

Staff Association President Speech for 2017-2018

Steven Griner

August 1, 2017

Distinguished Ambassadors, Secretary General, Assistant Secretary General, colleagues and friends:

First of all, I would like to thank my colleagues for electing me president of the OAS Staff Association for the 2017-2018 period. I am honored and humbled by your support.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize the hard work of the outgoing Committee and in particular, the leadership of Kim Osborne and Catherine Pognat. It takes a lot of time and effort to lead the Staff Association and your work has not gone unnoticed. We will do our best to build on your accomplishments.

I would also like to welcome our new Committee Members: Luiz Azevedo, who I served under when he was president two years ago, Rebeca Omaña, Adam Siegel, Luis Villalobos, Maria Elena Cruz, Magali Santos, Pamela Izaguirre and Carla Sorani, who is our representative on the Retirement and Pension fund and Beatriz Ferro-Santos who serves as an alternate on the same committee.

I have had the pleasure of working with some of you. For others, this will be the first time. One of the nice things about the Staff Committee is having the opportunity to develop friendships with colleagues from other parts of the OAS and with whom you would otherwise rarely cross paths. I truly look forward to it.

I started at the OAS on August 9, 1993. I remember that day because it was a very happy one in my life, one of the best, actually. As a kid

growing up in Texas, I started to learn Spanish in high school and continued to study it in college. I was interested and active in politics. Working at the OAS would give me the unique opportunity to bring together these two interests. It was a dream come true for me and that dream continues today.

A couple of other memories spring to mind from that fateful Monday. Marlegne Molina from Human Resources – there are some of you who still remember her – sat down with me and explained the compensation package, including basic salary, post adjustment, step increases and cost-of-living adjustments. She explained to me our pension plan and detailed my options for health insurance. I was particularly interested in that last topic as my wife soon became pregnant with our youngest son.

There was tuition reimbursement up to \$1,000 and we were actually encouraged to use it.

Twenty four years later, I have a predictable and stable salary, insurance and a pension plan due in large part to the hard work of the many staff committees that preceded this one. Many of you have served on those committees and I would like to take this opportunity to thank you. Many have benefited tremendously from your efforts, including myself, and I want to continue that good work.

Later that August in 1993, the OAS had an orientation for new employees of the General Secretariat and recently arrived diplomats from the Permanent Missions. Jean Michel Arrighi explained the origins of the OAS Charter and important resolutions on the defense and promotion of democracy, like Resolution 1080, the precursor to the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Elizabeth Abi-Mershed described the mandate and structure of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

I didn't realize it at the time, but both of them had just started at the OAS that same year, although they already seemed to possess institutional knowledge that is so important to an organization such as ours.

I am also struck by what did not exist back then.

By my unofficial count, today we have a net of eight additional departments with mandates that did not exist 24 years ago.

1. The First Summit of the Americas would be held the next year in Miami in 1994 and we did not have a Summit follow up office.
2. The Inter-American Convention against Corruption would not be adopted until 1996 and MESICIC was yet to be conceived.
3. The Inter-American Committee against Terrorism would not be established for another six years.
4. The Departments of Effective Public Management and Sustainable Democracy and Special Missions and the Department of Social Inclusion would not be established for years or even decades to come.
5. The notion that you would invite civil society organizations to the General Assembly was not contemplated at all, let alone institutionalized.
6. We did not have email or Internet, let alone computer viruses and cyber-attacks.

Yet, in 1993, the OAS had 658 posts funded by the Regular Fund. Today, we have 358.

I think that is worth repeating: in 1993 we had 658 posts funded by the Regular fund and today we have 358. We have 300 fewer Regular Fund posts and at least eight new departments.

We have done so much more with less.

Organizationally, we have stretched by fits and starts. Over the years, departments have been renamed and reassigned to different Secretariats. New Secretariats have been created and existing personnel, transferred and given new and greater responsibilities.

Since 2010, 60 percent of our colleagues have left in pursuit of other opportunities and those remaining have stepped in and assumed their duties. Oftentimes their job descriptions and classifications do not reflect these new responsibilities.

Article 38 of the General Standards calls for an organization-wide audit of posts and updating of job descriptions in periods of no less than four years. But we have not had such an exercise since 1996.

It's been 21 years. We shouldn't have to wait any longer.

The Staff Committee will continue to insist on funding to conduct this audit as soon possible.

Of course, some progress has been made. Upon taking office, Secretary General Almagro unfroze reclassifications and many are at the final stages of this long and tortuous process. The outgoing Committee has diligently sought to ensure that pending competitions are completed and we will continue to work closely with the Department of Human Resources to meet the new deadline of December 31.

We continue to do more with less.

This could not be truer than in the OAS Offices, likewise for the special missions in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Colombia and the Adjacency Zone on the Belize-Guatemala border, as well as the Judicial Facilitators Program.

For many citizens in the hemisphere, our colleagues in these offices and missions are the first, and sometimes the only contact they have with

the Organization of American States. You are an integral part of the staff and please know that we in the Committee want to support you in any way possible. As President, I intend to reach out to you periodically, but please contact us if you have specific issues you need addressed.

We continue to do more with less.

We have met this challenge head on. It provides us with professional opportunities that are not immediately available elsewhere. It gets us out of our comfort zone and forces us to learn new skills and become expert in new fields. However, the OAS should support staff and provide training, both internally or if the information is not available in-house, through tuition reimbursement. Training is a cost-effective way to provide for the skills needed to maintain our effectiveness in this continuously changing work environment.

Our Secretary General has taken very seriously the drafting and approval of new workplace policies, which were either nonexistent before or hopelessly out-of-date. During the first two years of his administration, he has worked with Staff to institute a Prohibition on Workplace Harassment, a Policy on Gender Equality, Diversity and Human Rights, and most recently, an Alternative Work Schedule.

This is a very good start, but a policy is only as good as its enforcement.

We need to continue to work to draft detailed procedures, which are applied to everybody across the board. This also includes our Whistleblower Protection Policy, which was adopted in 2014, shortly before the election of the Secretary General. These procedures should ensure uniformity, transparency and due process for all involved. All of us, but managers in particular, need to be provided with continuous training on the content of these policies and the procedures.

In addition to equitable and transparent enforcement, it is important that all colleagues have a final recourse to decisions affecting their future at the OAS.

Since 1971, the OAS Administrative Tribunal has adjudicated disputes between the General Secretariat and its staff. I am encouraged to learn that the administration has requested \$96,700 for 2018, but I remain concerned that the Tribunal has suspended its activities for the remainder of this year due to a lack of funds. The amount needed to finish the year is modest. The potential costs of not having the Tribunal as a final arbitrator could be exorbitant, both financially and politically. I truly hope the Administration will seek an accommodation to guarantee this important avenue during the remainder of this year.

In 2010, our Department of International Law created model legislation on access to information, which was approved by the General Assembly in the same year. To paraphrase the Declaration of Nuevo Leon, “access to information, including those on privacy and confidentiality, is an indispensable condition for citizen participation and promotes a respect for human rights.”

We need to practice what we preach and ensure that information – updated, accurate and relevant information – is made available to staff.

Conversely, it is important that confidential and private information of each and every one of us is secured with proper safeguards and procedures. In my conversations with staff before and after the election, access to information, privacy and confidentiality were reoccurring concerns, which will be addressed by this Committee as soon as possible.

I am sure that if our Secretary General or Assistant Secretary General could wave a magic wand to increase resources, regularize contracts,

equally apply our policies and guarantee access to information, they would do it in a heartbeat.

Of course, it is not as simple as that.

The tasks ahead of us will require persistence from everybody. It will require hard choices from the administration and the member states, providing scarce resources for initiatives that have long been neglected, but are vital to hone the skills of the staff and to ensure that we are afforded the guarantees and due process that we demand of our member countries.

As staff, we must remain vigilant and address problems in a timely manner. We also need your help. Remain engaged. Share with us your ideas and suggestions. Volunteer for a committee. Do your part.

The solutions to the challenges that face us do not lie with one individual, but with all of us. It is important that the Staff Committee, in coordination with the Secretary General and others, cultivate and maintain support from OAS Permanent Missions to increase the resources that have been depleted over the years.

To do more, we need more.

Thank you.