

# **“Some of My Best and Closest Friends are to be Found There”: Faculty Perceptions of the Cancellation of a Professional Conference**

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## **Abstract**

*An e-mail survey was designed to investigate faculty members' perceptions about the unexpected cancellation of a national conference. Responses from 24 faculty (15 men and 9 women) were analyzed for conceptual themes. Results suggested that professional conferences have multiple meanings for faculty members, including emotional ties to colleagues and to the body of literature, and pragmatic issues related to the business of professional organizations. The loss of these benefits as a result of the cancellation of a conference causes some disturbance in the emotional, social and professional lives of faculty. The cancellation of a national meeting also has positive benefits in the lives of faculty members, such as unexpected free time.*

**Keywords:** faculty, professional conferences, professional relationships

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## **Introduction**

### *Background*

In September of 1998, the annual National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Congress in Miami Beach Florida was canceled due to a serious threat from Hurricane Georges. The conference, which was to begin on Wednesday, September 23, was canceled just minutes before the scheduled start time because the best meteorological models predicted that the storm would make landfall near Miami Beach sometime Friday. The Convention Center was closed by order of the Mayor of Miami Beach, and city officials required NRPA to cancel the Congress. The Convention Center serves as a major evacuation shelter for the Miami Beach area, and emergency management agencies took control of the Center on Wednesday. City officials ordered the beach front hotels at which conference attendees were housed to close by mid-day Thursday.

This emergency abruptly changed the plans of thousands of people who had intended to participate in the Congress. Those already in Miami Beach were advised to book flights home at the earliest opportunity. Others learned of the cancellation and evacuation when their flights arrived at the Miami airport on Wednesday - they too were advised to book return flights. Some learned of the cancellation before they left home, or at intermediate destinations along their travel route, and never arrived in Miami. Fortunately for the residents of Miami Beach, Georges turned out to sea on Friday and the Miami Beach coastal area was spared any serious damage.

The Society of Park and Recreation Educators (SPRE), an academic group affiliated with NRPA, was to hold its annual research symposium, business meetings and awards banquet at the NRPA Congress. The unexpected, and unprecedented, cancellation of the conference created an opportunity to study the perceptions that faculty members held about this annual gathering. How did faculty feel about missing the conference? What were the personal and professional implications of such an event?

### *Related Literature*

There are few published reports dealing with faculty members' experiences at professional conferences. Writers have examined such issues as the costs of faculty travel to attend conferences (Reiland, 1996), the relationship between journalists and researchers at conferences (Fenton, Bryman, Deacon, & Birmingham 1997), problems with the format and structure of academic conferences (Zare, 1998), and the possibility that virtual or electronic meetings will replace traditional conferences (Guernsey, 1996). Other studies examined interpersonal status issues among conference attendees (Hall, 1996), and the tradition of using conference presentations to improve research studies before submission to academic journals (Drott, 1995).

There is also a small body of anecdotal literature in which writers describe purported benefits of attending professional conferences. These assumed positive aspects of conference attendance have included: reinvigorating faculty members (Grissom, 1996), providing a place to deal with controversial academic issues (Thompson, 1999), helping faculty to stay current in their specialty fields (Wortley, 1997), providing a place to explore job leads (Menagh, 1996), providing opportunities for graduate students to network and learn to present papers (Dolan, Kropf, O'Connor, & Ezra 1997; Eggen, 1997; Hill, 1997; Stocker, 1998), and creating opportunities for specialty caucuses to meet (Fletcher, 1997).

However, a literature search uncovered no previous empirical research that examined the perceptions that faculty hold about conference attendance. Therefore the present study was designed to investigate faculty members' perceptions about the meanings and purposes of a professional conference, following the unexpected cancellation of that conference.

## Method

This study was an e-mail survey of subscribers to an electronic listserve called SPRENET. SPRENET is a managed listserve that contains approximately 380 subscribers, most of whom are faculty members in academic programs associated with parks, recreation, leisure studies, natural resources or tourism. The list also contains students and practitioners in these areas. I sent the following message to SPRENET on Wednesday September 30, 1998 (one week after the conference was canceled):

"I have talked to several friends who described their reactions, feelings or thoughts about this unprecedented event. Colleagues here at Nebraska say they've never heard of a national conference being canceled. It seems to me to be a natural opportunity to do research about the meaning and purpose of such meetings in a group of scholars. I am being deliberately vague here so as not to nudge you in a particular direction. What I'm curious about is this: What are the reactions and impressions you have to the cancellation of the conference? What thoughts or feelings do you have about not being able to attend the conference? How will this effect you personally or professionally?

Please respond to me directly rather than to SPRENET. Thanks for your help on this."

A total of 24 faculty members sent e-mail responses to this message. One faculty member wrote three messages, which were treated as one response for the purpose of this study. Responses were received over a three week period. The first five responses were received on Wednesday, September 30 - the same day the original message was sent; fifteen responses arrived on October 1; three on October 2; one on October 5; and the last response arrived on October 19. The e-mail messages varied in length from 8 lines to 61 lines. The average message was 27 lines long, and contained 340 words.

The 24 respondents included faculty members from 23 colleges and universities. Respondents had institutional affiliations from ten large "flagship" universities, eight regional universities, and five smaller colleges. These institutions were located in 14 U.S. states and one Canadian province. E-mail responses were received from 9 women and 15 men.

## Results

### *Data Analysis Strategy*

Verbal data from all 24 faculty respondents were analyzed using a method recommended by Coffey and Atkinson (1996). I started by reading all comments several times to get a broad sense of the content and tone of the responses. Then each relevant comment or segment of comment was coded to reflect its central construct (e.g., "how to account for the work we did"). These individual coded comments were then sorted so

that similar codes could be grouped together into themes (e.g., "how to account for the work we did" and "fewer things to count at the end of the year" were grouped into the theme "Recognition"). A set of 15 initial themes was developed, but further sorting resulted in the collapse of some themes into others (e.g., "Recognition" and "Student Issues" were collapsed into the final theme "All the important business that we get accomplished is now disrupted."). This last stage of collapsing was done to eliminate overlap or redundancy in the original themes, with the goal of developing a smaller number of distinct themes.

### *Findings*

This data analysis process yielded five final themes, each of which will be discussed below (a complete list of all comments is available from the author). Themes are listed in descending order according to the number of comments that were included in the theme. That is, the first theme included the greatest frequency of comments, and so on. Each theme is labeled with a direct quote from a respondent.

1. *"Some of my best and closest friends are to be found there."* Faculty members described several important and positive benefits that they missed when the conference was canceled. Many of these comments focused on the friendships and collegial relationships that were the central aspect of their conference experience. The NRPA Congress was a time to "establish, re-establish and maintain" personal and professional connections. One respondent wrote,

"There is definitely a less tangible loss that comes from a missed annual meeting. That is the reaffirmation of working relationships through face-to-face contact. In this day and age of e-mail...we tend to forget the human compassion side. At our conference we spend time together in work and play...Suffice to say, annual meetings provide the important affirmations that we need in order to work together throughout the year in a trusting and secure relationship."

Others observed that they regretted the loss of social and personal aspects of the conference more than the professional aspects, saying that they missed the "companionship" and the "neighborhood of fellowship." One faculty member missed being with "old and dear friends who I once spent too much time with (in graduate school) and now see all too infrequently."

There was also a group of comments related to the lost opportunity to stay current with colleagues' research and new ideas. One respondent wrote, "I work hard to keep up with what my peers are doing, and although I subscribe to and read the journals, nothing replaces the Leisure Research Symposium (LRS) for thought-provoking, cutting-edge discussions and commentary...I'll miss the reinvestment in my scholarship that usually results from the interactions at LRS." Another said, "I'll miss the new ideas from young presenters."

Some respondents said that they would miss the chance to discuss their own research, "...it is satisfying to know that your colleagues find your work of interest. This is immediate feedback that you don't get with a publication." and "This was supposed to be my first solo presentation and the first opportunity for me to share my dissertation ideas. Although I was anxious...I was looking forward to connecting with other people who are doing similar research."

2. *"All the important business that we get accomplished is now disrupted."* Respondents described several pragmatic losses related to tasks and activities that traditionally are conducted during the annual conference. Faculty members wrote about undergraduate students who intended to search for internships, and graduate students hoping to identify doctoral programs. Other students were to be honored as Future Scholars and missed the mentorship experiences. Departments hoped to search for new faculty members and chairs, and faculty members hoped to find jobs.

Respondents described many tasks and meetings related to SPRE, to editorial boards, to collaborative grants, and other activities they had been scheduled to complete at the conference. Others lost the chance to become credentialled (as accreditation visitors, etc.) or to earn CEU's.

A major pragmatic issue that emerged was related how one documented work that was to have been done at the conference, "I hope that my efforts in reviewing that large bunch of abstracts is still considered a worthy use of my time." One respondent worried about expending travel money without a clear payoff in vita lines, "A smaller pot of beans to count at the end of the year may mean a lower raise." Respondents wondered how to cite paper and poster presentations and other conference tasks, "As an untenured faculty member, I am puzzled how involvement in this conference should be included on my vita. I was coordinating an event that never occurred." and "How do I list a poster if it was accepted but never delivered? Is it ethical?" (This issue was debated on the SPRENET list in the days after the cancellation.) And the ultimate practical issue was money, "Will the dean pay the travel bill...can I afford it on my credit card if he doesn't?"

3. *"I feel a real void."* Some respondents described negative emotions that accompanied the cancellation of the conference and the loss of perceived benefits, "I had several fairly strong reactions to arriving in Miami only to find the conference was canceled. Firstly, I felt abandoned...On a professional level, the cancellation of the meeting increases my feelings of fragile isolation." Others picked up this theme, "I drove with four students...the faces on the students were indescribable - disappointment, disbelief, dismay and anger." One respondents expressed feelings of incompleteness, "I was so geared up to present my sessions...(then) no sense of accomplishment."

There were also feelings of concern for colleagues who were in Miami, "Are my faculty OK - are my students OK - did they get reservations - calls back to the secretary to find out if others at NRPA got out." A few respondents expressed fear about the possibility of being in the path of an unpredictable hurricane, "I was concerned about my

safety first, then getting stuck there indefinitely, then third about contributing to the problem..."

4. "There was really no choice but to cancel it." Respondents by and large understood and accepted the decision to cancel the conference. Nonetheless, many expressed frustration that a conference had been scheduled in Miami during hurricane season, "There was this sense of incredulousness.." and "The decision to hold Congress in Miami in September was one I questioned from the start." Some faculty members were disappointed with NRPA's response to the crisis, "NRPA didn't seem to have a back-up plan for the events that occurred." and "I called the Congress infoline at 8:30 am on Wednesday and the woman indicated that there were no plans to cancel and they were not discouraging people from coming."

But all respondents also expressed their perception that the cancellation was required and justified, "We not only would have been endangered, but we would have been in the way." and "The decision to cancel cannot be questioned. Not only would we have been in harm's way, but think of all the service workers who had their families and property to worry about." One faculty member summarized it well, "As tourists, we were out of our element and not experienced in dealing with this type of disaster."

5. *"It wasn't the worst thing to have happen."* Some respondents described unexpected positive outcomes as a result of the cancellation. One person was energized by the thought of being in a large storm, "I was looking forward to weathering a hurricane if it were to come." Others noted the benefits of a shorter trip, "Not being at the conference afforded a 'windfall' of time." and "On the flip side, I find attending NRPA stressful, in one way it was nice to not have that stress this year." One respondent described turning a 71 hour drive with students into a positive experience, "We made the best of our roadtrip...we discussed it was like any other outdoor recreation program where weather can make or break it. I got to practice what I teach—leisure and recreation." Two faculty wrote that they were in some sense "relieved" to hear of the cancellation—because they had not been able to attend the conference and were glad not to have missed anything.

Finally, a few respondents noted that the experience was unique and made good fodder for recollection. "This is the kind of trip that creates memories and stories that will last." and "Upon returning there was a lot of telling stories about spending 36 hours in Miami Beach."

## Discussion

### *Limitations of the Study*

Results of this study should be interpreted within the context of the sample of participants who responded to the e-mail survey. The extent to which this group is representative of SPRENET subscribers, or of all faculty members who attend the NRPA Congress, is unknown. While representativeness is sometimes viewed as irrelevant to

qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), some qualitative methodologists encourage researchers to consider the generalizability or transferability of knowledge gained from qualitative analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Schofield, 1990). The transferability of the present findings is difficult to judge. The participants did include faculty members who teach at a variety of colleges and universities in several states and one province, and did include a relative balance of men and women. To the extent that this group is similar to some larger group, the experiences of the respondents might be similar to those of other faculty members.

### *Interpreting the Findings*

The results suggest that professional conferences have multiple meanings for faculty members. These include emotional ties to colleagues and to the body of literature, and pragmatic issues related to the business of professional organizations. The cancellation of the conference seemed to be an event with considerable significance and meaning that caused faculty members to think consciously about the roles that the conference plays in their personal and professional lives. Respondents wrote comments like, "Since the moment I learned that the conference was canceled, I have been reflecting on the different ways that I/we have been affected." Some respondents even noted that they had already been talking with others about the meaning of the conference and its cancellation, "Just yesterday I was talking to a colleague here at (university) and she said she was just going through the motions a work. NRPA is usually her stimulation and pick-me-up for the fall semester." Obviously this was a noteworthy and influential event in the lives of most respondents.

These empirical findings complement previous anecdotal evidence in the literature concerning professional meetings. For example, two articles in the published literature describe the aftermath of canceled conferences. In both cases, the canceled conference was a trade group meeting rather than an academic gathering. But the responses are similar to the findings of the present study. One writer (Cringely, 1999), describes his frustration when Microsoft canceled its annual Professional Developers Show. A second paper describes the permanent cancellation of an annual Food Marketing trade show (Snyder, 1996). The author writes movingly of the meaning the conference had for past participants. Although it was widely known that the sponsoring organization might have to discontinue the conference, the author states that the news was "...a shock, like a death in the family" (p. 133). He goes on to say "The people in the supermarket non-foods business are like a family...where friendships are long-lasting and where newcomers get a warm feeling of being a part of something important and exciting." (p. 133). This seems very similar to the sentiments expressed by the SPRENET respondents.

It may also be useful to place the findings from the present study into the context of the broader literature concerning faculty lives and faculty development. Many of the themes that emerged here have been discussed by others who are trying to understand the processes and outcomes at play in faculty careers. For example, the most prevalent

theme in this study was concerned with the role that the LRS has in establishing and maintaining relationships between faculty members. The literature has demonstrated that these relationships, both on campus and with more distant colleagues, are a central determinant of faculty job satisfaction. This finding held true among faculty in U.S. universities (Clark, 1997; Winstead, Derlega, Montgomery & Pilkington, 1995), and several international universities (Lacy & Sheehan, 1997).

Previous research demonstrated that creating collegial connections and friendships is a primary strategy used by faculty members to overcome the fragmented and isolated nature of modern higher education. It is worth noting that the experience of isolation on home campuses may be especially pointed for African American faculty members (Krenzin, 1995; Thompson & Dey, 1998), other minority faculty members (Johnsrud & Sadao, 1998), and women (Riger, Stokes, Raja & Sullivan, 1997). Collegial connections, such as those fostered at national meetings like LRS, may be even more important for faculty who feel marginalized at their home institutions.

Confirming the findings from the present study, Parson, Sands & Duane (1992) found that professional affiliations outside the home campus, such as national colleague networks, were reported to be a major source of professional support for male and female faculty members. Research has also suggested that faculty members look to national networks to provide them with professional socialization, career information and access to current research (Rose, 1985), precisely paralleling the themes found in the SPRENET group.

## Conclusion

National annual meetings of faculty members are important events with many significant benefits. The loss of these benefits as a result of the cancellation of a conference causes some disturbance in the emotional, social and professional lives of faculty. The cancellation of a national meeting also seems to be cause for reflection about the meanings and purposes of the conference—which may be an unexpected positive benefit.

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