

**Reflections on SECOPA:  
The Best Region and Conference in ASPA**

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## **Reflections on SECOPA: The Best Region and Conference in ASPA:**

SECOPA was the first regional conference in ASPA; it was the first regional organization to incorporate. It has the largest membership in ASPA and one of the largest geographical territories. In terms of the continuity of its annual conference and developmental activities, SECOPA is unmatched by any other region, with the possible exception of the DC area which is much more compact and homogeneous. Having served on the Chapter Development Committee of the ASPA Council (as vice-chair and briefly as chair) that also reviewed the activities of the various regions, many times discussions of the problems of other chapters and regions concluded with, "yes, but that's in Region V." There was very little doubt that SECOPA was better organized and more active than virtually all the other regional "organizations" in ASPA. It was the best region in ASPA.

Relatedly, the SECOPA conference has always been among the biggest in terms of attendance. It has had a wide range of relevant presentations. Participants have come from far and wide and generally commented that SECOPA was the best conference. Moreover, the conference has always (although some years have been close) made money. This was not duplicated at national ASPA during my term on the council.

It is both a pleasure and a luxury to reflect on how the conference and the organization arrived at its current position within the ASPA family. During that time, however, many questions have been raised, and some have been answered, but some still deserve further consideration. It is the hope of this brief paper to reflect on SECOPA's rich history, with some of the warts, and to conjecture about its future. This analysis is limited in the following ways. First, I was out of the country last year, so recent changes are not addressed. Some of the data are missing. Perhaps more importantly, due to the passing of time, my personal data retrieval

mechanism (DRM) has become less reliable. So, since most of the information is from personal recall, I am sure some of the finer points are debatable.

### **SECOPA from President Nixon through President Carter:**

The first SECOPA conference occurred in 1969, the first year of the Nixon presidency, run by a Republican program chairman, Jeff Duffey. Duffey, along with Don Pugliese, became the chief historians of the organization into the 1980's with their two historical epics which appeared in the Southern Review of Public Administration (1977, 1982), a journal no longer in existence--a point for future further discussion. Somewhat mysteriously, all the data for conference finances during the Nixon administration years (1969-1973) are missing. Perhaps they were included with the original eighteen minutes and erroneously erased by an erratic Woodsian foot. Such a conspiracy could seem eminently plausible to even the most mediocre data analyst.

Jeff and Don I (first names seem more appropriate for close gatherings) saw a strong role for the regional organization in leadership and chapter development. They noted the inception of what appeared to be a regional journal referenced above and a conference that met needs not addressed by the national ASPA conference "despite its ever-increasing size, prestige and program dimensions ..." (1977:19) They argued for incorporation of the region "to provide an orderly and systematic manner for embracing new members into the leadership network." (1977:22).

Jeff and Don II reviews SECOPA during the Carter years (1977-1980). Although totally unrelated to the American presidency, it was during this time that SECOPA achieved formal incorporation. Some of the "facts" in article are debatable as to who wrote the articles of

incorporation, but as they say, "history is in the minds of those who write it." In spite of this one minor flaw, several interesting questions are raised in this re-analysis of SECOPA. What should be the relationship of SECOPA to national ASPA? What level of continuity can be maintained for leadership development at the regional level? What kind of organizational structure should SECOPA have? Jeff and Don saw the challenge as moving "SECOPA forward in the development of membership programs and services without (sic) developing into a traditional bureaucratic structure." (1982: 360) And indeed, the challenge persists today. The issues raised by Jeff and Don I and II still confront SECOPA, which maintains its place among the other regions which have yet to reach that level.

## **Re-assessing the Issues:**

### **I. Leadership:**

ASPA is a voluntary organization which supposedly is based on its chapters. This is a basic problem from national to local because local chapters traditionally change presidents every year (there has been increasing adoption of two year terms). Chapter presidents may not maintain the continuity of communications with other organizational levels--such as financial reports which the Chapter Development committee had to beg for in some instances--because of their brief tenure, the fact that some chapter presidents had only a local focus, and indeed, some chapter presidents are selected to give the local chapter visibility, not because the individual wanted that particular commitment. SECOPA tried to provide more continuity through its Board of Directors, which former chapter presidents could join by paying a minimal fee and attending the annual conferences. The reality was, however, that collecting such small fees was more trouble than it was worth, and the SECOPA Board of Directors became the executive officers, with their election and major decisions made by anyone who attended the annual meeting with

no credentials check at all. Furthermore, since SECOPA conferences were generally profitable, the practice of requiring contributions from chapters was dropped as well. In that sense, SECOPA came more to reflect reality through administrative expediency and it has done less to identify and encourage regional leadership. That problem was well-reflected by the region's aborted attempts to give money to its chapters. Through several efforts, SECOPA attempted to redistribute some of its increasing bankroll through chapter development awards, student awards, and the like, but it got very little response. The same was true for student and chapter development awards at national ASPA. Perhaps because the awards were small, very limited responses were received to those offers, but its been difficult to achieve consistent two-way communications between the chapters and both the regional and national levels.

**Recommendation:** There are usually within every chapter some informal leaders who quietly and ascetically maintain the chapter, in spite of who is occupies the formal positions of leadership. These may be former chapter presidents, but they should be members who have been active in their respective chapters and at the regional and national levels as well. Both ASPA and SECOPA would well-advised to identify those informal leaders and establish them as chapter liaisons who can be contacted about activities at the other ASPA levels.

## **II. External Organizational Dimensions:**

The issue of organization has both external and internal dimensions. The external dimension focuses on the linkages between SECOPA and its corresponding national and local organizations. Simply put, SECOPA has no legal status in ASPA, it is incorporated. Even if it were not incorporated, relationships to other levels are haphazard. Local chapters are legal members of the ASPA network, but regions are not. The rather bizarre organizational chart in Jeff and Don II (p. 359) depicting SECOPA Board of Directors directly under "National Council Regional Members" with some linkage to "ASPA Chapter (Region V)" is misleading. Some

have seen SECOPA as a breeding ground for national ASPA officers. It does so informally, early attempts at using SECOPA funds to support officially selected national ASPA candidates were thwarted early. Importantly, regional officers have usually been outside the loop in terms of ASPA communications. While local chapters would be notified of position, action, or request by the national office, the regional organization would not.

**Recommendation:** if it has not yet been accomplished, SECOPA should simply be placed on the ASPA and chapter development mailing lists. A more formal relationship would require reporting, at a minimum, and other bureaucratic concessions to national. Additionally, establishing chapter liaison officers who would maintain their positions for several years could add to local leadership continuity.

### **III. Internal Organizational Dimensions:**

Internal organizational dimensions refers here to the structure, or lack thereof, in SECOPA. SECOPA is aptly named, since it represents a grouping that comes surprisingly together every year for three days and then disbands. Interim activities, such as the nominating of officers or award winners have yet to be regularized. Moreover, while the region was previously lauded for having a "regional journal (the former SRPA)," that journal has become the main organ of a national ASPA section without consultation with any of the regional officers. The region is now mentioned on the cover in letters too small for old men like me to read. While some may have anticipated more regularization and bureaucracy, that has hardly been the problem.

The lack of centralization has been reflected in the managing of the regional conference--the organization's main mission. Debates about how much control the regional organization can exert over registration fees, program format, and local activities have been mitigated by informal agreements. By tradition, the program committees have involved

members from other than the host chapter. These have usually been academics who have may have greater regionwide visibility and who have a greater stake in conference participation. With regard to registration fees, while chapters bid for the conference with some estimation of the fees, there is really no legal mechanism to bind them to a particular structure. Finally, there is an informal agreement that the local chapter retain one-third of the proceeds, while SECOPA receives two-thirds. At one recent conference, the local chapter only returned half of its proceeds, thereby reiterating the looseness of the informal arrangements.

A brief analysis of conference financial results illustrates the lack of control SECOPA exercises over the conference. Data were compiled from the two SRPA articles referenced and some unpublished results for more current conferences. Unfortunately, there are some gaps, but 15 SECOPA conferences are analyzed. Attempts were made to correlate conference proceeds with its revenues, its expenditures, the attendance at the conference and the relative size of the city in which the conference was held. The amount of registration fees, and other variables would have augmented the analysis, but they are not readily available at this time. The coefficients of determination for relationships between revenues and net proceeds, conference attendance, or city size are all well below .10, except for the relationship between revenues and expenditures ( $r^2 = .86$ ). None of the independent variables, including year, is correlated with net proceeds. In other words, the conference spends what it gets. That's good bureaucratic logic. Some conferences have had large proceeds, some have been meager. The chairman of one of the latter type conferences remarked that he was trying to break even. In short, there is no regional policy!

Figure 1 offers a graphic portrayal of these relationships. While revenues and expenditures continue to climb each year, the same cannot be said for net proceeds. The constant increases in revenues and expenditures can be partially explained by inflation, but one could certainly wonder why there is no constant trend for conference proceeds?

SECOPA is an annual gathering whose organizational structure virtually disappears between conferences. Many liberties can be taken by the local host chapters that actually run the conferences. A brief review of individual conference budgets demonstrates their variability and lack of control. A host chapter could purchase virtually anything, including a cruise for some lucky registrant. It could decide not to honor the two-thirds/one-third agreement. Such relationships would drive most accountants to apoplexy.

On the other hand, national ASPA runs a more centralized national conference. The relationships are fairly clearly defined so they give accountants a warm and fuzzy glow upon review. But the national conference for several years was a money-loser--at least on the books. Several ASPA members expressed displeasure at the centralized program structure and especially at the high registration fees, but a primary reason for these shortfalls was due to national office overhead. During my first ASPA council meeting, I asked several other, more senior, council members to explain an expenditure at the national conference. None of the ones I talked with seemed to know what the item was. Finally, John Stewart of the Finance Committee explained it to me. A third year council member asked the same question in the open meeting. The ASPA president assured the member that the executive director would make a report at the next meeting. I was certainly not alone in not understanding the conference budget. The council, incidentally, had just previously passed a policy position that the federal budget should be written to be comprehensible to the average American. Obviously, there are problems with a more centralized and organized approach as well.

**Recommendation:** Do little more to organize and centralize the conference. For some reason, it seems to work as is, with a few minor glitches here or there. Formalizing the processes for elections and awards deserves some attention, but continue the annual conference and allow the organization to work with "smoke and mirrors" and a large dose of "muddling through." Overall, SECOPA seems to have found a good balance between its services and its



structure; it is probably getting the most from its members that it will get as a voluntary organization with no staff.

### **Overview:**

SECOPA has a long and rich history of which its members can be justifiably proud. The conference runs well each year because good people walk in the door to participate in its direction and implementation. The major recommendation here is to identify the leadership base by behavioral criteria, rather than structural ones. Minor adjustments are warranted with regard to communications from ASPA and formalizing some of the annual work done at the conference with regard to elections and awards. A final suggestion might be for SECOPA to encourage a new regional journal that could publish its conference proceedings or other epic histories like the ones cited here. But as long as the good ship SECOPA avoids any serious perils in organizational waters, let her continue on her present course.

### **References:**

Jefferson S. Duffey and Donato J. Pugliese, "The Southeast Regional Conference," Southern Review of Public Administration, v. 1, June 1977, 14-24.

Donato J. Pugliese and Jefferson S. Duffey, "Leadership Development and Continuity in a Voluntary Professional Association: The Case of SECOPA," Southern Review of Public Administration, v. 6, Fall 1982, 347-361.

Figure 1

# SECOPA Conference Results

## Revenues, Expenditures and Net by Year

