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Summer 1979

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ARTICLES

The POD Delphi Study, 1978

LANCE C. BUHL and STEPHEN C. SCHOLL

What a supreme irony—and a surefire sign of irrelevance—were the Professional and Organizational Network in Higher Education (POD) to become stagnant, maladaptive, and unresponsive. To stave off these beasts of bureaucratization, the POD Core Committee has regularly utilized some form of membership survey to guide program planning. The most recent attempt at such a democratic strategy began over a year ago. The impetus for the decision evolved out of the Committee's 1977–78 deliberations on defining the mission of POD. Given the charge in October, 1977 to draft such a statement and to manage the Core Committee's decision-making process with respect to it, the authors (Buhl and Scholl) quickly realized that a simple statement, however directional, was not likely to communicate terribly effectively what the organization was about or where it should be heading. It needed some sort of elaboration in terms of underlying values and of recognizable milestones along the way to realizing them. These ought, of course, to be widely shared (even consensually defined) values and markers. The idea of using the delphi process was not especially creative, though it had more than a bit of justice in it: POD itself was the product of some focussed talks among three handfuls of higher education "developers" (about 30 of them) in 1975. Those discussions were informed by a pre-meeting delphi process involving participants in projections about the future of organizational, faculty and instructional development.¹ To augment the Core Committee's decision about a mission statement with another delphi was simply to round

¹ Surveys of interests for program planning were conducted in early and late 1976, and the evaluation of the 1977 National Conference included a survey of conference program preferences. See the article "POD: The Founding of a National Network," *POD Quarterly* (Spring 1979) p. 12, for reference to the May, 1975 conference at Wingspread, Racine, Wisconsin.

out the circle. Hopefully, this route will be traversed in one way or another from time to time in the future. May the paralyzing predators find other organizations to devour!

The delphi and nominal group techniques (NGT) are particularly elegant and powerful aids to group processes aimed at judgmental decision-making. Both ask each member to come up with solutions to a problem statement, array all responses (and clarifications) without regard to source, have all members of the group rank the ideas, pool and array the results of ranking, call upon those furthest from the group's ranking norms to advance reasons for dissent (or to agree with the group's sense of things), and, if necessary, to rerank. The Delphi is typically used with groups spread geographically; NGT is designed for small groups working immediately together. Delphi evolved out of the Rand Corporation in 1950 as a way to help people think systematically, realistically, and practically about the future or, more accurately put, about alternative futures they conceivably faced and among which they could make value choices. Presumably, once having identified a set of highly probable futures, group members would plan accordingly either to increase the likelihood of preferred future states or to decrease the likelihood of ones they had strong reason to fear. NGT was developed initially in 1969 for use in community training and development.²

Three very attractive qualities are associated with these techniques. First, the notion (common to most future forecasting techniques) is that futures are something people have some control over, consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally. Why not, then, increase the level of actual influence people have by getting them psychologically invested in and informed by data that transcends the limits of today's (or, at least, next year's) concerns? Second, these processes orient people's thinking to mediate rather than immediate issues and tend to get people out of mental ruts in which thinking is bound by present conflicts, the personalities associated with them, and the ideas personalities overwhelm. At the least, projects which merely extend the configurations of present

² The best guide to these two approaches is found in Andre L. Delbecq, Andrew H. Van de Ven and David H. Gustafson, *Group Techniques for Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1975).

interpersonal conflicts are portrayed clearly against an array of other possibilities for behavior. The techniques, in this sense, are generative and very possibly regenerative. Third, these devices affirm the synergistic potential of group processes by calling upon and honoring the ideas of each member of the group. The delphi and nominal group techniques are fully consonant with the premise that a group's decisions are most meaningful (most likely to be observed or implemented faithfully) when arrived at through a process of consensus which is informed by the broadest possible spread of ideas within the group. Consensus alone can produce meager fruit if the range of ideas up for consideration is narrow. Often highly influential or visible personalities, by simply suggesting an alternative, shortcircuit the generation and evaluation of ideas. Both delphi and NGT help prevent such shortcircuits by minimizing the influence of personal power. In sum, these qualities seemed especially synchronous with the values of POD.

We faced a challenge. The delphi technique in classic application is elaborate, costly, and time-consuming. Like other POD members, we operate with overburdened budgets and overcommitted schedules; we were volunteers on the project, a labor of love if ever there was one. Our challenge was to preserve the power and integrity of the process but to mold it to fit the decision-making needs of the Core Committee and the constraints (dollars for mailing only and time for very little). Fortunately, the technique is malleable. So, where typically a single representative reference group is used, remaining essentially constant across all iterations of the process, we used three groups (the Core Committee to generate initial statements of desired future states—see Table I below; the membership at large to rank the initial list and to add other statements for future group ranking; and participants at the Annual National Conference of POD). The authors are of the opinion that, rather than “confound” the data, this use of three distinct but overlapping reference groups contributed to the utility of the data for the decision-making purposes of the POD Core Committee. The Core Committee's central concern is to ensure that the organization is responsive to current and potential members.

Where in typical studies the timeframe itself is quite extended (up to twenty-five years) and respondents are asked to indicate probable dates of occurrence for future facts within that period, we set up

a very modest fixed timeframe (by 1985) and asked the membership at large to rank statements both in terms of desirability of occurrence and of probability of occurrence within that schedule. Finally, where delphi studies often call upon group members to think about future facts that will impinge upon their organizations, we opted to follow studies in which respondents are asked to project and to evaluate future statements about the organization itself.

The process was initiated at a two-day meeting of the POD Core Committee, March 18 and 19, 1978. Actually, deliberations during the meeting were three-phased. First, Committee members generated statements about what they thought the organization ought to be doing/looking like in 1985. Second, they grouped all statements into several thematic categories, organized themselves into sub-groups, defined the themes, and refined the goal accordingly. Third, they took one more pass at refining the goal statements, organizing themselves this time into sub-groups according to target populations with whom the organization was concerned (institutions, administrators, faculty, other decision-makers, the membership) and outlining possible approaches to each. The second and third phases worked off the initial data and, while important as vehicles for clarifying ideas and values within the Core Committee, did not lead immediately to a practical plan for action. Indeed, members agreed that the ideas needed some validation and extension by the membership at large.

The next step in the process involved a decision (by the authors) to use the list of future facts generated by the Core Committee during the first phase of the March 18–19 meeting. The statements were revised only to the extent of providing parallel construction and avoiding duplication. The edited list was submitted to members of the Core Committee in late July, 1978 for final editorial suggestion before being submitted to the membership.

During September, the list of 35 goal statements, organized as a delphi questionnaire, was mailed to all POD members. Members were asked to complete the September questionnaire, rating the statements and adding new goals. One hundred and twenty-two members (or 40% of the total membership) responded in time to have their ratings tallied. (October 6 was the deadline, and significant delays in postal delivery undoubtedly affected the response rate.) The results were tabulated by the authors, using a small group

of POD members as referees to settle questions where interpretations of responses were necessary.³

Two iterations of the study were conducted at the Fourth Annual National Conference of POD, November 5–8, 1978. Conference Round #1 asked attendees (1) either to agree with the ranking of responses to 31 future statements that resulted from the membership's responses to the September questionnaire or to rerate the list; (2) to indicate preferred size of the organization in 1985; and (3) to rate (for the first time) 29 goal statements written in by respondents to the September questionnaire. Approximately 35% of the conferees (67) completed and returned the initial conference questionnaire. The responses were tabulated by hand by the authors and a dozen conferees who participated in a workshop on using the delphi process. (A simple computer program and optical scanning of response sheets makes tabulation and analysis of a delphi iteration more efficient. Lack of equipment at the conference site made such technological shortcuts impossible.) The data are summarized in the following Table, arranged in the ranking provided by the Conference Round #1, but including reference to the September questionnaire ranking as well (last column on right: the numbers refer to the rating rank of original Core Committee goals derived from the September iteration; letters refer to goals written-in by the membership in September which were rated highly enough to be ranked or combined with the original statements). In this report only the most highly rated 25 statements were listed, and some goals were rewritten to combine similar ideas.

Conference Round #2 (Table I organized as a questionnaire) represented a deviation from the classical application of the delphi technique. Instead of asking the traditional question—please rate the desirability and probability of each statement—we borrowed from the nominal group technique (not unusual in some delphi adaptations) and asked attendees to select the ten statements from the list of twenty-five most highly ranked goal statements emanating from the first Conference Round and to rank them in order of the importance they attached to those ten. This ranking forced choices among goals which were already judged to be relatively desirable. Forty-six attendees completed Conference Round #2.

³ The September questionnaire tabulation and other questionnaires and reports not published in this brief summary are available from the authors.

TABLE I

By 1985:		Conference Round #1 Ratings ⁴		September Questionnaire Rank
		Desirable	Probable	
Alpha	POD will be a strong personal/professional support network.	4.80	3.47	4
Beta	POD will have regular means and channels for evaluating and sharing information and materials about instructional, professional and organizational development and developers (especially POD members) among members.	4.79	3.74	1
Gamma	POD will provide regular opportunities for interpersonal interaction and personal growth for its members.	4.71	4.27	2
Delta	POD will offer systematic training in useful "developers" skills to members.	4.53	4.02	3
Epsilon	State-level funding and coordinating bodies will be informed of the importance of instructional, professional and organizational development.	4.51	2.87	6
Zeta	POD will have identified the unique development needs of administrators and will be giving attention to them in its activities.	4.33	3.36	7
Eta	POD will increase its offerings of small, inexpensive conferences and workshops.	4.33	3.11	S, Z
Theta	POD will hold an annual meeting which avoids thematic repetition, features well-selected presenters, and attracts most POD members.	4.32	3.68	14, L, K
Iota	POD will have established liaison with AAHE and other appropriate higher education associations.	4.31	3.87	8
Kappa	POD will be an essential organization for instructional, professional and organizational development folks in higher education.	4.28	3.43	10
Lambda	POD will have regular forums at its meetings for the discussion of professional ethics and values associated with "developers" work.	4.26	3.85	5

⁴ Respondents to the September and Conference Round #1 questionnaires were asked to rate each goal statement according first to its desirability and then to its probability, ranging from 5 (most desirable/most probable) to 1 (least desirable/least probable).

TABLE I (Continued)

By 1985:		Conference Round #1		September Questionnaire Rank
		Desirable	Probable	
Mu	POD will have added Canadian members to the Core Committee.	4.24	4.33	J
Nu	POD will have been organized to have the efficiency of a traditional professional association while maintaining the adaptability of a network that meets emerging member needs.	4.22	2.87	16, CC, M
Xi	POD will have annual and long-range plans to support research in instructional, professional and organizational development.	4.18	3.27	9
Omicron	POD will be having impact on foundations.	4.12	2.62	12
Pi	POD will publish a directory of members including relevant vitae.	4.10	3.88	15
Rho	POD's membership will have expanded to include more teachers and administrators.	4.06	3.51	18
Sigma	POD will serve as a model for applying sensible futuristics to its own planning as an organization.	4.05	3.21	B
Tau	POD will have established liaison with institutionally-based associations (such as A.A.C., A.C.E., A.A.S.C.U., etc.).	4.04	3.39	17
Upsilon	POD will develop a matrix of research data needed in relevant fields.	4.01	3.22	20
Phi	POD will nurture communications among foundations, consortia, governmental, and professional association projects.	3.90	2.93	U
Chi	POD will be having impact on learned and professional (discipline-based) societies.	3.90	2.54	11
Psi	POD will actively promote a holistic approach to faculty development, emphasizing the faculty member as a whole person (essence, a "rose") and de-emphasizing her/him as a practitioner only (hired hand, an "orange").	3.81	3.29	T
Omega	POD will have disseminated model institutional programs for learner-centered education.	3.74	3.18	21
Pi Phi	POD will be helping institutions train prospective faculty in teaching and learning skills.	3.72	2.90	13

Table II summarizes the results in terms of a ranking of goals by priority points (Nx rank = priority points).

TABLE II

By 1985:	Priority Points	Number of Responses (N = 46)
1. POD will have regular means and channels for evaluating and sharing information and materials about instructional, professional and organizational development and developers (especially POD members) among members.	342	44
2. POD will be a strong personal/professional support network.	315	38
3. POD will provide regular opportunities for interpersonal interaction and personal growth for its members.	262	35
4. POD will hold an annual meeting which avoids thematic repetition, features well-selected presenters, and attracts most POD members.	237	38
5. POD will offer systematic training in useful "developers" skills to members.	224	34
6. POD will be an essential organization for instructional, professional and organizational development folks in higher education.	158	28
7. POD will increase its offerings of small, inexpensive conferences and workshops.	135	24
8. POD will have identified the unique development needs of administrators and will be giving attention to them in its activities.	111	25
9. POD will have been organized to have the efficiency of a traditional professional association while maintaining the adaptability of a network that meets emerging member needs.	84	21
10. POD will have established liaison with AAHE and other appropriate higher education associations.	79	25
11. POD will have annual and long-range plans to support research in instructional, professional and organizational development.	75	17
12. POD will publish a directory of members including relevant vitae.	66	18
13. State-level funding and coordinating bodies will be informed of the importance of instructional, professional and organizational development.	58	14
14. POD will have regular forums at its meetings for the discussion of professional ethics and values associated with "developers" work.	54	13

TABLE II (Continued)

By 1985:	Priority Points	Number of Responses (N = 46)
15. POD will actively promote a holistic approach to faculty development, emphasizing the faculty member as a whole person (essence, a "rose") and de-emphasizing her/him as a practitioner only (hired hand, an "orange").	45	10
16. POD will nurture communications among foundations, consortia, governmental, and professional association projects.	43	11
17. POD will have disseminated model institutional programs for learner-centered education.	38	8
18. POD will have established liaison with discipline-based associations.	36	10
19. POD will develop a matrix of research data needed in relevant fields.	36	9
20. POD will be helping institutions train prospective faculty in teaching and learning skills.	34	8
21. POD will have added Canadian members to the Core Committee.	32	7
22. POD will serve as a model for applying sensible futuristics to its own planning as an organization.	31	7
23. POD will have established liaison with institutionally-based associations (such as A.A.C., A.C.E., A.A.S.C.U., etc.).	29	8
24. POD's membership will have expanded to include more teachers and administrators.	26	7
25. POD will be having impact on foundations.	4	1

The authors are convinced that the delphi technique, as modified for the purposes of the Core Committee, proved to be a very useful means for testing the representativeness of Core Committee thinking, for maintaining open channels of communication with the members about significant policy-relevant matters, and for enriching the organization's decision-making process. Statistical purists will not be pleased, we're sure, with all the modifications introduced into the process. We cannot, for example, state categorically that completely representative samplings of the group were tapped each round (and especially during the Conference rounds). But, the value of the technique is not to be determined on statistical grounds. The process was open, the tabulations accurate and honest, and the data were meaningful to the Core Committee.

The Core Committee looked at results of the September question-

naire during their deliberations just preceding the National Conference. Sufficient questions about priorities were raised by these intermediate results that several decisions either were shaped directly by the data or were postponed until a further reaction from members and likely members could be solicited through Conference rounds. And, at the last meeting of the Core Committee on the last day of the Conference, the final priority ranking of Goals (Table II) was the sole basis of input as the Committee, through the application of nominal group technique (administered by the authors), reviewed its previous decisions, made adjustments in conformity with the delphi feedback, and modified subcommittee assignments on the basis of what the membership responses suggested were most significant areas for program planning. Interestingly, five "imperatives" for 1979 were distilled by the Core Committee in that final session, using NGT, to add to tasks already confirmed or elaborated by the delphi responses.

Only a small portion of the information gathered by the 1978 delphi study led to major shifts in the direction of POD. Some goals ranked high because they delineated the obvious. But changes based on significant membership consensus are emerging. The beasts of bureaucratization went to the oracle and were confounded.