

A College Planning Conference

H. M. HAMLIN

Members of the faculty of the College of Education, University of Illinois, in commenting on the experience which the group had in a pre-school planning session, reveal their enthusiasm for it as a way of group attack upon common problems. H. M. Hamlin, professor of agricultural education, College of Education, University of Illinois, describes the way in which the faculty considered matters of group concern and evaluates results in view of future planning.

IT IS "NEWS" when a college does anything democratically. Hence there may be news value in the report of a planning conference of the College of Education of the University of Illinois, held just before the opening of the current school year. Democratic procedures were used in the conference and the meeting was used to further such procedures during the ensuing year.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLANS AND PROCEDURES

In June, 1947, when the dean of the College of Education proposed to the Executive Committee the idea of a staff planning conference, the situation was such that such a conference seemed particularly appropriate. About fifty of the staff members for 1947-48 had been on the staff in 1946-47; about fifty were new to the staff. The dean of the College, the dean of the Graduate School, and the president of the University had each been at the University one year or considerably less. The budget of the College for 1947-48 was to be approximately double the budget for 1946-47.

The purposes of the conference evolved steadily from the time it was proposed until it ended. Some of the principal ones seemed to be these:

- ✦ To promote acquaintance among staff members and to build staff morale
- ✦ To introduce and orient new staff members
- ✦ To select some of the principal objectives to be pursued during 1947-48 and later
- ✦ To consider changes in programs and new programs
- ✦ To find better ways of communicating with each other and of cooperating in policy-making
- ✦ To try out and improve methods of group conference adapted to our staff meetings and to those held by individual staff members with other groups.

The Executive Committee, and later the faculty, accepted the proposal unanimously. A Conference Planning Committee was authorized by the faculty, and three persons were appointed to the Committee. The Central Committee of three immediately added Committees on Arrangements, Procedures, and Recommendations. About a week before the Conference convened a committee was provided to plan a staff social event.

Planning for the Conference Program

A letter was sent to all current members of the staff in July, 1947, asking opinions regarding the time and place of holding the conference and requesting suggestions on subjects to be discussed.

About sixty-five subjects were submitted for consideration. The sixty-five subjects proposed were organized into categories and the lists thus organized were placed in the hands of the dean, the Executive Committee, and the Conference Planning Committee.

The Conference Committee submitted a proposed program at a meeting with the dean and the Executive Committee. The proposals of the Committee were rather severely criticised, but the committee was empowered to draft a final program and distribute it to the staff. The Central Committee members conferred with as many members of the staff as possible before making a new draft of the program. A tentative program was mailed to staff members before the close of the eight-weeks summer term; the final program was mailed about September 20.

The program, as finally drawn up, put its emphasis upon three matters: the Objectives and the Program of the College, Staff Participation in Policy-Making, and Communication. A staff group was provided for each of these areas to make recommendations to be reported to the entire Conference group.

The committee did not follow precisely the recommendations of the staff as to subjects discussed. About three-fourths of the questions submitted by the staff were in the area of Objectives and Program. About a dozen questions in the area of Communication were raised by the staff. Little was proposed by the staff in the area of staff participation in Policy-Making. The committee, however, believed that it was quite as important to find ways in which staff members might work together as to discover common purposes and to organize

a program. It held that crucial problems of communication and participation had to be solved to provide the unity and morale needed to accomplish an important program.

Compromising on Procedure

The committee discovered varying views among staff members as to the procedures which might be used at the conference. One group held that all formal talks should be omitted and that group thinking and planning should begin at the outset of the Conference. Others wanted to use considerable time in set talks which would orient and inspire the staff, particularly the new members. A compromise of these views was adopted. The first day was planned to include a talk by the dean and short talks by members of the Executive Committee and other staff members. The next day-and-a-half was given over to meetings of three groups to discuss the three principal questions before the Conference. The final two sessions were arranged to allow the Conference as a whole to pass upon recommendations from these groups.

Making Assignments

It was necessary to decide whether staff members would have their choice of groups in which to participate or whether assignments should be made. The final decision was that the Conference Committee should assign each staff member to a group.

Some persons who could have made important contributions to other groups were assigned to fields which may not have been their major interests because it was believed that their presence was needed in these groups. Persons from

the same department or group in the college were distributed among the various conference groups. Interests of participants were recognized to the extent that this could be done. Many of the new staff members were not well enough known to be assigned intelligently; these were distributed among the three groups almost at random.

Deciding on Personnel

Group leaders were chosen for their known ability and experience as discussion leaders; rather than because they were specialists in the subjects to be discussed. An attempt was made to secure persons as impartial as possible with respect to the issues likely to be raised in their groups.

A recorder was provided for each discussion group who was believed to have ability in preparing and organizing written materials, and who would be sensitive enough to all of the reactions of the group to record and report group sentiments faithfully.

Consideration was given to providing an evaluator for each group. This proposal was waived in favor of setting up a Committee on Procedures with one member from each group and one member at large. This Committee was charged with studying procedures in the entire conference, with special attention to the three discussion groups. The member of the committee in a particular group was asked to advise the group leader, offering suggestions as to how the group might make more progress. He was also asked to raise procedural questions with the entire group from time to time. Three opportunities were provided for the Committee on Procedures to discuss procedures with

the entire Conference: at the opening of the Conference, at a general session following one day of group work, and at the final session. Time did not permit the third appearance of the Committee.

The Committee on Recommendations was composed of a chairman and the leaders and recorders from each of the three discussion groups. The Committee was authorized to keep in touch with the work of all discussion groups and to keep each group informed of interests shared with any other group. Recommendations formulated by the groups were to be passed to the Recommendations Committee as soon as adopted.

The Recommendations Committee was scheduled to meet from noon to 2:00 PM on the last day of the Conference to review, organize, and edit the recommendations submitted by the various groups. It was empowered to omit, rewrite, and add new recommendations—the set of recommendations resulting to be presented to the Conference by the Chairman of the Recommendations Committee.

The Committee on Arrangements provided rooms in the Union Building for meetings of the entire staff, for group meetings, for meetings of subgroups, and for an office. With the cooperation of the clerical staffs, typing and mimeographing services were made available. Arrangements were made for messages to conference members to be delivered at the Conference office. The committee arranged for the showing of motion pictures and also made provisions for chairs, blackboards, and other facilities, and for physical comfort, including ventilation and eating arrangements.

Preparing for Special Responsibilities

Fourteen persons, including the Central Committee and the Committees on Arrangements, Procedures, and Recommendations, were invited to attend two meetings preceding the Conference. On Friday evening, September 26, one-and-a-half hours were devoted to discussion of the purposes of the Conference; the general arrangements which had been made; the functions of each session in the total conference program; and the duties of the committees, leaders, and recorders. Following the general meeting, each committee met separately.

On Saturday forenoon, September 27, the same people devoted two hours to consideration of the methods to be used in the group meetings. Much of the pre-planning of the Conference was dedicated to setting up a Conference situation as planless as possible. The Planning Committee agreed that it wished to turn the Conference over to the participants with no unnecessary restrictions upon the actions it could take and under conditions which would bias as little as possible. It was agreed that parliamentary procedures would be minimized. In the group meetings proposed recommendations were to be revised until generally acceptable or the subjects discussed were to be cited for further study with suggestions as to the issues involved. It was conceded that parliamentary procedures would be necessary in dealing with the group recommendations in the final sessions of the Conference.

Providing for Evaluation

At the conclusion of the Conference, the group voted to ask the dean to appoint a committee to evaluate the Con-

ference. The motion, sponsored by the Conference Planning Committee, was accompanied by two recommendations: (1) that none of the twenty participants in Conference committees be included in the membership of the evaluation committee; (2) that both immediate reactions and relatively permanent outcomes be determined.

CONFERENCE RECOMMENDATIONS RESULTING IN ACTION

The Conference made about twenty major recommendations to the faculty of the College of Education. These were acted upon in three long faculty meetings and the essentials of most of them were adopted by the College. Some of the principal recommendations which have become a part of the official policy of the College are:

1. Extension of many of the privileges of faculty members to persons on the staff but not on the faculty, including a number of teachers in University High School
2. Authorization of the development of a long-time program for the College based on thorough study of social relationships and trends, evaluation of the current program, and of innovations in the program
3. Study of the organization of the College and development of an organization better suited to present needs
4. Decision to change the Executive Committee of the College, which has consisted of five professors or associate professors elected by the faculty to a Policy Committee, of eight elected members chosen by the entire staff with a specification that only three members must be associate or full professors
5. Study of salary and promotion policies, staff load, and assignment
6. Development by the staff of a definite policy and plan for the University school
7. Placement of priority in the immediate

future on the study of the organization and financing of the state school system

8. Agreement on conducting school surveys free and on a participatory rather than an inspectional basis
9. Acceptance of workshops as a regular part of the program of the College with credit provided when appropriate
10. Acceptance of an experimental program of teacher education
11. Organization of the personnel teaching undergraduate courses so that a more definite sequence of courses may be achieved.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE CONFERENCES

Although there was general satisfaction with the conference as it was planned and conducted, the Conference Planning Committee found reasons for dissatisfaction and made the following suggestions for future conferences:

1. Begin work on the conference not later than March.
2. Since the University opens earlier next year, it will be necessary to call the conference earlier.
3. Reduce "preliminaries" to one half-day and reduce the time given to talks.
4. Provide group sessions the first afternoon and the second day.
5. Leave the second evening open for work of the Recommendations Committee.
6. Devote the third day to consideration of group recommendations by the entire conference.
7. Again limit the conference to three days.
8. Avoid evening meetings, except for the meeting of the Recommendations Committee already mentioned and possible recreational activities.
9. Schedule subjects with more attention to their interest possibilities. For ex-

ample, the consideration of salaries and promotions on the first day might well have been left to the end of the meeting to revive a lagging discussion. In general, the most interesting subjects should be placed at the beginning and at the end of the conference and at the beginning and at the end of each session.

10. The Conference this year had about the complement of committees and officials it needed. The organization should be kept as simple as possible.
11. Some of the practices used at this Conference which seemed rather desirable may be inappropriate for the other conferences. The device of presenting a considerable number of speakers the first day helped us, and particularly those of us who are new, to become acquainted. A staff tea was appropriate this year but may be unnecessary and unwelcome next year. There was deference this year to the many new staff members; they were encouraged to ask questions about College practices and routines; such questions might not be in place if and when the staff becomes composed largely of persons familiar with our customs. There may have been good reasons for bringing the Executive Committee before the group this year, but there may be no occasion for using that Committee or the Policy Committee in this fashion again. One of the great virtues of this Conference was that it had no precedents; the Committee will be greatly alarmed if this conference is regarded as a precedent to be rigorously followed. Meetings of this sort can be kept alive and fresh only by continual alterations in procedures.
12. The Conference Planning Committee, rather than a separate committee, should evaluate the conference and plan for evaluation as it makes its other plans.

Copyright © 1948 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.