

LOOKING BACK: A DECADE LATER
by Linda Wolf

The first National Conference on the Teaching of Public Administration and Affairs began in the Fall of 1977 as the result of a conversation among three friends and colleagues. Jim Wolf, Gerry Brown, and I were sharing one of our too infrequent exchanges about the practices of teaching -- a discussion on the patio of our house that went on well past the time when the wine ran out. Our conversation was energizing and I found myself feeling that these opportunities were much too valuable to occur by accident. As we began to verbalize our own needs to "do this more often," it seemed to us that other colleagues might have the same needs. Our conversation shifted to ideas for an expanded sharing experience which was to be the first National Conference on the Teaching of Public Administration and Affairs held in Kansas City, Missouri, May 5th and 6th, 1978.

I would like to describe what it was in our discussion that was so exciting and the ideas and assumptions which we shared about our mutual profession. First, was the notion that teaching was challenging work -- work that demanded an enormous amount of personal energy and commitment. Too often, because of the way in which academics are rewarded, the art of teaching seemed to us to receive little formal attention and nurturing. When we tried to characterize a "good" teacher, we felt that a major variable was whether or not a teacher seemed to enjoy being in the classroom. We recognized that one of the gifts that we gave to one another was a renewed vigor and enthusiasm for our practice, which helped us to "enjoy" the work we did.

A second idea which we shared was that beyond the replenishment of personal energy, we also gave each other information about classroom content and presentation. Jim, for example, was teaching a very exciting introductory course in Public Administration based on the conceptual design of a cognitive map of the field. His explanation was very helpful to me as I was beginning to develop an outline for the same course. We talked about the various informal and unplanned exchanges about good texts, course design, and presentation styles which we had with other colleagues over the years and how useful these chance encounters had been for us.

Finally, we talked about the serendipitous -- the creative solution to old problems and the excitement of a "new" perspective which often characterized our interactions. Having an opportunity to think and talk about our teaching activities could produce quite unintended and stimulating results.

Given these assumptions on our part, we felt the need to invent a way for ourselves and others to spend time together around the issues of teaching public administration. After reviewing exciting opportunities and with full recognition of the monster we might be creating, the notion of a conference was developed.

Unlike conference planners with vested interests in, and support for, the conference subject, we began with the point of view that this new endeavor would only work if others shared our point of view. We agreed on a set of ground rules which guided all of our activities for the planning phase. These rules were:

1. that the conference would need some institutional support, but that it should be a largely free-standing entity so that its future would be dependent upon the interests of participants, not any institutional agenda;
2. that the conference should be small enough to allow for a maximum interchange between participants;
3. that the conference be designed to maximize written and oral interaction;
4. that our role in the conference was only to construct and convene and that beyond day one, the conference belonged to participants;
5. that we have fun.

Somewhere in the midst of the logistical nightmare which accompanies every conference, a key design decision was made. With primary impetus from Gerry and Jim, the conference was organized around a kiosk concept. In order to meet our own ground rules about maximum interaction, and also to accommodate the reality of an almost non-existent budget for room rental, we decided to arrange several small clusters of discussants within one large room. At every time slot, participants could choose to attend a particular cluster and also leave that group to wander into another discussion unit. While the design was a logical way to maximize space and time, it depended upon the willingness of both presenters and discussants to see this occasion as one of real sharing rather than simply conference presentations. We worried a bit about whether or not this difference could be conveyed and once conveyed, whether it would be acceptable to the participants. Frankly, we were afraid that the word "conference" would suggest a norm of behavior that we felt would diminish the quality of the experience.

Our concerns about the design and the entire conference proved groundless. The conference was, and is, a peer exchange, a learning opportunity, a non-bureaucratic experience which will soon occur for the fourth time. The system for selecting papers, and room arrangements and lodging are all much better scrutinized and more sophisticated, but the conference is still the product of the participants. All of those people have provided learning experiences for one another and this document, good as it is, is only the tip of the iceberg.

From the very beginning of our efforts with the first conference several people and institutions played crucial roles in implementing the idea. Dick Heimovics of the University of Missouri at Kansas City (UMKC) became an immediate fourth planning partner. UMKC and the University of Southern California's Washington Public Affairs Center provided both financial and moral support. ASPA and NASPAA personnel contributed time and counsel. Dwight Waldo and Frank Sherwood encouraged our efforts. Since that time other actors: Dave Cox, Memphis State; Ron Hy, University of Mississippi; Ann-Marie Rizzo, Florida International University; Guy Adams, Evergreen State College; Bob Denhardt and Jay White, University of Missouri - Columbia; and H. Brinton Milward, University of Kentucky have allowed the conference to have a life of its own.

Hopefully, this volume will enrich and support our teaching colleagues, especially those who have not been able to attend conferences or who have limited opportunities for patio conversations. Obviously, the expectations of the first planning team have been exceeded but more importantly the expectations of other teachers are not coming to fruition through the continuation of the National Teaching Conference "movement".

From Innovations in Teaching Public Affairs and Administration, Richard Heimovics and Ann-Marie Rizzo, editors.