

CUR Focus

The Western Pennsylvania Undergraduate Psychology Conference (WPUPC) celebrated its 40th annual gathering in the spring of 2012. Initially serving a smaller region of Northwestern Pennsylvania, the conference has grown to encompass both liberal arts colleges and larger universities across Western Pennsylvania. Hosting the conference currently rotates among 11 institutions. Looking back over the past 40 years, we used our extensive archive and the recollections of current and former steering-committee members and conference coordinators to examine the development of the WPUPC and the features that have made it a sustainable, regional undergraduate conference.

The first meeting of the WPUPC was held in 1973 with the sponsorship of the Northwestern Pennsylvania Psychological Association. It was conceived by a group of faculty members at neighboring institutions as a professional conference in which students could present their work. Even at its inception faculty members appreciated the challenges any one institution would face in sponsoring the conference yearly. In particular, the cost of hosting the conference, along with

the committee as extremely important to the longevity of the conference. In particular, they cite as essential the continuity and sense of institutional history the committee provides. This sense of continuity is largely due to slow turnover in membership on the committee, with several representatives having served for over 30 years. In addition, the steering committee identifies host institutions three years in advance, which facilitates planning the conference and reserving the date in busy academic calendars. Finally, respondents emphasize that the feedback the steering committee provides during the yearly debriefing is quite helpful to future hosts.

A second feature of the conference vital to sustaining its success has been the development of reliable funding streams. Survey respondents indicated that the yearly institutional assessment and small conference registrations fees (currently \$15 per student) have been adequate for covering the costs of the conference. In fact, there has only been one year in which the assessment was not sufficient, and funding reserves defrayed those additional costs. The yearly assessment has been raised to cover increased costs associated with hosting the event only six times over the last forty years. The small registration fee (often paid by the students' home institutions) helps cover the cost of food during the conference. The registration fee also allows the WPUPC to acquire some funding from institutions that are not a part of the steering committee, but that regularly have students present at the conference (see Table 1). These participating institutions are mostly from Pennsylvania or Ohio, and they appreciate the ability to have students attend the conference, without their having to take on the duty of hosting. Moreover, host institutions have been creative in identifying additional funding, including contributions from institutional offices (e.g., undergraduate research offices, college deans, academic departments, and student organizations) and outside sources (e.g., sponsorships by textbook or software companies).

Although these additional sources of funding may be small, they have generated a modest reserve fund that can be tapped if future costs should exceed the yearly assessments. Overall, the combination of steady funding streams and additional funding opportunities has provided the WPUPC with adequate finances and has equitably spread the cost of operating the conference across member institutions.

New technologies have helped the conference manage logistics. Virtually all conference communications utilize e-mail. The development of a permanent conference website has provided a consistent web presence (<https://sites.google.com/a/allegheeny.edu/wpupc/home>), and the creation of temporary host institution websites has facilitated the submission and approval of student projects, the development of conference programs, and the distribution of resources

for students (e.g., <http://www.westminster.edu/acad/psych/wpupc.cfm>). Communication among member institutions has been streamlined by electronically circulating conference organizing materials (including mailing lists and web material) among host institutions, eliminating the need for these to be created each year. Such materials include directions for the online registration process, formats for student acceptance notices, and instructions for students regarding

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especially given that no one institution may develop sufficient experience with it to offset changes in departmental personnel. Having a different institution organize the conference every year can generate a sense of “starting over.” On the other hand, respondents also identified sharing the load of hosting the conference as the biggest benefit of rotating it. As the respondents emphasized, this allows “ownership” of the conference to be shared and, consequently, increases the energy and commitment to hosting and keeps the conference “fresh.” The majority of respondents report that the benefits of rotating the conference far outweigh the challenges and that no one college could take on the responsibility of hosting the conference every year. Thus rotating the hosting of the conference clearly has been the key to its longevity.

Changes Across Four Decades

The number of students and institutions involved in the conference has fluctuated. Early in the conference’s history, a conference low of approximately 40 student presentations led to the establishment of the steering committee. The members were made responsible for

also varied the organization of the day's events, finding that providing sufficient concurrent paper and poster sessions is vital to supporting a sense of community. In addition, adhering to a common presentation time schedule has been important so that all students have an equal opportunity to receive feedback on their work. Faculty moderators are provided with instructions for running the paper sessions and are encouraged to prepare questions to stimulate discussion when necessary.

Student participation in structuring the conference has varied. At some institutions students are key organizers and hosts. Student feedback has also been used to shape offerings at the conference. For example, in 2011, based on the request of former attendees, we instituted a lunch meeting for officers of psychology clubs and honorary societies to foster collaboration across member institutions.

Finally, host institutions have varied in their approaches to identifying and sponsoring the keynote speaker. Choice of these speakers often emphasizes local and regional connections, but many keynote speakers have also had broader-reaching reputations (e.g., Michael Grazzani, Martin Seligman, and Walter Schneider). Perhaps most importantly, several WPUPC alumni have been keynote speakers, sharing their experience of becoming successful professionals in the field.

Competition from New Venues

The regional undergraduate research conference faces competition from both national undergraduate conferences and student venues at professional conferences. Faculty members in our region regularly encourage students to present at national undergraduate conferences such as NCUR (National Conferences on Undergraduate Research) and NEURON (NorthEast Undergraduate Research Organization for Neuroscience) or at regional professional meetings (e.g., the Eastern Psychological Association) and even at national meetings, including the American Psychological Association, the Association for Psychological Science, and the Society for Neuroscience.

There are several benefits for students presenting at national undergraduate or regional professional conferences, compared to the regional undergraduate conferences. First, national and professional conferences tend to be more selective, resulting in a higher overall quality of presentations. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Some of the faculty members we surveyed said that they found the WPUPC to be less threatening for students and a better place for them to learn about making research presentations. Usually the WPUPC is a student's first experience presenting research outside his or her home institution. The faculty members work hard to insure that the conference is a good

first experience. Seeing the other student presentations helps the student evaluate his or her research in an appropriate context. Many students wouldn't be ready to present at a larger venue, but after the WPUPC, they are prepared to take their presentations to the next level.

An obvious advantage of the regional conference is proximity. It is much less expensive to take students to a local conference and to schedule travel time during the hectic period near the end of the academic year. Proximity can also be a disadvantage, in that students who drive themselves often don't stay for the entire conference. Many students leave after their own presentations, making the afternoon audience sparse. If a conference is held at an appreciable distance from their home institution, students are more likely to stay for the presentations of others. The selective nature of those conferences may also produce more engagement. Students who know that their work has been judged to be of high enough quality to get on the program are also likely to value the other work on the program accordingly.

Breadth of exposure is another difference between the national conferences and the regional undergraduate conference. Students can witness a wider range of types and levels of research at professional conferences. A benefit of the local conference, however, is that students can see that undergraduate research is the norm in their own small part of the world. This has great benefits for developing a culture of research. It is why many faculty members encourage students to present research at the WPUPC before the student's senior year. Sophomores who present research projects (often done in conjunction with a research methods class) are prepared for future presentations and are excited by the research they see modeled by the seniors.

Social comparison is a benefit of the local conference cited by some of the WPUPC faculty members surveyed. No formal means of assessing the impact of conference attendance on undergraduate research outcomes has been consistently applied, but students see and comment on how students from other institutions perform. They compare their own performance and research quality to what they see. This seems to motivate them to conduct more and better research. They appreciate research more, and they are ready for the next project.

A major advantage of the regional conference is inclusion. The high acceptance rate for students' proposed presentations means that we strongly encourage many students to present. The opportunities for presentation at national and regional professional conferences are usually limited to co-authored work with faculty members or to sessions hosted by Psi Chi (the international honor society in psychology). Average students are left out. Additionally, the lead times for presentation at many professional conferences are incom-

