

Consulting Rosarians: A Beginning Inquiry

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A. The Question:

A few months ago I wrote an article ('The Rosarian's Eye' at www.venturarose.org/rosarians-eye.html) asserting the importance of experiential knowledge in the assessment of rosarians as they move up the ladder of importance from lowly clerks to lauded judges. Midway in this scale would be the Consulting Rosarians who represent an important educational tool in educating the public about rose culture and appreciation.

The eligibility requirements for Consulting Rosarians comprise an interesting assortment of ministerial, knowledgeable and attitudinal requirements. Some are easily verifiable-such as membership in the American Rose Society or in a local society. Others are indicative of knowledge through experience-the requirement that the Consulting Rosarian's garden, for example, contain at least eight classes of roses including all of the popular classes plus Old Garden Roses. These are less easily verified, but do not present any particularly difficult assessment-they are there or not. And, finally, the attitudinal-willingness to share and impart knowledge proactively-would seem to require a particular personality type associated with secular missionaries. However, it has not yet been suggested that candidates for Consulting Rosarians submit to a personality test-for reasons to be made clear later.

The Consulting Rosarian program utilizes three assessment tools with regard to these requirements: 1) the American Rose Society undertakes to answer the question regarding membership in the organization; 2) letters of recommendation from extant Consulting Rosarians assess the attitudinal and experiential components; and 3) an open book exam conducted after an educational and informative seminar sponsored by local rose societies tests the knowledge of Consulting Rosarian candidates. Clearly the bulk of the burden falls upon the letters of recommendation by current Consulting Rosarians as to the quality of future Consulting Rosarians. And equally clearly, the burden of administering the Consulting Rosarian Program falls upon the District Chairman of Consulting Rosarians.

A short survey was distributed to the District Chairs of the 18 Districts of the American Rose Society in December, 2001. The survey concentrated on questions of verification of the eligibility requirements for potential Consulting Rosarians and active Consulting Rosarians. The survey was not intended to be a scientific evaluation of the program or process, but merely an indication of the range of responses to the challenges posed by the program. In any event, eight of the District Chairs responded with comments regarding the verification and evaluation process.

B. The Background

The Consulting Rosarian Program has evolved from a Committee of 32 Consulting Rosarians representing 8/10th of 1 per cent of the membership (in 1926) to the current program incorporating nearly eleven per cent of the total membership of the American Rose Society. While the goal of increasing public knowledge of rose culture has remained constant, the operative network dedicated to that purpose has waxed and waned as the program has adjusted to everything from major increases in membership to the opportunities presented by the growth in cyberspace. The relatively reactive stance of the early program in which members of the ARS only were invited to write in questions of the experts has evolved into a program where Consulting Rosarians are expected to be proactive in seeking out persons and venues for proclaiming the good news of the rose. Similarly, the Consulting Rosarian

selection process grew from one of 'noteworthy' rosarians in the beginning to a 'networking' arrangement of nomination by local society CR chairs to District Director selection to the current system open to any member of the ARS meeting the requirements.

C. Current Eligibility Requirements for Consulting Rosarian Candidates:

The requirements can be divided into three categories

1. Ministerial requirements: These are requirements that do not involve any discretionary decision-making on the part of another person.
 - The candidate must have been a member of the American Rose Society for at least a three-year period
 - The candidate must be an active member of a local society.
 - The candidate must attend an ARS school or workshop designed for Consulting Rosarians and pass an open book exam based on materials in the Consulting Rosarian Manual.
 - The candidate must provide three letters of recommendation from three different active Consulting Rosarians on a form provided by the District Consulting Rosarian Chairman.
2. Experiential or Activity requirements:
 - The candidate must have grown roses of various types for at least five years
 - The candidate must currently grow a variety of roses (seven classes are listed on the Letter of Recommendation form).
 - The candidate must be familiar with the basic elements and factors of rose culture.
3. Attitudinal Requirements:
 - The candidate must be willing to live up to the Consulting Rosarian Guide (to share knowledge proactively)
 - The candidate must be enthusiastic about the rose and the American Rose Society
 - Presumably, as an incidental byproduct of the above, the candidate must be willing to work to increase the membership of the American Rose Society.

D. The Answers: Verification practices:

A requirement such as three year membership in the American Rose Society is easily ascertained by reference to the membership records of the ARS and presents no particular difficulty as it is a purely ministerial requirement: either the candidate has met the requirements of that membership or not. Equally membership in a local society presents no discretionary questions except where a local society does not exist. The letters of recommendation, workshop attendance, and test passing also admit of little or no discretion.

Questions of knowledge seem to have been pretty much pre-empted by the existence of the seminar/open book test requirement. At least one CR Chair regards it as a 'primary determinant' of the knowledge of the CR candidate. However, there is some hesitancy to accepting the open book standard test as truly indicative of a rosarian's knowledge. In two cases the CR Chairs regard an open book test as poor indicators of actual rose knowledge. In another, the Chair provides for an interactive Seminar/school by setting up situations that 'force them (the CRs) to practice what they are learning.'

Otherwise, the questions of knowledge of rose culture and experiential behaviors are left to the Letters of Recommendation (LORS). And the LORS signed by the current Consulting Rosarians attest to the knowledge and attitudinal suitability of the CR candidate. The letter form supplied by the ARS state that the candidate is 'personally known' to the recommender. The letter provides spaces for specifying how many roses are grown and of what type as well as the number of years of experience growing roses. The letter asserts that the candidate has displayed a 'thorough knowledge of rose culture.' It

stipulates that the candidate has been an active member of a local rose society and the ways in which that activity has been manifested.

Attitudinally, the letter simply avers that the candidate is proactive and takes the initiative in sharing rose knowledge, is willing to live up to the Consulting Rosarian Guide, and is willing to increase membership in the local society and the American Rose Society.

Barring the addition of any other criteria for either the candidates or the recommenders, the letters of recommendation bear the burden of displaying candidate fitness for the task of being a Consulting Rosarian. And there is some strong sentiment expressed for keeping the process as simple as possible. Some of this sentiment is based on the voluntary nature of the program; that is, if the requirements become burdensome or onerous, people will simply stop opting to become Consulting Rosarians. Some of it is based on the notion that growing roses is not 'rocket science' and that chemical and agronomic validation is over the top. And some is based on the very practical observation that the position itself does not warrant the kind of scrutiny demanded of 'the CIA.'

Current Consulting Rosarians maintain their active status by putatively attending a CR school or seminar or workshop once every three years, submitting an annual report of individual activity, and filling out a Rose in Review report to the District Coordinator each year. All of the responding District Chairs take the workshop requirement as the touchstone for the performance standards of CRs. The other two requirements seem to elicit less support although some District Chairs are less regardful of individual reports. The least monitored activity seems to be the Roses in Review report. The recent comment of the RIR Coordinator in this district indicated that less than half of the CRs participated in the RIR report in 2001. However, one District Chair noted that while he does not really regard this requirement as legitimate, he has been under pressure from his District Director to supervise this requirement more actively. On the other hand, more than a couple of District Chairs report recommending and securing the removal of deficient CRs through the strict application of the seminar/workshop rule.

E. Three modes: The responses indicate three modes of Consulting Rosarian Chair administration of the CR program in their district:

1. The least common would be the proactive response. At least one District Chair requires that the person writing a Letter of Recommendation visit the garden of the candidate to verify the statements of the candidate. This model of activity tends to take the initiative in requiring that the candidate actually have been active in the local society in some form beyond being a dues paying member or passively attending meetings. And such a Director tends to be active in reducing the ranks of CRs by encouraging laggards to live up to the expectations regarding a CR or by resigning from the program. This approach seems to focus on the provision of qualitative advice and activity by Consulting Rosarians.
2. A second response is best regarded as reactive. In this mode the District Chair tends to accept the statements in the LORS unless he or she has knowledge to the contrary. In this style of administrative oversight, the statements of the recommenders or the candidates, and the extant Consulting Rosarians regarding their performance tend to be accepted unless contradictory information surfaces at some point. Failure to perform as a Consulting Rosarian by non-attendance at Workshops or seminars elicits first a warning and then an invitation to disassociate from the program-either by becoming Emeritus if qualified or dropping out. Even where the norm is not highly regarded in this approach-the RIR requirement or the recruitment of members function-the District Chair tends to be punctilious in responding to violations of the agreed upon norm. This approach seems to focus on managing a smooth program with removal of norm violators.

3. The third response is oriented to managing the traffic flow as opposed to verifying data. The most common response in this mode is to accept the statements of the LORS as true. There tends to be less effort expended on monitoring the performance of the CRs than on providing educational opportunities for their betterment. This approach is consistent with the analogous efforts in academia to encourage positive responses from potential deadwood rather than engage in punitive actions. This approach seems to concentrate on rewarding good behavior as the essence of the focus of the program.

It should be stressed that the above ideal types do not represent any one particular District Chair, but rather composites of the various responses. Nor is one response versus another being promoted as the 'best' approach. The CR program very sensibly recognizes that geographic and other circumstances will demand different approaches in variant circumstances. However, it is interesting to note that the expected outcomes from the different types may promote quite different CRs from one district to another. If the proactive approach produces more engaged and informed CRs, it will also produce significantly fewer of them. If the reactive approach does not pursue the same degree of CR excellence, it does punish norm violators and expel them. If the monitoring mentality permits the retention of potential deadwood, it concentrates scarce resources and energies on the creation of educational opportunities for those with personal initiative.

And, of course, it is perfectly possible that in the course of a three-year term, an individual District Chair of Consulting Rosarians could display manifestations of all three types. And if situations were volatile enough, might even exhibit manifestations of all three types in a single day. However, it has to be emphasized that there is no intention in delineating the various ideal types to suggest that one is more praiseworthy than another. Any District Director has to adjust to what might best be described as a 'field of responsibility' and that is the whole panoply of circumstances and facts evident in any particular setting.

While this essay does not promote or project any particular changes in the program for Consulting Rosarians, it would suggest that any contemplated changes in the program be measured against the potential capacities of the various approaches to the program evidenced in the survey of the verification of eligibility requirements. For example, the substitution of a closed book exam would impact significantly but differently in each type. For the proactive type, it would simplify the task of assuring that only qualified and knowledgeable persons become Consulting Rosarians in the first place; and where there are a sufficient number to begin with, any resultant loss in numbers would be more than overshadowed by the increase in quality CRs. For the reactive type, the introduction of a closed book exam would represent a serious problem in program management since the very fact of a such an exam would reduce the numbers of people willing to take it and thereby the number of people willing to become a Consulting Rosarian in the first place. While the current system manages to finesse the differences between experiential knowledge and 'book' knowledge, a closed book test would exacerbate them and disrupt the smooth administration of the system. It would also, by upsetting the balance currently extant direct the energies of the District Director into damage control in the process. For the traffic manager, a closed book exam might enhance educational opportunities in a district, but at the cost of personal manipulation of scarce resources into the recruitment arena rather than in the educational opportunity area for current CRs.

The above is not to be taken either as an endorsement or objection to a closed book exam versus the current system, but as an indication of how proposed changes might be analyzed in terms of leadership functions. Leadership functions are not the only factor to be considered in any evaluation of proposed changes, but they do represent one form of reality in the verification process to ensure the suitability of persons applying to be Consulting Rosarians.

Finally, to answer a question raised early on, the introduction of personality tests for Consulting Rosarians to guarantee attitudinal components of the eligibility process would defeat any leadership type. Most people would argue that rosarians have too much personality in the first place.