



## Planning a Conference

Planning a conference is really not as complicated as it may appear. If you plan to host a conference, approach this task as you would any large program - with careful planning and proper organization. This handout is designed to help you with this process - from determining who your audience is, to picking a theme, making all arrangements and finally evaluating the success of the conference from both the participants' and presenters' point of view.

### Determining An Audience

Generally, student organizations coordinate either a campus wide conference or a regional conference. Consider if the conference is open to members only, members and guest, officers only, advisers, or the entire student body. When determining your audience, consider what types of issues, topics and programs would be of interest to them. This is also the opportune time to determine an estimate of conference attendance.

### Choosing An Appropriate Date

1. Campus-wide conferences can be successfully scheduled for the first two weeks of October, if there are not other major events going on campus. This allows adequate time for publicity, gives students enough time to readjust to USD and allows for any last minute planning that might arise.
2. Check with other student organizations and University departments regarding traditional events that are planned i.e.: major AS productions, Fraternity/Sorority Rush, etc. You may also check with CASA for information on what is planned.
3. Avoid dates scheduled during sporting events, such as, football games.
4. There is a great deal more flexibility in fall term but be aware of winter break, mid-terms and finals.
5. Check the calendar for major religious events and other holidays.

### Choosing A Theme

1. Although it is preferred, it is not necessary to have a conference theme. Is there a common theme running throughout the conference? Can you come up with a catchy title/logo to go with it? When applicable, consider past themes (if continuity and recognition is desired).
2. If you can't decide on a theme right away, use your creative energies for more important things such as session titles and special activities.
3. When you do come up with a theme, include it on all written materials. Hint: the way a theme is carried out is more important than the actual theme itself.

### Gathering Financial Support

1. Forming a Budget
  - A. Make a detailed budget and keep your ledgers current.
  - B. Indicate donated items and estimated cost from the donor. All items need to be recorded as actual costs of putting on the conference.
  - C. Indicate any anticipated revenue and projected revenue.
2. Determine if you need co-sponsors.
  - A. Any person or group associated with your conference will reflect on your conference and organization.
  - B. You can request a simple money donation or materials and services (such as paper, copying, pens, name tags, etc.).
  - C. Determine what the co-sponsor will receive in return. Many companies are interested in name recognition with student leaders and student groups. Give them ideas of how their name will be visible during the conference.
  - D. Acknowledging sponsors and donors in the conference program is very important. Consider inviting sponsors to parts of the program.
3. Donations
  - A. Brainstorm all the possible materials and services you need in order to put on a successful conference. This will help you get organized, give you an idea of costs to include in your budget and help you figure out who to approach for donations.

- B. There are many items that can be donated - copying, telephone usage, paper, office supplies, name tags, pencils or pens, typing, prizes, etc.
- 4. Consider a registration fee
  - A. If you decide to charge participants a registration fee to attend, consider the costs of planning the entire conference and then determine what the fee will cover (which should be shared with participants) such as meals, materials, facility rental, etc. Be reasonable. Ask yourself what the average student or student organization would comfortably pay to attend this conference.

## Find the Best Facilities

1. When choosing a location, ask yourself if people can get there easily from campus? Is there ample parking? Is it accessible to people with disabilities? Will an interpreter be needed?
2. Find out what other things are happening within the building that might distract from the conference.
3. Are there fees involved for using the facilities and do they include tables, chairs, overheads, screens, etc.?
4. Is there a place for a central headquarters for registration, information tables, a message board, etc.?
5. Will you need special phones hooked up? Can this be accommodated? Do you have specific power requirements for computers, equipment?
6. Are there restrictions regarding food service? Do you have to use the building's services or can you use outside catering?

## Program Planning

1. Topics
  - A. Choosing the topics for your session/workshop is a challenge. Brainstorm possible session topics and titles (depending on perceived participant needs). Prioritize to determine which topics would be better received and well attended.
  - B. Decide how you would like each session to be, then determine how many sessions you have time to offer. HINT: Remember to consider how many participants you can reasonably expect to attend the conference.
  - C. Most successful conference planners limit themselves to no more than three sessions and one keynote per day. HINT: You can offer more than one topic per time period and you can offer the same session/workshop at different times.
2. Scheduling
  - A. The placement of each session is very important. First, choose those topics that can be offered more than once. Then decide if it is better to place the most popular session early to draw people in and risk latecomers or sleepyheads-or place them later in more prime time slots.
  - B. Be sure to allow sufficient time for each session. It is very difficult to adequately present a session in less than one hour.
  - C. Allow for a ten to fifteen minute break between sessions to allow for running over and time to get from place to place.
3. Facilitators
  - A. Once you have a proposed program agenda you need to identify facilitators. Brainstorm a list of possible professionals you know. HINT: Include University departments and local businesses. You can approach these places for names of specific people to talk to; a CASA Coordinator may be able to assist as well (depending upon perceived participant needs).
  - B. Approach the facilitators as you would potential co-sponsors. Be prepared to explain why you chose them and what information or facts you want them to address in their session. Do not set too many limitations and allow them to plan the session; "freedom" of expression.
  - C. It is best to give the facilitator a brief description of the session. Ask them if it sounds like a good description, is the wording appropriate, etc. Tell them who their audience will be and give them an idea of the type of participants you are expecting.
  - D. Be sure to confirm their participation in writing. Provide the facilitator with a conference packet, any publicity, etc. (Also, don't forget to send a thank you letter after the conference).

## Publicity

1. Both timing and quality are of the essence. When doing a time line be sure to provide adequate time for design, layout, changes and printing. A good four to six weeks is usually adequate.
2. For a regional conference you might prefer to do two mailings: a flyer announcing the conference and an information packet complete with registration forms.
3. Plan to do follow-up phone calling during the last month.

## Registration

1. Consider whether or not there will be on site registration; when the deadline for cancellations is; will there be full or partial refunds; must each registration form submitted also include a deposit and for how much.
2. You also need to think about sending confirmation letters to registered participants.
3. Will pre-registration mean just registering for attendance at the conference or will you require people to pre-select their first, second, and third choices for sessions? If this is the case, how will you determine who gets to attend what?

## Hospitality

1. Delegate someone to be in charge of each session and what their specific responsibilities will be, i.e., room set-up, paper, blackboard, markers, name tags, introductions, etc. Having refreshments or water available for facilitators is a nice touch.
2. If presenters are coming in from out of town, make arrangements for someone to meet them at the airport or train station.
3. Large, visible and clearly legible signs should be posted throughout the conference site to help with traffic and alleviate confusion.
4. The San Diego Visitors' and Convention Bureau and various University offices can supply you with publications, maps and other information for out of town participants. A restaurant list is a nice inclusion in your packet.

## Housing and Transportation

1. Make sure to arrange for accommodations for all registered out of town participants. Students do not usually mind staying in other students' rooms. Finding housing for staff, facilitators and advisors may be more difficult; try hotels or VIP rooms in the Residence Halls. You can contact Housing at ext. 4777.
2. Remember to mail out maps so that people know how to get to the conference and don't forget to arrange for University parking permits.

## Evaluations

1. Conference participants and facilitators should be given the opportunity to evaluate their experience; this information can be very helpful for future planners and provide valuable feedback to facilitators about the effectiveness of their presentations.
2. There can be up to four kinds of evaluation forms developed: participants evaluation of sessions, facilitators evaluation of the conference as a whole, participants evaluation of the conference as a whole; and conference planning team evaluation of the program as a whole.
3. Utilize questions on a scale (1-5) rating and ask open-ended questions to receive as much feedback as possible.
4. One of the most useful evaluations will be your post-conference committee meeting. Include final budget figures, completed evaluations and your own thoughts on what went well and what could have been better. Document all of this, plus time lines, sample correspondence, etc., so that your successors won't have to re-invent the wheel.

## Miscellaneous

1. Try to have access to a computer. This can help tremendously with registration, evaluations and other on-site information.
2. Send thank you letters to everyone and copies to supervisors when appropriate. People appreciate knowing that you valued their participation and that you wanted their supervisor to be aware of their participation and helpfulness.
3. Utilize the many resources in the Center for Community Service Learning and CASA. A Coordinator can assist you in all stages of your planning.