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Mensa and You

This chapter covers what we generally term “National” and the editor’s relationship to National.*

There is no such thing as “National.” In use, the expression refers loosely to those who set and those who carry out policy and actions of American Mensa Ltd. In reality, there is a governing body—the American Mensa Committee (AMC), made up of elected and appointed officers whose membership status is no different from your own—and a small staff of nonmember employees of the organization. Except for Local Groups Secretary Rita Levine, the staff is located at the Mensa office in Brooklyn, New York. At one time nearly all AMC officers lived in or near New York and all AMC meetings were held in New York; thus references to “New York,” in the Mensa context, usually mean the same thing as references to “National.”

We ourselves, all the thousands of ordinary members around the world, *are* Mensa, and our national and international boards and committees are creatures of our own making. Terms such as “National” are convenient to use; but we must avoid the error of grouping fellow Mensans as “us” and “them.”

I am indebted to Amy Shaughnessy, editor of the *Local Secretary’s Handbook*, for source material on the descriptions of officers’ functions.

* This chapter amounts to a snapshot of Mensa in 1982 and hence has some historic value. No change has been made to the text, and so very little of it remains true in 2002.

The American Mensa Committee

Officers

American Mensa Limited is a not-for-profit corporation of the State of New York; the AMC is its board of directors. Its elective officers are installed every two years by vote of the membership in May of odd-numbered years: Chairman, First Vice Chairman, Second Vice Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, and nine Regional Vice Chairmen (RVCs), one for each of Mensa's geographic regions. The two most recent past Chairmen also serve on AMC. The elected officers appoint the Membership Officer, Groups Officer, Publications Officer, Director of Science and Education, and Public Relations Officer, as stipulated in the bylaws, and other officers as they see fit, such as the Officer for Isolated Members. Special appointees include the Ombudsman, Design Consultant, Services Consultant, Archivist, Supervisory Psychologist, Counsel, SIGHT Coordinator, and national editors (*Bulletin*, *InterLoc*, *Register*, and handbooks). Appointees' terms expire with the terms of the officers who appointed them.

You would do well to acquaint yourself with the duties and special areas of concern of all the national officers. You might borrow your local secretary's copy of the *Local Secretary's Handbook* and read its summaries of all the officers' functions. Here we'll concentrate only on those whose responsibilities bring them closest to the editor, in order of likelihood of contact, not of rank.

Understand that the hierarchy of offices in Mensa is a hierarchy of authority only in the sense that authority is the necessary concomitant of responsibility. A title in Mensa signifies nothing other than the amount and kind of work a person has agreed to donate to the organization. It does not contradict the fundamental Mensa concept of a round-table society of equals. You need not feel apologetic about calling upon national officers for information or help; they are there to serve the organization, which means you. Let's not forget, though, that as volunteers just like you they are entitled to exempt themselves from unreasonable demands.

If you write to AMC officers or other personages in Mensa, feel free to follow the customary form of address among Mensans: we are all on a first-name basis.

Publications Officer

The Publications Officer is the executive publisher of the *Mensa Bulletin*, *InterLoc*, *The Isolated M*, the *Register*, and handbooks such as this one. The Publications Officer coordinates the production of Mensa publications, considers the feasibility of proposed publications, answers questions dealing with the production of existing publications (contracts, permits, budgets, etc.), participates in the operation of the funding support program, and oversees the Editors' Awards. The Publications Officer administers that portion of American Mensa's budget that is allocated to national publications.

With respect to local group and SIG editors, the Publications Officer is not "boss" or monitor. The Pubs Officer has no direct authority over local publications, but may be the member of AMC called upon to communicate with editors in matters relating to their newsletters. "To be a friend to the editors" is the way former Publications Officer Dick Amyx once described his role: that of responding to requests for advice, answering questions, taking matters of concern to the editors before the AMC, and occasionally helping editors to steer clear of potential trouble with timely reminders about copyright violations and misuses of the Mensa logo. The Publications Officer is equally ready to assist SIG editors and appreciates being included on the mailing lists of those SIGs for which sending an extra copy is not a hardship.

Groups Officer

The Groups Officer's area of concern is groups other than local groups within Mensa, which means primarily the SIGs. The Groups Officer both aids and promotes Special Interest Groups and is a resource on matters of SIG concern, whether editorial or not. SIG editors may look to either the Groups Officer or the Publications Officer for information and advice about their publications.

Chairman

The AMC Chairman will occasionally request local group editors to publish messages to the membership, particularly those whose time value makes the *Bulletin's* unavoidable two-month delay impracticable. The Chairman will also respond to queries about the society as a whole and consider any request or suggestion aimed at the welfare of the organization. As one of American Mensa's National Representatives to the International Board of Directors, the Chairman is in a position to offer proposals that affect all of Mensa.

Regional Vice Chairman

Your RVC is charged with special responsibility to and for the local groups in your region. As chief executive officer of the region, the RVC represents the region to AMC and AMC to the region. The normal channel from the RVC to the local group is through the local secretary; likewise, a group's requests for RVC assistance with funds, information, RG approval, or advice are ordinarily made through the locsec. But the RVC may have occasion to seek out the editor and vice versa. An RVC might consult an editor in the process of gathering views on an issue from all responsible officers in the region. In the case of a conflict between locsec and editor, either party might appeal to the RVC for help in resolving the difficulty.

Public Relations Officer

If your peripheral efforts for the group involve publicity outside Mensa, either you or the locsec should enlist the aid of the Public Relations Officer, who is experienced in dealing with the media and can offer valuable assistance. The Public Relations Officer may also seek cooperation from your group in various national or gathering-related publicity events.

AMC Meetings

The AMC holds at least three regularly scheduled meetings per year, usually in conjunction with an RG, at the invitation of the host group. AMC's meetings are open to all members who wish to attend and observe; participation is customarily restricted to AMC members. In advance of an AMC meeting, editors, locsecs, and others receive copies of the meeting agenda. Meeting minutes are published in *InterLoc*.

If there is a matter that you feel should be brought before the AMC, you may put your request to the Pubs Officer, to your RVC, or to another AMC officer. Some matters can be handled administratively, without requiring a vote of the AMC in session; others may best be placed on the agenda for consideration by the entire AMC.

In recent years, the AMC Secretary has made it a practice to prepare "Mini-Minutes"—a one-page synopsis of actions taken—immediately following each AMC meeting. The "Mini-Minutes" are distributed to local editors as a service; publication in your newsletter is optional.

AMC Actions in Effect

Many local group and SIG officers and editors harbor misconceptions about the AMC's jurisdiction over their activities. Some imagine that there is a complex scheme of rules and restrictions set down by AMC for them to follow and that since they have never discovered a copy of those rules they may at any time commit some unwitting infringement and be subject to disciplinary action. A local group editor who asks, for example, "Are we allowed to print ads for national SIGs?" has a mistaken idea of the authority of AMC.

AMC can pass actions that affect the local groups and SIGs and their editors. It can establish the definition of a local group for funding purposes, for example, and authorize the Groups Officer to omit from the *Bulletin's* Directory any SIGs that fail to submit semiannual status reports. But it is the general policy of AMC not to concern itself with the internal affairs of the groups unless called upon. AMC respects the autonomy of the groups and strives to take only those actions necessary to the health of the organization.

The following is a summation of all AMC actions still in effect as of August, 1982, that in any way touch upon the newsletters. Here the language has been abbreviated by the editor, who is responsible for any misinterpretations; refer to the official AMC Minutes (published in *InterLoc*) for exact wording. The numbers that appear in parentheses with the date of passage by AMC are those used in the document "AMC Actions Still in Effect," which is maintained by the AMC Secretary; beginning in 1980, they also correspond to the resolution numbers in the official Minutes.

Local Group Funding Support Program

To be eligible for local group funding support, a group of fifty or more members must have bylaws that have been approved by the AMC. A group with fewer than fifty members must have at least six meetings a year or a combination of three meetings a year plus a regularly issued newsletter at least four times a year. (118, 9/17/77)

Funding consists of a flat \$200.00 (single payment) grant plus \$5.00 per member (payable at \$1.25 per member per quarter). Subsidy for mailings to the Headquarters list and for other editors' subscriptions is \$.40 per mailing (payable quarterly). (81-124, 12/5/81, as amended 8/7/82)

There is provision for subsidizing a voluntary biennial mailing of sample local group newsletters to other editors. (124, 12/3/77)

(See Chapters 6 and 7 for more information on funding and eligibility requirements.)

Newsletter Ballots

For all elections and recall elections of local group officers and for all amendments to local group bylaws, ballots must be mailed to all members, either in or with the newsletter or as a separate mailing. In all voting on amendments to the bylaws, proposed changes must be published to the members at least 90 days before the deadline for returning the ballots. (134, 5/6/78; 177, 178, and 179, 11/17/79)

Editors' Awards

An appointed panel of not fewer than five members, none of whom may be a member of AMC, is to judge the local group newsletters for the annual Editors' Awards. (81-47, 5/24/81, as amended 8/7/82)

American Mensa's Staff

The national office of American Mensa, housed in converted apartments in Brooklyn, is staffed by a small number of employees of American Mensa Limited. Among the staff's functions are response to membership inquiries, processing of new and renewal memberships, maintenance of records associated with membership, distributing communications among AMC members and to the local groups and SIGs, handling financial transactions, performing data processing services, and supporting the actions of AMC administratively as needed. Sheila Skolnik is Office Manager.

Margot Seitelman is American Mensa's Executive Director. She has been with Mensa for more than twenty years and knows the organization thoroughly. Her inestimable labors for Mensa involve her in daily communications with the AMC Chairman and other officers, with international officers and staff and with other national Mensas, with the Budget Committee, and with public relations. She is the Business Manager of the *Bulletin* and looks after *Bulletin* advertising. Margot channels requests and correspondence to the proper parties and handles quantities herself, performs diplomatic missions and carries out policy, and brings a personal touch to the corporate workings of the organization.

Local Groups Secretary Rita Levine attends to the business aspects of the local groups in relation to American Mensa. She keeps current lists of local secretaries and editors, computes and processes local-group support funds, supplies the various handbooks, works with the RVCs, and manages countless other details involving the local groups. Rita's office is at her home in New Jersey; she has served Mensa for more than twenty years.

National Publications

InterLoc

InterLoc is a service publication funded by AMC and sent free of charge to all local secretaries, editors, national officers, Gifted Children coordinators, proctors, and any other "interested members" who request it. Published ten times a year, it carries the official minutes of all AMC meetings, funnels pertinent information and announcements from National to group leaders, and contains other items of business such as listings of proctors and of group sizes and renewal rates.

Its other major function is to provide a forum for open communication among M leaders and other actively involved members, who use its pages to exchange ideas, seek solutions to problems, and report on successful programs that other groups may wish to emulate. The "Symposium" section permits readers to solicit help anonymously on matters troubling their groups. As an editor you are welcome to contribute your comments and questions to *InterLoc*, where they are certain to receive attention from your Mensa colleagues.

Like any other national M publication, *InterLoc* has an AMC-appointed editor who is responsible for the selection and presentation of material judged to be of interest or significance to its readership.

InterLoc's contents are generally of little interest to the membership at large but valuable to those involved in running the organization at its various levels. If you are not receiving *InterLoc*, you should be. Write to Rita Levine to make sure that your name is on the circulation list. "Interested members" who do not receive the newsletter automatically by virtue of their office are periodically asked to reconfirm their inclusion on the list.

Bulletin

Included twice yearly in the national publication that goes to all members is a Directory of American Mensa. Local group editors are listed in the local groups section. Rita Levine is in charge of maintaining these data and must be kept informed of changes of editorship in the local group newsletters. SIG data are maintained by the Groups Officer, to whom SIG coordinators must report semiannually in order to maintain their listings.

Every month, the *Bulletin* publishes interim updates to the Directory. These changes are incorporated into the next full Directory.

Other Handbooks

American Mensa is the publisher of various manuals designed to assist member-volunteers in carrying out their tasks. In addition to the *Editor's Handbook*, the following are currently available from Rita:

- *Local Secretary's Handbook*
- *Special Interest Groups Guidelines*
- *Proctor's Guidebook*
- *Handbook for Nominating Committees* [national]
- *Annual Gathering Handbook of American Mensa* [national]

In preparation are a treasurer's handbook and an American Mensa Committee handbook.

Editors' Workshops

One of the regularly scheduled events on the Annual Gathering program is an editors' workshop. Under the direction of the AMC Publications Officer, the workshop may vary in format from year to year, but its focus is always on issues of special concern to Mensa editors. Often the Pubs Officer will use *InterLoc* or a direct mailing to editors to request advance suggestions of items for discussion.

Regardless of the degree of structure of the workshop or the agenda of topics to cover, the session offers many benefits to editors. It is an opportunity to meet fellow editors, as well as various members of AMC and staff; to raise questions, discuss problems, and share solutions; and to receive information that can help you in your task. More important, it is a chance to experience a sense of camaraderie with your Mensa colleagues. Many veteran editors look forward to the AG and the workshop as a time to "recharge their batteries." From an intensive exchange with others who constantly face the same problems that you usually handle all alone can come a boost that revitalizes your spirits and your enthusiasm for the work.

American Mensa provides a small subsidy for the attendance of editors at AGs in order to encourage their participation in the workshop, recognizing its value to their performance as editors. The amount of subsidy is based on air mileage one way, plus the AG registration charge. You will receive application forms in advance of the AG, with a deadline for returning them if you wish to apply for the subsidy. Checks are issued some time after the AG is past.

You and Your Fellow Editors

Mensa editors are members of a very special fraternity. Only another editor or past editor knows what it really takes to do the job you are doing and can truly appreciate your work. Another editor knows that even the smallest newsletter—the tiny-circulation, single-sheet meeting announcement—involves more effort than anyone else realizes. Your fellow editors understand the feeling of isolation that occasionally gets the better of you, the doubt that anyone cares what you are doing, the frustrations, the suspicion that you’ve been had. They also notice a sudden blossoming of art work, a growth in the number and quality of published articles, a gradual increase in size and variety, or the addition of a new feature. They share your triumphs vicariously and shudder at your setbacks. Nearly every one understands what your work means to you, in a way that scarcely anyone in your local group—including your local secretary—is able to do.

To many editors, the relationship with fellow editors is one of the chief rewards of the work. Correspondence and often lasting friendships have grown up out of requests for advice, helpful responses, commiseration, and mutual admiration. AGs and RGs offer opportunities to develop those relationships, but they may just as readily flourish through the mails. To many editors, a first meeting with another editor at a gathering amounts to a long-awaited reunion with an old friend.

Mensa editors also constitute a powerful force within the organization—much more so than many, especially the newer ones, realize. Supervisory Psychologist Abbie Salny consistently credits the cooperation of the editors with a large measure of the success of the MERF scholarship program. The editors’ ability to influence elections, to affect AMC actions, and to promote or deflate group morale cannot be overestimated. Editors must be aware that although their primary responsibility is to the members of the group they serve, they do have a larger audience that pays attention to what they are doing.

You should also bear in mind that your fellow editors will know when you are addressing yourself to that larger audience rather than focusing on your own group, and generally they have a low opinion of the practice.

Two cautions are in order here. First, when you write to another editor, you would be wise to specify “NFP” (Not For Publication) on anything you do not wish to see in print. What may seem to you obviously to be a private communication may strike another editor as a choice item of just the right size for that hole in the forthcoming issue. (Remember that under pressure of deadline an editor with space to fill will print almost anything.) To protect themselves against their own possible errors in judging incoming material, some editors find it prudent to publish a disclaimer from time to time to the effect that anything they receive is fair game for publication unless “not for publication” is specified.

Second, when you receive comments from another editor, consider whether publication might be outside the writer’s intent and also possibly be misinterpreted by your own members as interference. Don’t use the newsletter to carry on sparkling repartee with another editor unless you are sure that its inclusion is consistent with the interests of your members.

Editors’ Awards

The presentation of awards for outstanding local group newsletters has been a tradition in American Mensa for many years. The awards are given annually at the AG. Their purpose is to grant recognition to editors whose work represents superior achievement and to stimulate attention to quality among all Mensa editors.

Over the years, the awards have been made in a number of ways and according to a variety of criteria. They have been selected by a panel and they have been voted by the editors themselves. Newsletters have been judged strictly within group sizes of small, medium, and large; they have been evaluated in terms of categories such as art work, regular features, style, and service to the group; and they have been considered under combinations of both systems. Special awards have come and gone. In years when meaningful consensus could be reached, an Owl Award has been presented to “the best all-around newsletter” in American Mensa.

Every system has had its adherents and its opponents. Some urge the abolition of the awards altogether; some still hope to find a workable method that neither places a burdensome obligation on a small committee, constitutes a hardship for small-budget newsletters in mailing to judges, nor results in 29-way ties with first place being decided by a difference of two votes.

At the time of this edition, the Editors’ Awards are still in existence and once more under review.