
So You Have to Plan a Conference ...

Barbara Baker

Conference planning is time-consuming, hard work. It is physically and mentally tiring. But when the conference is over, you realize it is one of the most rewarding and prideful experiences you will ever have. The team spirit that comes from working with a group to put on what has to be "the biggest and the best" is exhilarating. The feeling of accomplishment almost overshadows the exhaustion.

The recent conference of the North Carolina Library Association was the second time that I have chaired a group planning a major professional development experience for members of the learning resources professions. It does not matter, though, whether thirty people or two thousand people are coming together for the conference, the basics of planning a conference are the same.

The following is a condensed review of the activities that took place prior to the October 10-13 conference in Charlotte. I hope others can use this information to make their own conference planning experiences rewarding.

1. I thought about the 1989 conference and planned. When I attended the NCLA conference in 1987, I took a lot of notes. I made notes all over my copy of the 1987 conference program. I asked people what they thought went well, what they thought could have gone better, and sometimes I just stood around and listened as people talked about what sessions that they had been to or were going to. I also attended the final meeting of the 1987 conference planning committee (after the conference) and let planning committee members tell me what went well, and what they would have done differently.

2. In November 1987 I began bringing together the group of people who would be members of the 1989 conference planning committee. A number of people had volunteered. I examined their knowledge and talents and the interests they represented. I filled in the "gaps"

with people I knew and people suggested by other executive board members.

3. I wrote down the tasks that had to be accomplished to have a conference: program planning, local arrangements and hospitality, registration, publicity and publications, and vendors. I decided to use a management style that has worked for me in the past and so appointed an individual to head up each of the tasks. Even though some of the tasks could be accomplished by one person, I appointed committees for each task. This allowed for input from many sectors of the membership and a greater number of ideas to be considered. It also gave us extra staff when we needed it at conference time. In other words, the planning committee was a large group. We only met once as a whole. The subcommittees met as needed, and a council of the subcommittee chairs met on a regular basis.

4. At the initial meeting I described the organization of the conference planning committee from my perspective and allowed for meetings of each of the subcommittees. We did a lot of talking at that meeting about the theme for the conference and program ideas that could complement themes we were suggesting.

5. The local arrangements chair and I met with the convention center and hotel representatives to see their facilities and to make sure we knew what was necessary in order to set up the conference.

6. After the initial meeting of the entire planning committee, the subcommittees went about their work. There were a lot of telephone calls and several meetings of the subcommittees and the subcommittee chairs. A lot of ideas and a lot of talk went into the first months of planning.

7. The shift in activity over the twenty-four months of planning was interesting to watch. In the beginning, the task of program schedule planning got the most attention. Programs of thirteen sections and several committees were coordinated. Three general sessions, table talks, and two other planning committee-sponsored activities were worked into the schedule. Social activities were coordinated through the local arrangements committee and integrated into the schedule. At

Barbara Baker, the incoming president of NCLA, was chair of the 1989 NCLA Biennial Conference Planning Committee. She is Associate Dean for Educational Resources at Durham Technical Community College in Durham, N.C.

the same time the vendors subcommittee was inviting exhibitors.

8. As the activity of planning the program schedule and vendor invitations slowed, the publicity and publications group became very busy. A pre-conference publicity flyer was prepared, national publication bulletin board columns were notified of the upcoming conference, and work on the conference program document began. (I believe the publicity and publications group had the greatest difficulty keeping everybody happy. They put out a pre-conference flyer even though their information was very "sketchy" and then had to deal with people calling because it did not say enough. They were still getting changes to the conference program two days after the program was to have gone to press.)

9. After the flurry of activity for the publicity and publications group, the registration subcommittee took on the huge task of pre-registering and registering nearly 1,900 participants.

10. The local arrangements group worked throughout the two years to plan social activities, make room assignments for meetings, and recruit the local library association to staff a hospitality table at the conference.

11. Communication about the activity of the conference planning committee was important. The executive board of NCLA was kept informed of the progress of the committee. As soon as a "near final" draft of the program was available, it was distributed to the executive board and to any other groups we thought might be able to spread the word about the conference. This was valuable since we were scheduling for so many different sections of the membership. We got feedback about the way names were spelled and which sections had been left out.

12. The "front line" people—registration and hospitality table volunteers and conference planning committee members—were thanked with a social event just prior to the beginning of the conference.

13. During the conference, members of the planning committee stayed in touch with each other to make sure things were running smoothly. There was always a conference planning committee member at the registration table to take care of any problems that might arise.

14. The final meeting of the 1989 conference planning committee was held on December 11 in High Point, the site of the 1991 conference. The



Members of the hard working 1989 Conference Planning Committee are shown from left to right: seated: Mary Frances Crymes, Pam Jaskot, Barbara Baker, Mary Williams, and Ariel Stephens. Standing: Charles Mallas, Don White, Carol Myers, Deborah Carver, James Jarell, Lovenia Summerville, Ray Frankle, and Vanessa Ramseur.

chair of the 1991 conference planning committee was there to hear what the 1989 committee thought went well and what they would have done differently if they had known then what they know now. The conference treasurer reported that almost \$25,000 would be turned over to the NCLA treasurer to fund special projects of the sections and round tables and programs for the 1991 conference.

Every two years the North Carolina Library Association begins the conference planning cycle again. It is rewarding to help plan this major conference and I would encourage anyone who even thinks they might want to be involved in this kind of activity to volunteer to work with the Association committee. If it seems too much to take on, how about volunteering to help a section or your local association to plan an activity? There's always work for one more volunteer!

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