costs, and we may be able to recoup some of our finances from the experiments of 2019. In our colleges and universities, we don’t provide free food to students, but our students still come to class.

Leadership development

This AGM concludes my fourth year as president. In 2017 I was re-elected for a second two-year term. I have in the Executive since 2012, and before that I served in various other roles.

I see these as my greatest contributions to RhetCanada/CSSR over the years:

1. Discovering ways to use online tools to get work done and centralize information
2. Enhancing our website and social media and ensuring the webmaster is an executive member
3. Encouraging our executive structure to become more flexible so that we can manage our volunteer roles within our careers
4. Discovering our new alias RhetCanada so our identity can be briefer and clearer in social media
5. Instituting roundtables at conferences

It's time for leadership renewal.

In 2019, I am calling on RhetCanada to help me transition out of this role. I desire to move on to other roles in my life.

As you can see, I am by nature a blogger, converser, thinker, and innovator. I want to use more of my rhetorical skills in public activism for the causes I care about, and I want to publish books and articles as a rhetoric scholar. I can still be a good contributing member of our society.

I'm not very good at persuading people to do tasks or managing an executive (it feels like nagging), or planning conferences step by step according to Congress deadlines (it feels like being managed by a machine), so when I drop the ball, that's where it gets dropped.

We currently have no nominee for President after my term ends, unless we discover a nominee in the next few days who has the qualifications. Our constitution requires the president to have two years of prior experience as an executive member, usually as vice-president. Our VP David Beard has expressed his intention not to succeed as president. We are thin on qualified people who are ready and willing to take on a presidential role.

To prevent our organization from harm, I am willing to stay on as president for a transition year. BUT it needs to be a year in which I transition out while I mentor others in. We truly require others to plan next year's conference, we need others to help move along tasks and roles within the executive, and we need a leadership development group to work on nominations, mentoring, succession planning for our committees and the executive.