

1997

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Recommended Citation

Bainer, Deborah L. and Halon, Christine S. (1997) "Voices from the Past," *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*. Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer/vol10/iss1/10>

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Voices from the Past

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This year's annual conference of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association (MWERA) in Chicago was a milestone: the organization's 20th conference. Already, MWERA has a rich and productive history. The organization has established itself as a notable regional body committed to building collegiality, sharing and stimulating research interests, and mentoring graduate students and new faculty. While MWERA limits its efforts in contacting members to 13 midwestern states and Canadian provinces, its actual membership is spread throughout the United States, Canada, and other countries.

This seems like an appropriate time to reflect on MWERA's past, and to ponder the future. To identify benchmarks and aspirations of the organization, past presidents were contacted and asked to respond to two questions. Their responses are reported below.

1. What were the highlights or memorable events during your year as president of MWERA?
2. What suggestions "from the heart" do you have for the organization and its future?

Jean Pierce, 1983-84 ***Northern Illinois University***

"Perhaps the most memorable event was the creation of an electronic forum for mid-western educational researchers, the first of its kind in the nation. The EdResearch Forum was located on CompuServe, since the Internet had not yet started to grow. The idea worked fine for a handful of MWERA members, but in 1983 computer networking was a few years ahead of its time. More use by network-literate researchers was needed to keep the space available to us. By 1985, EdResearch Forum came under the sponsorship of AERA. As Mid-West goes, so goes the nation!

"Periodically reexamining our mission and prioritizing our goals as an organization are crucial. Currently, a top priority is the mentorship of graduate students and new faculty. Perhaps we need to ensure that student voices are represented on decision-making committees. If the main goal is to create a feeling of stability and 'family,' then perhaps we should not put a lot of time and effort into membership recruitment, and we can consider five-year presidency track (Conference Co-Chair, Conference Chair, President-Elect, President, Past President). If a major goal is to promote communication and collaboration among researchers throughout the region, then we could make a stronger effort to ensure that members from a wide variety of states, provinces, and cultures are nominated for leadership positions. If a primary purpose is to promote the implementation of research in classrooms, more could be done to attract elementary and high school educators and to facilitate communication between practitioners and researchers."

John Kennedy, 1984-85 ***The Ohio State University***

"I remember bringing the conference to the Bismarck Hotel in Chicago for the first time. The conference had been held in various places up until then. At that time it was easy

to get accommodations in Chicago but the plane fares were expensive. Plane fares have gone down so it is now a tradition for MWERA to be held in Chicago.

"Also, I launched a membership drive that brought in some key people such as Bob Brennan, Isadore Newman, Don Cruickshank, and Ayres D'Costa. The conference that year was attended by about 250 people.

"MWERA should stay in Chicago. Furthermore, I encourage the organization to maintain its commitment to the presentation of data-based research. Avoid being overly enamored with newer non-empirical research strategies, as quality will suffer. Non-data-based research is like intellectual cancer: we have to live with it for a while, but eventually we must get rid of it. It must be contained and quarantined to limit the degree of its penetration. MWERA must keep, promote, and expand a forum that presents data-based research. Respect for MWERA will grow, unfortunately at the expense of AERA and other organizations, which are being clutched by vacuous, non-data-based research."

Isadore Newman, 1988-89 ***University of Akron***

"I don't know if this is a highlight (to some it may be). As Program Chair, it was the first time I experienced total and complete academic panic. I totally closed down for a couple of hours. It was from this experience that I learned to be more appreciative and sensitive to what program chairs have to do and less critical of minor errors. I learned that people like Dennis Leitner, Ayres D'Costa and Greg Marchant are some of the most supportive people I have ever had the pleasure of working with. Another highlight was the conceptualization of the MWERA journal in its present format by Greg and myself. I believe it would not have come to fruition without the support of the Executive Committee, especially Dennis Leitner.

“I think the MWERA is a wonderful organization to mentor students as well as new faculty into the research culture, introducing them on a first name basis to some of the leading figures in the world. I would like the organization to support these informal get-togethers--dinner, conversations, and chat hours between such figures and our membership, especially new mentees.”

Dennis W. Leitner, 1989-90
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

“Sometime during my ‘tour of duty,’ I got tired of receiving the annual *billet-dous* (rhymes with ‘bill-is-due’) from our distinguished Executive Officer, Charles Anderson, requesting my annual dues. So I simply threw him a check for ten times the annual dues and told him to save the postage. If you know Charles, you know how much he anguished over where to put the money. After two or three years and a revision to the MWERA by-laws, we now have the opportunity for LIFETIME membership in MWERA and 37 people (as of October 1996) have taken advantage of it. Hopefully this will provide a type of financial security for MWERA for many years to come.”

Ayres D’Costa, 1990-91
The Ohio State University

“MWERA has evolved through some little-publicized crises over the years, although its good qualities have persisted despite these crises or perhaps because of them. One MWERA crisis had to do with its journal. The old membership dues were insufficient to support a journal and it was also a newsletter. This issue had caused many a heated debate among Board members and prior presidents. During my tenure on the Board, we presented our needs to the membership and received strong support to increase dues and to continue support for a professional journal under the able leadership of the new editors, Isadore Newman and Greg Marchant.

“The money allocated to the Journal was usually not sufficient, and it was therefore up to the editors to find ways to supplement their budget. Incidentally, this was also a problem faced by incoming program chairs. It would seem that one of the skills needed by editors and program chairs was creative financing. Izzy found a supportive dean at the University of Akron, each of the two editors found other support in their respective departments, and a brand new journal concept was born. Incidentally, the idea of selling a cover photo and write-up to a university for a small fee was part of this creative financing scheme. Also emerging was the raising of money through publisher ads in the Journal and exhibits at the conference, a scheme that Sharon McNeely (current president) made successful through her contact work with publisher representatives.

“In my term as editor, I found similar financial support for the Journal, most prominent of which was Dean Zimpher’s (The Ohio State University) grant to MWERA’s journal. I hope that the concept of a professional journal will be em-

bedded in MWERA and continue to receive support in the future. We deserve to hold our heads high among our professional communities, and our journal will help us do that.

“One of the endearing privileges I enjoyed as an officer of MWERA was the trust and support that I received from members and other officers. As Program Chair and later in another leadership role as President, there was never a concern in my heart that my motivation or dedication were ever questioned. Past presidents would come to tell me that they felt good about what we were doing for MWERA, and that a cardinal rule was for the old guard to give way to the new so that creativity was never stifled. This is the essence of my suggestions to the new Board. Develop this trust in your newer officers so that they can pass on this wonderful torch of faith to their colleagues. Trust will beget trust, and I pray that MWERA will remain small enough to retain this trusting and supportive environment as its primary organizational quality.”

Barbara S. Plake, 1991-92
University of Nebraska, Lincoln

“I recall the transition of our research publication to the *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, thanks in great part to the creative ingenuity of Isadore Newman and Greg Marchant. The quality and appearance of the publication improved dramatically!

“Also, we implemented a plan to encourage more participation by graduate students in the annual business meeting. We offered a free year of membership through raffle at the business meeting with the goal to encourage more graduate students to attend the meeting. However, the person whose name was drawn wasn’t at the business meeting! It seemed counter-productive to the goal of encouraging more graduate students to attend the meeting to award the prize to someone who wasn’t in attendance. But we did anyway!

“What sticks in my mind about the organization is the people who constitute the organization. So many supportive folks! During my term as an officer, I suffered some very severe family crises and the members of the organization were wonderfully supportive and helpful. One time the Board of Directors met in Lincoln, Nebraska, in the dead of winter to accommodate my restrictions on travel due to family constraints.

“I like to encourage my graduate students to attend the meetings because I know they will be treated with respect and they will get an excellent orientation into attending and presenting at conferences.”

Ken Kiewera, 1992-93
University of Nebraska, Lincoln

“What was most memorable was organizing the conference with the Executive Committee. We made some changes and tried some new things. Typically, we had a keynote speaker and guest speaker. We wanted to have a slate of invited speakers so we invited Carol Ames, Michael Pressley, and Joel Levin. It’s nice to see that many of the new things we tried have continued. Also, I had a hand in assembling a

team of editors and I felt really good about that. They did a great job of taking over the responsibility from Izzy.

“We should keep MWERA our own. We should keep it intimate, unassuming and down-home. It’s a place for grad students the cut their teeth. On the other hand, we need to bring in the Big Guns, the role models who will both inform and inspire us. I remember my having a beer with Michael Pressley in the lounge and learning so much about his work. I like that we’re concerned about taking care of ‘our own’ but we need to get a sense of prominent ideas that are out there and how the people behind these ideas go about doing their work. MWERA is where we rub shoulders with the big names in our field.”

Richard Pugh, 1993-94
Indiana University

“My memories of my year as President are many and were very professionally rewarding. The number-one highlight during my year as President was launching the historical study of MWERA. I remember writing the RFP and publishing it in the *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*. I remember appointing a review committee to consider the proposals which we received. I remember notifying Terri Strand that her proposal was the one selected by the Review Committee. The presentation from the study by Terri at the recent annual meeting and the scheduling of a symposium on the historical study followed.

“The second event that I remember the most was receiving a phone call from Charles Anderson one day. He called to tell me that he had become ill and could not continue as Executive Officer. After our conversation, it was evident that we needed to move ahead and identify a new Executive Officer. I gave a sigh of relief when I checked the by-laws and found that the MWERA constitutional representatives had anticipated such an event and had included in the by-laws the procedural steps for identifying an Executive Officer. Following these procedures, the President and MWERA were permitted to move smoothly through the process of appointing Jean Pierce as the new Executive Officer. I wish to thank the constitutional representatives who had developed the procedures and thank Jean Pierce for accepting the offer and skillfully handling a transition period as the responsibilities shifted to her.

“My suggestions ‘from the heart’ are to keep the invited speakers in the program. They are the standard-setters. Keep the sessions which fall under the category of social: the Cracker Barrel, President’s Reception, and luncheon. These are part of the MWERA icon. Finally, always try new things at the annual meeting. Take a chance; be a risk taker!”

Thomas Andre, 1994-95
Iowa State University

“The major event was the change in hotel. The Bismarck had been our home and, more importantly, offered cheap hotel rates in the downtown area. As MWERA is a second and unfunded conference for many people, keeping

the expense down was important. Many people had strong feelings for the nostalgia of the Bismarck, but others viewed it as a run down sleaze pit. Thus the change was accomplished with much soul-searching. It turns out to have been a good decision, especially since the Bismarck is closing, I hear.

“The IRS-tax fiasco was also a traumatic experience. Essentially we thought we might be liable for considerable back taxes. As it turned out, we had tax exempt status all along. The import, maybe, of the event was, don’t worry too much until you are sure of the facts.

“The most memorable events of the past few MWERA conferences for me have been the quality of the invited speakers. Mike Pressley, Joel Levin, John Bransford, Jere Brophy, Carol Shakeshaft, Carol Ames, Robert Slavin, and many others have given exceptionally fine talks which extend the members’ knowledge about currently important events and issues in educational research. After the trials and tribulations of committee meetings, faculty meetings, territorial battles, and the other minutia of faculty life, it is nice to be reminded of the intellectual elegance that attracted one to this profession.”

Greg Marchant, 1995-96
Ball State University

“Six years ago the first issue of the *Mid-Western Educational Researcher* was published as a journal instead of a newsletter. Isadore Newman and I took on the task as editors to create a journal that contained articles and features that would be ‘user-friendly’ to our membership. Three years later Ayres D’Costa, Susan Brookhart, and John Surber took the reins. It fell upon me, as my first major decision as President, to appoint the next editors. After careful review of proposals and approval of the Board of Directors, I appointed the team that produced this, their first issue: Deb Bainer, Richard Smith, and Gene Kramer.

“Probably some of the most memorable events for any MWERA President actually occurred two years earlier during the term as Vice-President/Program Chair. The conference which I organized two years ago included some of the biggest names in educational research and attracted over 400 members, the largest attendance ever for a MWERA annual meeting. It was also during that conference that the need to change hotels became solidified. It was gratifying to have the first annual meeting at the Holiday Inn Mart Plaza during my presidency, and for it to be such a success.

“I guess my suggestions for MWERA is not that different than those I would have for any organization, department, or group. Know and respect your history, but dare to be bold in new attempts. Work to facilitate inclusion, rather than practice exclusion. Trust people to do their best and what is right until they prove otherwise. Never underestimate the possibility that things can go wrong; but if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it. Remember that people are people, to be respected as professionals and cared for as friends. I believe that MWERA already operates with these suggestions in mind. It is my hope that the Association will continue to attract members who will carry on this tradition.”