

The Genesis of a University-Based Interdisciplinary Signage Research Organization

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When I first met Jim and Sharon Weinel in 2014, I had no idea that the seeds of our first conversation would eventually lead to the formation of the Academic Advisory Council for Signage Research and Education (AACSRE), a non-profit organization that provides a space for an interdisciplinary array of academics to come together in research to respond to and anticipate issues related to on-premise signage. As envisioned, this group is a think tank which has assembled a wide cross-section of academics from art history to engineering and marketing to law, among others. The members of this group represent 21 Universities across the United States. This organization was the first of its kind to put research and researchers in the forefront of this arena. This organization would not have come to fruition without the partnership of Jim and Sharon Weinel. While they gave the founding gift upon which the organization was built, Jim and Sharon have done so much more. Their gift allowed AACSRE to put research first, allowing scholars to drive inquiry with the well-developed research tools available to them thereby enhancing the overall veracity of the scholarship produced.

Our first conversation focused on frustrations experienced by industry leaders who often found themselves in litigation with localities over regulations pertaining to on-premise signage. The story was nearly always the same. A new business wanted to construct a sign on its premises to help navigate prospective customers to their establishment. Local codes would restrict signage to a level that the business owners felt interfered with their ability to engage in the open marketplace. After failing to receive any degree of satisfaction in the regulatory appeals process, the city and business owners would find themselves at odds and in litigation.

Keywords /

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Jim and Sharon Weinel with AACSRE founding president, Dawn Jourdan at the Gemini, Inc. headquarters in Cannon Falls, MN

In the litigation, the city would argue that its regulations were within the police powers divested to local governments. They would claim that limitations on size or illumination were justifiable in the name of “public health, safety, and welfare.” The business owner would then hire an expert to demonstrate that the sign did not cause issues with traffic safety, for example. Another expert would show, in fact, that limitations on size not only interfered with the economic viability of the business and the commercial area in which it was situated, but also created safety issues because the lettering on signs was too small and caused traffic accidents. Ultimately, some courts would decide: (1) that the research done by industry experts was questionable in value because the work had been paid for by the complainant and not subjected to double, blind peer review and (2) that the complainant had not met the burden of proof requiring evidence that the standards developed by the local government were arbitrary and capricious. Mr. and Mrs. Weinel understood that to win these court battles, the scholarship commissioned must be bullet proof. They began asking academics how this could happen, and the result was the formation of AACSRE.

AACSRE has two signature programs. The organization designed and developed its own peer reviewed journal. Working with the University of Oklahoma Libraries, my colleagues and I co-developed the Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding. This journal is unique because of its commitment to being the home for interdisciplinary scholarship related to signage. Published twice a year since 2016, the journal solicits articles from scholars in all fields that describe state-of-the-art studies related to signage. The articles are submitted to editorial teams which are competitively selected to steward the journal. Current editors include Dr. Chris Auffrey and Dr. Vikas Mehta at the University of Cincinnati’s School of Planning at the College of DAAP. These articles are reviewed as a part of a double-blind, peer-review process. This process, used widely in academic circles, is meant to bolster the credibility and the veracity of the

work that is ultimately published in the journal. To date, 11 issues of the journal have been published by more than 66 authors.

AACRSE's second signature program, the Emerging Fellows Program, is my personal favorite. My colleagues and I knew from the start of this effort that, to be sustainable, we must work together to grow the number of scholars committed to doing research about signage. Our goal for this program was to identify graduate students and pre-tenure scholars who were engaged in sign-related scholarship across the disciplines. This group is chaired by Dr. Steven Kopp, professor of Marketing at the University of Arkansas' Sam M. Walton College of Business. Annually, a call for proposals is widely distributed by this committee. The proposals are reviewed, and grants are awarded to successful applicants. These applicants utilize the funds available for a wide variety of activities, including data collection, survey design, costs associated with the acquisition of data and images, and payment for research subject participation, among other valid research uses.

Beyond funding, the Emerging Fellows Program recipients receive mentorship from members of the AACRSE Board, as well as the opportunity to present their work at the organization's annual meeting. After mentoring my own Emerging Fellows, I know that the value is reciprocal. I am positioned to introduce the fellow to a wide network of colleagues with similar interests. The fellow, in turn, can help grow my own network and understanding of a new attribute in scholarship. In developing this signature program, the Weinel's and I made a commitment to share the wealth of our experience and knowledge with future generations of AACRSE thought leaders. So far, awards have been made to eight young scholars as a part of this program.

AACRSE continues to evolve as membership grows and research questions broaden. As an organization, we believe that the organization provides the structure for on-premise signage research to happen. We do not dictate the topics of interest. Rather, we allow our members and those who submit their work to our signature programs to show us where evolution in research is possible and necessary. In some cases, new lines of

scholarship emerge because of changing legal structures or new ideas about the development of urban spaces. Technological advancements in signs, as well as the tools we use to study them, have, and will continue to drive the need for new research. For example, digital signs and smart phones are examples of two communication devices that continue to make us grapple with the role of signs in the smart city. In the future, we will continue to formulate new research that helps us better understand the power of signs to help us navigate our communities and find our ways to the places we need to travel. AACRSE will continue to look for collaborators who will contribute to and lead in this generation of new knowledge.

AACRSE was designed to provide a space and a vehicle for thought leaders in sign education and research to come together and envision ways to enliven the conversation about this very specific form of communication. It has provided that and so much more. The organization is the manifestation of the type of interdisciplinary research that all academically affiliated organizations seek to cultivate among interested scholars. Beyond professional relationships, the Weinel foundational gift seeded long-lasting and respectful relationships that will continue to bloom long into the future. For this, we are eternally grateful and committed to doing the work.