

2022 Big Ten Retirees Association Conference highlights



August 2022 conference participants outside Northwestern's Plant Biology and Conservation Program facility at the Chicago Botanic Garden

By Linda Major, incoming ERA president

The Northwestern Emeriti Organization at Northwestern University served as host for the August 2022 Big Ten Retirees Association Conference. Both ERA president Pat Crews and incoming president Linda Major attended the conference on behalf of the association. They were joined by 21 colleagues from 11 of the Big Ten institutions. Representatives from The Ohio State University, the University of Maryland, and Rutgers University did not attend.

Over the course of two-and-a-half days, conference participants discussed topics of common interest, engaged with Northwestern faculty representing a variety of disciplines, and unanimously agreed to a set of updates to the association's by-laws.

Conference highlights and key discussion points:

- Maintaining momentum during the pandemic posed a significant challenge for retirement associations. Although Zoom proved to be a useful technology for monthly meetings and programs, most retirees missed face-to-face interactions with former colleagues and friends. Once it was determined safe to reconvene, most institutions offered live streaming as an option for members unable to attend and also posted recordings on their respective websites for up to one year.

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Linda Major

- All Big Ten retiree associations plan to remain flexible for the upcoming fall in anticipation of possible COVID outbreaks. Most will offer hybrid programming and meetings, allowing members to choose between face-to-face or virtual participation. Wisconsin has elected to host virtual meetings, programs, and association activities for the fall semester.
- Some associations invested in easy-to-use audiovisual equipment so that meetings are accessible for homebound members or those who live outside the area. A corps of their membership is trained to operate the audiovisual equipment so that video production does not depend on one volunteer alone.

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- Two associations receive technical and administrative support from their respective foundation offices. The provost's office at Northwestern provides financial and administrative support for their emeriti organization.
- Getting access to retirees' names and contact information from university HR departments prior to employee retirement remains a significant challenge for many of the member organizations. All eligible retirees are automatically enrolled in the institution's retiree association at the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, and Northwestern University (emeriti faculty only).
- The association newsletter serves as an important vehicle for creating community among retirees. Key components include but are not limited to: messages from the association president and the administration; member-generated art, photographs or poetry; recently published books and/or journal articles; information about upcoming tours and events; and useful news such as updates from campus departments, software updates, and information about member benefits. Wisconsin and Michigan secure sponsorships to help underwrite the cost of printing and mailing their association newsletters.
- The size, scope, and focus of each association vary but participation appears to be consistent across the cohort. Regardless of the number of retirees, most reported a core of 100 to 150 active members. Only two of the 12 associations providing profile data prior to the conference are affiliated with OLLI (Nebraska and Wisconsin). The remaining 10 are responsible for developing and offering activities of interest to their members including tours, book clubs, interest groups, and educational programming.
- Beyond the business meeting, conference participants joined student-led tours of the campus and attended faculty presentations focused on prison education, soft electronics for the human body, town-gown relationships, translating research onto the stage and into film, and the state of global affairs on campuses. We also toured Northwestern's Plant Biology and Conservation Program facility at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe.



Northern view of the Northwestern University campus

- The 30th annual Big Ten Retirees Conference, hosted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Retirement Association, is scheduled for July 26-28, 2023, in Madison, Wisconsin.

‘The association newsletter serves as an important vehicle for creating community among retirees.’

- Conference highlight
