

Imagine the Future: An Ex Post Facto Analysis of the 53rd NCLA Biennial Conference

by Plummer Alston Jones, Jr., Conference Committee Chair

Considering the fact that every event is unique and special in its own right, can we learn anything from an ex post facto examination of the 53rd Biennial Conference of the North Carolina Library Association that will aid planners of the 54th Biennial Conference to be held 2-5 October 2001 in Winston-Salem? Getting reliable (i.e., repeatable) feedback on which to base generalizations is very difficult, so we often must make the most of the very limited, but nevertheless valid (i.e. truthful) ratings and comments on the evaluation forms received at the close of the conference.

Approximately 800 individuals pre-registered for the conference. Notwithstanding the fact that Hurricane Floyd kept many of our members from the eastern part of the state from attending, there were 1,251 participants and 218 exhibitors, for a grand total of 1,469 attending the conference. As of the end of October, there were 42 refunds requested, all of which were due to Hurricane Floyd. This was the first conference to allow credit card payment of conference fees. Approximately 220 of our members took advantage of this new method of payment.

The evaluation form for the 53rd Biennial Conference was included in the conference program booklet as a tear-out sheet. A total of 87 responses were received, most of which were left on tables after the All-Conference Breakfast or at the Registration Desk by the end of Friday, 24 September 1999,

the last day of the conference. A few others were mailed to the NCLA office in Raleigh and forwarded to me.

Evaluators were asked to rate various aspects of the conference on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being Very Dissatisfied, to 5 being Very Satisfied. There was an area provided at the end of the form for comments. In many ways, the comments were the most valuable part of the evaluation process, since evaluators commented on aspects of the conference that were not addressed on the form itself. Often the evaluators made comparisons of events and facilities and offered valuable suggestions for future conference planners to mull over.

One question overheard many times was "Why do we always meet in Winston-Salem?" This is not such an easy question to answer. The Vice-President/ President-Elect is responsible for selecting the site of a conference at least four years into the future. So part of the answer is that Winston-Salem was selected for us at least four years ago by a past Vice-President. The other part of the answer involves the expense of renting facilities large enough for over 1,000 attendees with up to 10 or more simultaneous meetings or events. There are only a few cities that can handle the Biennial Conference, these being Charlotte, Greensboro, Raleigh, Durham, High Point, and Winston-Salem. Hickory in the west has a new convention complex that should be given due consid-

eration by future Vice-Presidents. Greenville and Wilmington in the east are also possibilities, but realizing that we always meet during hurricane season, they appear less and less practical, particularly in the light of Hurricane Floyd. Winston-Salem's Benton Convention Center and the Adam's Mark Hotel consistently offer NCLA the lowest bid and it must be noted that they really want our business and, despite problems beyond our and their control, were wonderful to work with.

Another question that is often overheard and addressed explicitly in some of the comments on the evaluation form is "Why are there so many programs for school librarians or public librarians or academic librarians?" The answer is that all sections and round tables of NCLA are given equal opportunity to present as many programs on as many topics as they are capable of doing. The smaller sections and round tables usually struggle to get one program together, while the larger ones have the resources, both monetary and personnel, to present more programs. Also, it should be noted here that program planners were encouraged to plan programs that reflected the conference theme "Imagine the Future." This could account for the observations of some evaluators that there were not many "practical" or purely "how-to" programs offered.

Still another perennial question is "Why are there so many programs planned at the same time when I can

only go to one?" The answer is that program planners are given their choices of time slots. Often speakers can come only on certain days or at certain times. The only alternative is to offer fewer programs with fewer conflicts. A related question has to do with "When do I have time to go to the exhibits?" The answer is to schedule more free time in the hope that participants will take advantage of the break to go to the exhibits, but often attendees may see this as the perfect opportunity to return to work for a few hours, to take a much needed nap, etc.

The most difficult areas in which to please a large, diverse group such as NCLA, are temperature and food and beverage service. For every attendee who is too hot, there are as many who are too cold, and still others who are just fine. For every attendee who gets tired of cheese trays, there are vegetarians who are delighted to find another source of protein.

Let's now review the responses received on the evaluation forms. Percentages are rounded off to the nearest whole number.

Possible responses:

- 1 = Very Dissatisfied
- 2 = Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 = Somewhat Satisfied
- 4 = Satisfied
- 5 = Very Satisfied

Benton Convention Center: Overall

- N = 87
- 1 = 0 (0%)
- 2 = 2 (2%)
- 3 = 13 (15%)
- 4 = 39 (45%)
- 5 = 33 (38%)

Of the evaluators responding to this area, 83% were satisfied or very satisfied. Some commented that they needed clearer directions to the convention center and hotel and more information beforehand about parking. Several evaluators expressed the desire for free hospitality stations throughout the convention center. Of course, it must be remembered that there is nothing free since NCLA must pick up the tab for all services provided. We did pay for the concession stands in the basement to be open during the conference. NCLA had to guarantee the concessionaires \$300 per day in food and beverage sales, but that turned out to be a wise investment and no funds had to be disbursed to make up the minimum required.

Most found the Benton Center very conveniently arranged.

Adam's Mark Hotel: Overall

- N = 70
- 1 = 4 (6%)
- 2 = 4 (6%)
- 3 = 21 (30%)
- 4 = 21 (30%)
- 5 = 20 (28%)

Of the evaluators, 58% were satisfied or very satisfied. The majority of the negative comments had to do with the Adam's Mark Hotel, including parking, service in restaurants, add-on charges, registration, or rooms. The Adam's Mark is the only convenient option, although future conference planners should inform attendees about other motels and bed-and-breakfast establishments in the area. It should be noted that when the Conference Committee viewed the Adam's Mark Hotel back in January 1999, we were afraid that the construction would be nowhere near completed. For example, the beautiful area where the SIRS reception was held was totally under construction. They did not finish the construction in the Terrace area of the West Tower, and this was the source of many complaints. Again, we were at the mercy of construction companies' schedules.

Programming: Content

- N = 88
- 1 = 0 (0%)
- 2 = 3 (3%)
- 3 = 17 (19%)
- 4 = 33 (38%)
- 5 = 35 (40%)

Of the evaluators, over three-fourths (78%) were satisfied or very satisfied. Comments were very complimentary. One evaluator wanted more programs featuring North Carolina authors as speakers. One wanted even more storytelling. The one comment that is true, but we will have to live with: "Too many choices for too few times." One State Department of Public Instruction presentation was described as "excellent pace, relevant, radical change, provocative, timely!" Sorry, there is no hint as to presentation or presenter!

Programming: Variety

- N = 87
- 1 = 0 (0%)
- 2 = 6 (7%)
- 3 = 18 (21%)
- 4 = 33 (38%)
- 5 = 30 (34%)

Seventy-two percent were satisfied or very satisfied. Comments had to do with the fact that "too many related programs [are] scheduled at the same

time." Two conflicting comments were "try to schedule events of interest to school librarians at times that do not coincide or sessions that will repeat" and "too many programs for schools." Is there a win-win opportunity here?

Programming: Speakers

- N = 86
- 1 = 0 (0%)
- 2 = 1 (1%)
- 3 = 18 (21%)
- 4 = 35 (41%)
- 5 = 32 (37%)

Of the evaluators, 78% were satisfied or very satisfied. Some suggested that the General Session speakers did not present "enough factual information to help us achieve specific tasks." Our apologies for this lack of attention to practicalities, but we asked our speakers to speak on the future of librarianship.

Special Events: SIRS Reception

- N = 48
- 1 = 2 (4%)
- 2 = 1 (2%)
- 3 = 6 (13%)
- 4 = 12 (25%)
- 5 = 27 (56%)

Of the evaluators, 81% were satisfied or very satisfied. Ironically, due to financial and logistical reasons, this was the last SIRS reception to be held at a Biennial Conference. NCLA will continue to offer the Intellectual Freedom Award, but outside sponsorship for the award and the reception may not necessarily be donated by SIRS.

Special Events: All-Conference Breakfast

- N = 78
- 1 = 0 (0%)
- 2 = 1 (1%)
- 3 = 7 (9%)
- 4 = 20 (26%)
- 5 = 50 (64%)

The very fact that 90% of the evaluators were satisfied or very satisfied makes it clear that this is a conference event worth repeating. There were complimentary comments on the storytelling and food, but one reaction that it was too hot that Friday morning.

Exhibits

- N = 87
- 1 = 1 (1%)
- 2 = 9 (10%)
- 3 = 17 (20%)
- 4 = 26 (30%)
- 5 = 34 (39%)

Of the evaluators, 69% were satisfied or very satisfied. Some

commented that there seemed to be less variety of vendors. It must be noted that we have no control over this eventuality. No vendor was turned down, with 109 individual vendors reserving over 120 booths. There were at least 2,500 visits to the Exhibits Hall, but we have no way of knowing how many individuals this represents. The revenues from exhibit sales can make or break the conference budget. One vendor remarked that she had never been treated so specially at any other conference at which she had exhibited. She wanted to keep the nametag and lanyard for her scrapbook! Some evaluators wanted more North Carolina authors signing their works. Unfortunately not many authors, from North Carolina or elsewhere, signed up for the conference. Perhaps the next Conference Committee could work more free time for exhibits into what is usually a very crowded, tight schedule.

Registration

N = 87

- 1 = 1 (1%)
- 2 = 3 (4%)
- 3 = 14 (16%)
- 4 = 19 (22%)
- 5 = 50 (57%)

A substantial 79% of the evaluators were satisfied or very satisfied. All of the time and energy spent outside the conference really paid off. There are still kinks to be worked out in future conferences, especially involving ticket sales for events after the preregistration period and at the conference itself.

Publicity

Ironically, this was one area of conference planning that was not addressed on the evaluation form. However, helpful comments were given for the improvement of subsequent conference program booklets and for the improvement of communication at future conferences. One evaluator summed it up by commenting that the "conference program [was] well designed but suggestions for next one: (1) number pages, (2) put day and possibly date along margin on pages of program with schedule, (3) include contents page at front, [and] (4) have Internet stations for attendees — perhaps a vendor would be willing to provide several computers for this purpose in an area adjacent to exhibits." Another evaluator suggested that the program should have included "a list of nearby restaurants and direc-

tions for both lunch and dinner."

Continuing Education Credit for Conference Attendance:

Some evaluations lamented the lack of forms for submitting continuing education credit applications. There were forms for this very purpose in the registration area, but there could have been information in the program booklet. Another suggestion to ponder for future conferences.

Some of the nicest comments were hard to categorize, but should nevertheless be included for the "feel good" effect that they have. One attendee commented that "I am very new to the state and NCLA, and am very impressed. I wish I could take advantage of *all* the sections and round tables as they all have so much to offer. Keep up the good work! I'll be participating." Another evaluator wrote that "the conference overall was very good. It was well organized and the sessions I attended were interesting. The conference planners should take a bow for a job well done."

The best comment, even though one might suspect it came from a member of the hardworking Conference Committee, is saved for last. The evaluator's effulgent comment: "Better than ALA!" Perhaps publicists for future NCLA conferences will find that comment quite quotable. May future conferences continue to elicit such comments!

1997-1999 Conference Committee

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