

THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN HOSTING A MEETING AT YOUR CAMPUS

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Advance Logistics (1–2 years)

Choose a catchy conference title.

Setting the date: avoid holidays and conflicts with other regional ASECS conferences. Check with the football coach and schedule your conference during an “away” game; there is always the danger that a “home” game in October or November can turn into Homecoming Weekend. Parking on campus and using classrooms for the conference is much simpler to manage during Fall Break, if you have one (and meeting in a campus building instead of at a conference center or hotel is more economical).

Hotel: reserve a block of non-smoking rooms in a nice hotel as close to campus as possible (there always seem to be enough smoking rooms). Many people will appreciate knowing about lower-priced housing alternatives, too. Try to find out if there are plans to remodel the hotel when your conference will be taking place. Check whether new hotels are being built. Make sure the hotel closets accommodate ladies’ dresses—some older ones are designed for male suits only.

Book exhibit: It’s hard to get Scholar’s Choice to attend a conference that will draw fewer than 200 registered attendants but try anyway. Contact them via their website (www.scholarschoice.com). Also contact your own publishers and your local university press and ask them to send some books for display/sale (AMS Press, UP of Kentucky, and Yale UP are often willing to send books).

Speakers: arrange your plenary speakers, if you are having them, as far in advance as possible. Be sure to reserve prepaid hotel rooms for them.

Get a bank account if you need one. My own bank gave me a supplemental personal account with an accompanying MAC/VISA card—checks had to be made out to me, but it went smoothly and the Visa was useful at Staples (I just swallowed the tax on the account interest—all five dollars of it). Write “conference” on the card and the check book to keep them separate.

Try to get some seed money from the society’s treasurer, and some offers of support from your college (if they don’t give you a flat amount, ask them to sponsor a reception, coffee break, or student workers and acknowledge that in the program copy). Remember to thank everyone in print who gave money—and be lavish with thanks.

Your bookkeeping will be much, much easier if you set a round, all-inclusive fee for the conference (for example, a flat \$60 or \$90). It also makes things easier for participants at tax time when they don’t have to separate out food expenses. Set a round figure for a “guest ticket” for the banquet. I give receipts to those who ask for them at the conference; I don’t mail them out one by one.

Have backup plans: alternative hotels, meeting rooms, parking places, locations for meals, etc. Backup plans are especially important for outdoor events.

Ask for help—from the society, from your department, from your students, from your significant other, from last year’s conference organizer. Save material you receive from other conferences to use as models—programs, registration forms, etc.

Arranging the Program (6–12 months)

Set up a website for the conference as soon as possible and put its address on all material. Keep it up to date.

Circulate the call for papers at the current conference and through newsletters. Inform ASECS of your dates so they can put it in the newsletter.

Set up an Excel spreadsheet for names, affiliations, addresses, emails, “paid,” “on program,” etc. You can use this to generate mailing labels and the final name badges. Keep it up to date.

Many panels will be arranged and submitted by the society’s members. However, about half will be have to be assembled from the individual proposals that have been submitted. Try to arrange them so there are connections and make up a title that covers all the papers in the session. Then assign a chair to the panel who can be trusted to start on time, keep speakers to their time limits, and initiate discussion. I recommend tapping members of the Organizing Committee; graduate students are not a wise choice as session chairs since some faculty members refuse to defer to them (I’ve seen it happen). Don’t leave this too late—panelists need to contact their chairs to supply bios and such, and it looks disorganized to have “chair: to be announced” in the program.

Make sure those who have arranged panels send you the email and mail addresses of the speakers so you can put them in the spreadsheet.

Schedule those papers that need slide projectors or VCRs into the same room to save yourself the agony of moving equipment. Make sure your speakers notify you early about their equipment needs. Write the equipment needs into the draft of the conference program (I post this to the website and also send this early to all paper-givers so they can find out who their chair is, find out when they are *tentatively* scheduled for, proofread their names/ paper titles/affiliations, and see that their session has/hasn’t been allotted a slide projector or VCR). Lots of people will need to change their affiliations, equipment needs, or paper titles at this stage. Make sure the titles are understandable to people in other disciplines!

Schedule as many thematic cross-national/disciplinary panels and as few single-author/discipline panels as possible. It’s helpful to imagine yourself a French scholar, an art historian, or an Americanist trying to decide what session to attend in a given time slot—we often look at the program only with the eyes of English Lit people. Don’t dilute the audience for the non-English lit papers, however, by scheduling, for example, French papers in competing panels unless you are sure you have a large representation from the discipline.

Friday will have the highest attendance; if you have to schedule 3 panels against each other, this is the day to do it. Friday lunch is good for the business meeting and Friday night for the banquet if you want maximum attendance. Avoid holding the business meeting at Saturday lunch since a lot of people will have left (some will come just for the Saturday sessions, but their numbers are smallish). Avoid Sunday morning panels if you are at the fringes of the geographical area for most conferees. I sometimes think we should start the conferences on Thursday afternoon and scrap Sunday morning panels entirely. Saturday night should be reserved for something fun, to treat those who stay to the end of the conference but that doesn’t depend on large numbers: a play, for example.

Preliminary planning: put 4 speakers on most panels—there will be considerable attrition by conference time so few panels will really have 4 speakers. Two speakers in a panel is to be avoided like the plague—rebalance your panels to eliminate this (unless they are the “right” two speakers). You never promised anything more than a *tentative* schedule, after all.

Down time: half hour breaks between sessions if possible: people need time to talk and will skip sessions to do so if you don’t give them the time. 75-minute panels with 30-minute breaks will keep things on track pretty well. You also need to allow some time after lunch for people to take walks, etc.

Drinks/teatime at the end of each day is to be desired. Plenaries go well here (before the drinks, though).

To estimate audience sizes, use this formula: total # of attendees divided by 2 and then divided by the number of concurrent panels (Example: $100/2 = 50$. With two concurrent panels: 25/session (v. g.); with four concurrent panels: 12/session (not v. g.). These numbers assume a captive audience. Audiences will

be smaller if your conference is located near a sexy urban area instead of in a small town or the countryside. Be warned that half of the graduate students will show up only to give their papers and then never be seen again. Shocking, but true.

Make those on the program pay their registration by a certain date (6–8 weeks before the conference, for example). Those who miss the deadline need to be contacted quickly by email—the bulk of no-shows tend to be those who never paid their registration fees! You must be firm about dropping them from the program if they seem to be waffling about paying (another reason that an initial 4 people per panel is preferred!). Grad students are prime offenders here, alas—don't assume they'll contact you to announce they've decided not to come. Another advantage of an all-inclusive rate: it makes people want to get their money's worth by attending more panels and meals.

Those coming from abroad often will pay in cash at the conference, after they've changed their money. Be sure you get a firm commitment that they are actually coming, however. If you can, ask the business office about VISA payments for non-US attendees. Stick to checks for the majority—they provide a receipt for the attendee and you cannot imagine how many people mess up a credit-card form!

Rooms: try to minimize the number of location changes. Arrange for rooms for each session plus an area for registration/book exhibit (lockable) and possibly another for milling around (have chairs/tables and a place to hang coats). Think about sound carrying through walls when you choose rooms and try to position the panelists at the farthest point from the door so those coming late won't feel so conspicuous. Try to schedule meals in the same place every day.

Do not use bulk mailing to send out the initial membership-wide conference material—it'll take six weeks, even if the post office says it won't. Try to keep the number of sheets in your initial packet to a bare minimum to save postage. Print on both sides of each page and refer people to the website and the articles in the *Intelligencer* for more information (make sure the web address is correct). Include a registration form, remember to tell them to whom to make out the check, and note the deadline for speakers/chairs to register. Use last year's conference material as a model.

Advance Logistics (6–9 months)

Arrange van/bus transportation between hotel and conference site. Try to time it with session breaks rather than hour/half-hour slots and post the schedule at both the conference and at the hotel. Colleges often have vans—reserve them early and figure out who is eligible to drive them.

Arrange parking (generally with Campus Security) for those coming to campus by car and make clear to the conferees where this parking is—especially important on the first day.

Arrange meals with the college caterer—if you give him/her some guidelines and a dollar figure per person, he or she can generally work something out. Because my school lacks a PA liquor license, I had to buy the wine at the liquor store, but the caterer served it (estimate \$5 of the registration fee and at least half a bottle of wine per person if you have this setup—we drink a lot and mostly red). Don't forget both diet and regular soda and some beer (“lite” beer was not popular).

Buffet-style meals are more economical than sit-down meals. The number of registered attendees who won't attend the banquet will equal the number of extra tickets purchased (many of which will be last-minute payments), so just give the caterer the number of registered attendants: it always balances out.

Caterers really know their business—take their advice very seriously. They know more than you do.

If you are planning sit-down dinners, remember to ask on the registration form about vegetarian and low-fat diets (several of our members have had heart attacks). You don't need this for buffets. In a buffet setup, many omnivores will choose vegetarian and low-fat dishes, so have lots of such food available.

Try to provide a cold, high-protein lunch on campus each day of the conference—hot starchy food makes everyone sleepy in the afternoon sessions. You also won't lose as many people in the afternoon sessions

if you feed them lunch on campus (2 hours is a good lunch slot and allows for a walk afterward). If you want attendees around for an evening event, you have to provide dinner. Once they get to the restaurants and bars, they won't come back. Many hotels now provide breakfast as part of the room cost, so there's no reason to provide it as part of the conference.

Arrange for the presence, near the conference rooms, of a steady supply of hot coffee/tea and obvious access to cold water (small bottles of spring water are perfect, but caterers prefer using giant plastic things—label the water thing or no one will recognize what it is). A shortfall here will cause the most griping among conferees.

Advance Logistics (1–5 weeks)

A month before the conference, mail to every registered attendee (and place immediately on the website) information about starting times of activities and, most important, the names of the campus buildings and rooms each attendee should look for. Many people cannot find the registration desk on the first evening because they have a room number but no building name. A photocopied campus map with key places circled is very important. Don't refer them to a website for the map—include it in the packet. It's simplest to keep the regularly updated programs on the website since this tends to change and takes up a lot of space in the mailing.

A month before the conference, ask your President or Dean to give a little welcome speech at the first reception or at the banquet (suggest a time limit of 2 or 3 minutes).

Those plastic badge holders with spring clips that you buy at Office Max or Staples only work on suit jackets with breast pockets. Get the ones with real pins or elastic neck straps (if you have more women than men at your conferences, the elastic neck straps are to be preferred). Best of all, get some of both.

Make name badges with big black letters on them—one needs to be able to read them from 10 feet away.

Start designing the program early, but take it to the printer as close to the conference as possible. You want only those who have registered for the conference to be listed, you want all panels to have at least 3 participants, and you want as many last-minute changes incorporated as possible. I brought my camera-ready copy to my local office-warehouse store a few days before the conference and they did it for me quite economically (Word's "folded booklet" feature makes producing the camera-ready copy easy). Print twice as many programs as you have registrants. They'll disappear fast enough.

Promote your conference at your own school. Invite all the faculty and students of your college (or at the least, those in your department) to attend the sessions and lectures for free. Put streamlined copies of the program (deleting, for example, meals/receptions) in their mailboxes. Put up flyers listing the date and location of the conference in the buildings where the conference is taking place (this is where a catchy conference title pays off). Only a few of your colleagues or students will come hear the papers, but at least they'll understand why you look frazzled and figure out who the strange people on campus are. The flyers are also useful to guide attendees to the right buildings.

C-Day

Post big signs that lead people around the building to the rooms and back again.

Have students at the registration desk/book exhibit (you'll want two at a time so each can take a break as needed). This will free you to tend to whatever turns up. Figure out how you want to hand out badges—laying them out on the table (if paid) with various flyers is one way; if you are making folders, attach them to the outside with a paper clip and have the students hand them out. Mark each unpaid badge/folder with a Post-It so you remember to collect money).

Remember that buildings and doors that were open on Thursday and Friday will invariably be locked on Saturday and Sunday. Know where to find the keys you need and how to turn on the lights when you get in!

A dish of Halloween-sized candy at the registration table is a welcome treat for all. If your college publishes a journal, get some copies of that and a few view books from the admissions office to display. People find such material interesting to peruse. Be sure to have a list of restaurants (not too long or far away) if they are “on their own” for dinner.

Make sure each session’s room has lots of cups and water for the speakers (I supplied small bottles of water instead of a pitcher to prevent spilling—Dannon Spring Water from the local grocery store is good, cheap, and comes in extra-small bottles). Non-speakers tend to swipe them, so keep a supply under the registration table so you don’t run out for the speakers.

It’s great if you can have an undergraduate/graduate student at each panel responsible for turning lights on/off as needed (for slides), passing out handouts, tidying up the room between panels, getting additional water as needed, and being in charge of finding you when there’s trouble. I recruited students from the English Honorary Society. It also helps to have people available who know their way around the campus and its buildings. Make sure they all get nice name tags, just like the conferees’, and list their names in the program somewhere. They need to be easily recognizable as Helpers. Pay them if you can; if not, make sure they get praise and glory.

Some small things will go wrong; as long as you have backup plans for the big things, you’ll be fine.

Afterwards

Don’t schedule much for the day after the conference. You’ll still be wired.

Give leftover display books to your college’s library.

Send everyone who helped you a personal thank-you note: the caterer, security, the president, the dean, your student workers (you can include checks in the notes to your student workers).

Prepare an accounting of the expenses and income for the society.

Close the account and forward any remaining money to the society treasurer. Don’t do this too fast—make sure your bills are all paid.