

The Morning After

by Howard McGinn

Well, it's over for another two years. We were entertained, fed by the exhibitors, and became lost in the High Point convention center corridor maze. We talked with friends we had not seen for a long time, talked with friends we see at meetings each month, attended continuing education programs, and wandered through the exhibit area. As a group we spent enough money to keep the High Point Chamber of Commerce happy, though some expense reports will cause distress to local business managers. Most of us left High Point convinced that we had a good time and that our money was well spent. But what did we accomplish?

I spend a lot of time at professional meetings and conferences in all parts of the state and country. It's one of the questionable "perks" that comes with the job. Many of these conferences are gatherings of non-librarians. They are meetings of county commissioners, data processing professionals, telecommunications directors, and business people. I have been doing this, either as a librarian or as a salesman, for over twenty years. What I have come to realize at these meetings is very frightening to me as a librarian, especially as a state librarian. I have come to realize that while librarians organize conferences to be entertained or to test their stamina at committee meetings, other professional groups gather to develop policy strategies to attain power, to strengthen their professional position in the community, to create methods to increase personal and institutional income, to survive.

Now, if I were attending conferences that were far removed from the world of library and

information sciences, I would not be too concerned about these trends. But these meetings are meetings of people who control funding or who often consider themselves to be THE information professionals of the present and future. The policies and strategies being developed by these groups center on the acquisition of power for the members of that profession and the concurrent increase in salary that power brings. And in the groups that consider themselves to be information professionals, librarians are rarely present and, in fact, are looked upon with disdain because these people feel that the time of the librarian has passed. Most of these information professionals, in reality, probably have never considered us at all, let alone as competitors.

I suppose I should not be so surprised by these trends. It fits the pattern of the death of a profession. While we eat and laugh at High Point, ALA, and other conferences, library schools are being closed, a generation of librarians is retiring, recruiting is stagnant, library budgets are being decimated, and libraries themselves are being absorbed by data processing departments, management information departments, or similar sounding operations. While we debate at our national conferences whether or not to censure the actions of President

Bush for the Persian Gulf War, other groups are setting the technical standards for the delivery of electronic information. While we attend meaningless committee meetings or "march on Washington," others are implementing strategies for increasing their share of the state and federal funding pie. While we work at trying to be important to our communities and institutions, others are becoming important to their communities and institutions because they have learned how to obtain and hold power.

The real losers in this process, however, are not the librarians. The real losers are the people librarians serve. The new self-ordained information professionals do not care about the people. They are not service oriented. They are technology or systems oriented. I sense no commitment on their part to the improvement of the lives of people; the commitment is to the improvement

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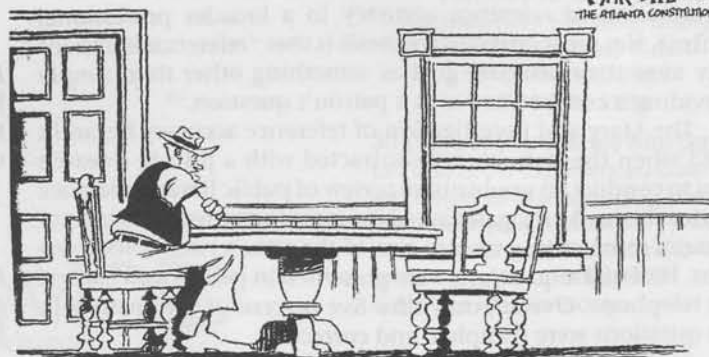
of their own lives. So we are seemingly left with a paradox. While we meet and eat, we take no actions to increase our power position in the community. Yet when we return home, we are the only information professionals serving our communities and institutions democratically. While these other groups, especially those calling themselves information professionals, meet in order to gain and keep power, they only serve themselves when they return home. Unless the library profession acts immediately, the competition will win the battle for the control of information because power produces revenue and revenue assures survival and status.

What steps can the profession take to meet this competition to the profession, to prohibit the death of a profession. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Hold the state conference every year. The information industry is moving too rapidly for NCLA to consider trends, formulate policy strategies, and respond effectively when meetings are conducted on a biennial basis.
2. Reorganize NCLA in order to deal with issues that face the entire profession. Eliminate the emphasis on special interest groups (e.g., academic libraries, school libraries, public libraries). The reorganization should be as a confederation of associations that also includes the state chapters of SLA, MLA, and others. Let the constituent members of the confederation conduct the continuing education programs. NCLA, as the umbrella organization, should concentrate on two areas: lobbying for legislation of all types to help all types of librarians and creating methods to increase the salaries of librarians. The time for NCLA to hire a full time lobbyist to support our programs in Raleigh is long past.
3. In conjunction with the reorganization, eliminate the "it's my turn to be president" system. We have been fortunate in the past to have had good presidents of the association. This system, however, does not necessarily insure that the best leader in the profession is elected, nor does it bring the unified voice necessary to rally the troops. There is the tendency for a balkanization of the profession to occur and for the segment not in power to "go underground" for six years.
4. Put real purpose and substance into the meetings. The conferences should be a time to formulate legislative plans, to create marketing programs, to build consensus.
5. Hold conferences in conjunction with important non-library associations like the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners. Meeting with the Southeastern Library Association every other year is nice, but does it gain us power?
6. Control access to membership in the association. Stop librarianship from becoming the generic profession. An organization of librarians should be exactly that — an organization of "professional" librarians. If we do not respect our own credentials, how can we expect others to respect us as a distinct profession?

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As I said, it's over for another two years. I hope I am more optimistic after the next NCLA conference, whenever that may be. Conferences mirror the health and nature of their sponsoring organizations and professions. The conferences will change only if NCLA and its members are willing to assess the "state of the association" and profession in North Carolina. If change occurs, progress in increasing salaries, power, and status is probable. If the status quo is maintained, then enjoy the entertainment and food while they last. When considering the deteriorating state of professional library conferences, I often think of a conference I accidentally attended in the mid-1970s. I was working for the J.B. Lippincott Publishing Company at the time as a salesperson and had been assigned to exhibit the company's publications at an African-American history convention. There was a second conference meeting in the hotel at the same time. It was the annual gathering of the Spanish-American War Veterans. I met all of the conference attendees — on the hotel elevator. The three survivors were on the elevator with their private-duty nurses. I'm sure they ate well and were entertained at their convention. May they rest in peace.



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