
WHCLIS II: A delegate's perspective

by Katherine F. Mawdsley

*Associate University Librarian, Public Services
University of California, Davis*



THE WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON
LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES
1991

Back at work in late July after a week as a professional delegate to the second White House Conference on Library and Information Services (WHCLIS), I initially relied on facile answers to the recurrent questions: **What was it like?** Exhausting, stimulating, frustrating, incredibly, if not impossibly, compressed; a case study in organizational behavior and decision-making. But I met some wonderful people, and I'm glad I was there. **Will it do any good?** It could. Much will depend on how the report presents the recommendations and how constituencies mobilize afterward to shape and pursue the issues. We were told repeatedly that WHCLIS was intended to be "a process, not an event," and the wisdom of the aphorism became increasingly clear.

No one asked me, "**Was it relevant to academic libraries?**" That question has an easy answer, too: Absolutely!

After some time spent not thinking about WHCLIS, the opportunity to review the recommendations in the draft final report was most encouraging. It reinforced and confirmed my sense that there was a remarkable degree of shared purpose and cohesion among the delegates. From an amazing and exhilarating variety of perspectives and backgrounds, almost 700 delegates and 1,000 other participants grappled with issues and labored to refine and articulate concepts originally expressed in over 700 ways. Out of a seemingly impossible morass, a number of themes emerged with clarity and importance as the week went on.

The process was enhanced by preliminary statements and background material many professional organizations, including ACRL, had prepared. Several of the resolutions on major topic areas quickly found strong support because they were embodied in carefully phrased proposed resolutions brought to the conference by well-prepared delegates. The resolution that drew the greatest number of votes in a ballot to choose the 15 issues of greatest interest

was an Omnibus Children and Youth Literacy Through Libraries Act developed by the Association for Library Services to Children. Pervading the conference was an awareness of the ultimate cost of neglecting development of lifelong literacy.

Receiving the second highest number of votes was the resolution on the National Research and Education Network, taken word for word from the publication prepared by the ACRL Task Force on WHCLIS. As a member of the Technology Topic Group at WHCLIS, I read ACRL's language into an early working session. The phrasing was superior to any other wording presented for consideration. It sailed through all subsequent levels of discussion and was the second resolution approved by the delegates in the final Plenary Session of the conference. The text of the resolution follows:

Congress shall enact legislation creating and funding the National Research and Education Network (NREN) that will serve as an information superhighway and allow educational institutions, including libraries, to capitalize on the advantages of technology for resource sharing and the creation and exchange of information. The network shall be available in ALL libraries and other information repositories at all levels. The governance structure for NREN shall include representation from all interested constituencies including technical, user, and information provider components, as well as government, education at all levels and libraries.

Another resolution important to academic librarians achieved strong consensus and resulted from careful prior preparation. ACRL member Robert Schnare, delegate from Rhode Island, introduced a comprehensive resolution on preservation. A nonglamorous issue and never highly profiled in debate, it was identified as the sixth most important issue to the delegates and passed overwhelmingly. The text of the resolution follows:

Congress shall adopt a national preservation policy to ensure the preservation of our information resources. The assessment of preservation needs should be clearly articulated with adequate funding provided for implementation of this policy. This policy must include: a) A broad-based program of preservation education and training is essential to the long-term development of a multi-institutional preservation effort; b) A comprehensive policy for preserving information on non-paper media; c) The development and dissemination of new technologies, standards, and procedures in our libraries, archives and historical organizations; d) Increased federal funding to support existing regional preservation centers and to create new centers in unserved regions of the country. Together, these resources will help to ensure that small libraries, archives, and historical organizations will have access to the information and services they need to preserve their collections.

Some issues surfaced repeatedly to members of the Conference Recommendations Committee which was charged with sorting out the duplication and overlap. Primary among these was funding, and the interests of academic libraries were clearly recognized in the resolution which topped the balloting:

In order for the United States to increase its productivity and stay competitive in the world marketplace, sufficient funds must be provided to assure that libraries continue to acquire, preserve and disseminate those information resources needed for education and research. Thus a national, regional, state, and local commitment of financial resources for library services is an indispensable investment in the nation's future. Government and library officials and representatives of the private sector must work together to amass sufficient funds to provide these necessary resources. The President and the Congress must recognize that it is crucial to the national interest to support education and research by expanding and fully funding statutes related to information services such as the Higher Education Act, Medical Information Assistance Act, College Library Technology Demonstration Grants, Library Service and Construction Act (LSCA), and the National Research and Education Network (NREN) and other related statutes. Amend Chapter II of the Educational Consolidation and Improvement Act to allocate funds for networking school libraries.

Other issues demonstrated their importance by multiple resolutions: increasing and guaranteeing

access for multilingual, multicultural populations and people with physical limitations was addressed repeatedly. National information policy concerns included ensuring access to public information, specifically including the Federal Depository Library System; guarding against inappropriate and over zealous security classification of information; and protecting the privacy rights of library users. The need to recruit librarians and other library workers from among the multicultural groups we seek to serve more effectively surfaced from several groups, as did the importance of information literacy and lifelong learning. Technical issues such as standards for network communications architecture, postal subsidy, and telecommunications rates were also considered.

After the overload of "WHCLIS Week," it was refreshing to dump the overstuffed briefcase in a corner and turn to mundane and local matters. But we must not lose the considerable time and energy expended by the ACRL Task Force and all its counterparts throughout the profession, the thousands of delegates to state pre-conferences, and the delegates, honorary delegates, and other partici-

We have the opportunity to be heard and to be effective. Now we must act.

pants in WHCLIS II. We must all regroup, read the final report when it is issued late this year, and work together to identify key issues for initial emphasis and action.

Much of the continuing effort to focus attention on major WHCLIS issues falls to the WHCLIS Taskforce (WHCLIST). WHCLIST is a membership organization with national representation that serves as an umbrella for communicating issues and promoting activities in support of past and future White House Conferences.

ACRL member Charles Beard of Georgia has been elected co-chair of WHCLIST and is serving as a member of the transition team preparing plans for followup to the July meeting. ACRL is well positioned to take an active role in these activities. We have the opportunity to be heard and to be effective. Now we must act. ■ ■

Ed Note: Kate Mawdsley attended WHCLIS as a professional delegate from California and was elected to the Conference Recommendations Committee from the Technology topic group. She is a past chair of the ACRL Government Relations Committee.