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NEDRA'S Founding

The origin of NEDRA as it celebrates its 10th anniversary

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At the upcoming annual conference in May 1998, NEDRA will celebrate the completion of ten years. While actually incorporated in the Fall of 1987, NEDRA held its first annual conference in June 1988, which marked the end of its first year. What was it like back then? To answer that question, recently I conducted interviews with several of the founders and early board members, all of whom are still active in development.

In the beginning — that is, in 1986 — relatively few people were employed by nonprofit organizations to do prospect research. In the Boston area, probably the greatest concentration of researchers worked at various Harvard offices. They were aware of other researchers, mostly at colleges and universities such as MIT, Tufts, Bentley, and Brandeis, among others.

"For most of us," explained founding president Joe Donnelly, few people in the development field "understood what we were doing." Individuals doing research often were considered staff assistants or clerical workers. Those working at some of the smaller Harvard sites often came over to the central development office in Cambridge to use its library. According to Sarah Fernandez (Royer), "They started talking about getting all the development researchers together to discuss common concerns — attaining professional status in (their) offices, networking, ethics, research methodology." Commented Kate Fultz, "Researchers wanted networking opportunities that were similar to those at Women in Development or NSFRE." The group began meeting informally in late 1986.

Official Beginning

Their first official meeting occurred on March 5, 1987 at Radcliffe. The purpose was to discuss just what the group should be and to decide what steps to take. Many of the early meetings were taken up with logistics, such as becoming incorporated, how to do outreach, what programs to offer.

The first volume of NEDRA News was printed in Fall, 1987; and by Summer, 1988, three more issues had followed. In the Fall of 1987, NEDRA was incorporated as a nonprofit organization with a board of directors: Joe Donnelly was president; Beth Melvin, vice president; Susan Ehrman, treasurer; Mike Schultz, secretary; and Nancy Eidelman, Kate Fultz, Judy Rottenberg, Sarah Fernandez (Royer) and Kim Watson were all directors.

According to an early issue of NEDRA News, the first program was a panel discussion of Ethics in Research held at Bentley College on November 20, 1987. The keynote speaker was W. Michael Hoffman, Ph.D., founding director of the Center for Business Ethics at Bentley College. He urged NEDRA to create a code of ethics. Some of the issues for researchers were how to elicit information over the phone and how to identify oneself.

Sustaining the Organization

There were many challenges to sustaining the new organization. "We grew incredibly fast in the early years," indicated Donnelly. "At first (we grew) by word of mouth; we used CASE lists and any others we could find." It was a challenge to reach beyond the Greater Boston Area and to reach out to other kinds of organizations, such as secondary schools, museums, and hospitals.

The high turnover rate in development generally, and among researchers in particular,

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increased the challenge of sustaining the organization. Moreover, according to Susan Cronin Ruderman, there was "an uphill battle" to convince managers that paying for NEDRA membership and meetings was worthwhile. Perhaps the biggest obstacle in maintaining some cohesion and determining program priorities was the difference between the needs of researchers in the big "shops" (e.g. MIT, Harvard, Boston University, Tufts) and those in the smaller "shops." The gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" seemed wide. Also, as Carol Thorp explained, the high turnover rate in the profession meant that a lot of the program offerings had to focus on basic "how-to" information. Eventually, there were some people who stayed in the profession, developed more advanced skills, and took on more comprehensive responsibilities, such as information and systems management, working with major gift officers, etc. After a while, some of these people became frustrated with these more basic how-to programs.

In the beginning, very few people were employed by nonprofit organizations to do prospect research.

Another challenge Thorp identified was that NEDRA was an all-volunteer organization. Board members had no central source to manage the membership list, to produce the newsletter, or to handle mailings; there was no paid help at all. "It was an enormous amount of work."

The wide geographic spread of the organization was another challenge. Accordingly, Elaine Lotto recalled, NEDRA started smaller meetings around New England, so that more people could attend. Roundtables were set up to last only a few hours, so participants did not have to take a full day to attend. Topics were very specific, and the cost kept very low.

A Maturing Profession

Taking a broader view, Judy Rottenberg noted that development research as a profession was at the time "still in its nascent stages, but maturing. There was no APRA, no Prspct-l, no conferences or workshops by CASE or NSFRE geared toward researchers. We did know of efforts to draw researchers together in Minnesota. . . ."

By 1983, a group of researchers in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area, including Inez Waltman Berquist and Kathleen Foley, among others, had formed MPRA, Minnesota Prospect Research Association. In 1987, the MPRA board members decided to become a national organization and changed their name to APRA, American Prospect Research Association. APRA incorporated in January, 1988, and held its first conference in September of that year. Berquist and Foley were APRA's first two presidents.

In late 1987 and early 1988, the founding NEDRA board members exchanged letters with the founders of APRA and, at that time, according to Fernandez, felt that APRA's requirements for chapter membership were not appropriate for NEDRA; APRA opted from the beginning to hire professional management services, thus raising their costs significantly. Back then, indicated Thorp, APRA did not have a New England presence, whereas NEDRA was already established and was gaining momentum. As a regional organization, NEDRA was able to offer more services within its defined area, and at far lower cost than APRA. Nevertheless, Donnelly explained, "APRA was an inspiration to us," and their members helped NEDRA form its own bylaws. Thus NEDRA chose to be an independent regional organization.

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