AC 2007-1597: PREPARING TO HOST A SECTIONAL ASEE CONFERENCE

Clare Cook, Ferris State University
Cook is a professor in the Electronic Engineering Technology and Computer Networks and Systems Department at Ferris State. His interests include embedded systems and digital interface. He has been actively involved with ASEE for nearly 25 years.

Preparing to Host a Sectional
ASEE Conference

Abstract

Hosting an ASEE sectional conference can be a highlight to the membership on the local campus. The planning, organization and execution of a well run conference takes many individuals working as a team. If the planning and organizing are done correctly, then the execution will result in a conference that is enjoyed by many of the attendees. However, the planning and organization is a formidable task.

The tasks of planning and organizing often fall on the Campus Representative but other ASEE members do step forward to chair this event. There are many activities to coordinate including: facilities, budgeting, fundraising, theme, layout, entertainment and housing to name a few. The program layout can be a very time consuming activity with paper solicitation, review, and generating the proceedings. Because final papers cannot be scheduled until the presenters register, there can be many last minute details to adjust in the program.

This paper will describe the activities involved in hosting an ASEE sectional conference from the prospective of being the chair of a sectional conference and sitting on the sectional executive board for over 12 years and assisting other institutions who have hosted this conference. The activities that revolve around hosting and how current members can be involved will be discussed. Additionally, the sectional conference can work as a recruiting tool to showcase ASEE to nonmembers and to the upper administration at the institution.

Introduction

Hosting an ASEE sectional conference can be a very rewarding and trying experience. It is an excellent opportunity for the hosting institution to bring new faces to your campus and to "show off" the programs and facilities you work in on a daily basis. A sectional conference also attracts attendees from other institutions to "see" how other institutions support similar programs. These sectional conferences typically meet annually either in the spring or fall from one to two and one half days.

Getting Started

You may have been approached at some point to consider having your institution host an ASEE sectional conference. There are a number of factors to consider before agreeing to this request.[1] The most important factor to consider is the support you enjoy from your home institution. Is your Dean excited about this opportunity? Are current members excited? Are non ASEE members excited? Without this excitement, the conference is

doomed before it gets off the ground. Support by administration and faculty is a must if you are going to host a successful conference. Many problems can be overcome by having a "can do" attitude and this comes from an excitement by all involved to host an outstanding conference.

Once you have determined the support you enjoy, you can move forward with more concrete planning. Support alone will not necessarily mean you are on the road to a successful conference. At times, this support can be somewhat passive. When called upon to complete a task in a certain time frame, you may find people put a low priority on conference activities and do not complete the necessary work. They many give you a lot of verbal support but not much action. Hosting a conference is an action activity and you need to determine how much action will be behind the support.

At the early stages of planning there is no lack of things to do to prepare for the conference. It is highly suggested that you place a member from your institution on the Executive Board for your section. The North Central Section has done this for many years and is quite successful. This member is actually on the board for a two year period; the year prior to hosting and the year of the conference. This provides continuity from conference to conference and also allows the hosting institutions to observe the activities for the site prior to hosting and also assist with sites that follow them. This person could be the Campus Representative but it generally is better if the general chair of the conference is an active ASEE member on the campus.

In this preliminary stage, the institution needs to determine if they have adequate facilities for the numbers expected. There will be a need for housing, meals, rooms for the technical program, transportation, spouse program, and display space for vendors. You need to determine how many papers may be submitted, how many attendees, and no small part is the cost of this to the institution. Karimi, Barr and Brannan[1] do an excellent job in laying out the cost for hosting various sizes of sectional conferences. The costs today are generally 15% to 20% higher and are largely dependent on facilities available at your location.

If the support is there and you have adequate facilities for the expected numbers and the institutional budget is adequate, you are on the way to hosting a sectional conference.

Putting It Together

During this process of determining whether to host a conference, you should be in contact with the Executive Board for the section. They can give you information about the next available date and timing of your conference. You need to be sure your facilities are available for the dates. At this point, you would want to make a formal request to the ASEE section to host the conference on a specific date. This request normally comes from the Dean and is sent to the Section Chair. The chair brings the request to the Executive Board for a formal vote. The dean is notified of the result.

At this time it is appropriate to name a representative from the institution to sit on the Executive Board. Ideally, this person would sit on the board beginning with the fall meeting two years before hosting. For example, if hosting in April of 2009, the representative would begin attending board meetings in October of 2007. If the sections have a list of conference sites prior to you hosting, it may be an advantage to sit on the board for two cycles to better understand the issues involved.

The person sitting on the board should have a broad knowledge of the conference site. This knowledge would include both facilities and the technical program. Often this person is the general chair of the conference, but it can be someone else with this knowledge.

Acting Locally

Locally, the October time frame is a good time to organize the conference committee at the host site. The two major aspects to hosting a successful conference are: Facilities and Technical Program.

Facilities: Here a decision will be made to host the conference on campus or in a local hotel/conference center. Costs and schedule have a big influence on which facility is chosen. The facility available may determine where the conference will be located. Your facility should be able to accommodate the following:

> Possible days for the conference
> Number of rooms
> Number of presentation rooms and room capacity
> Number of conference rooms and room capacity
> Number of breakfasts and approximate number of servings
> Number of lunches and approximate number of servings
> Dinner banquet and approximate number of servings
> Social events
> Break refreshments
> Audio-visual equipment
> Transportation [1]

In considering facilities, the proximity of the hotel(s) is an important aspect. Are the hotels in walking distance or is transportation necessary?

Many universities have offices that handle summer camps, and special activities. It would be important to contact this office for assistance with the facilities. Many times faculty are not familiar with coordinating the many details of multiple rooms, timing for breakfast/lunch/dinner and the many other details dealing with facilities. If your campus is fortunate enough to have an office like this, it is imperative to engage them in this project.

Technical Program: This normally revolves around a theme for the conference. Education in the future, university connections with industry, and other themes are appropriate for sectional conferences. Your speakers, workshops, poster sessions, and papers should broadly support your theme. As with facilities, there are numerous activities to come together. They include:

Initial call for papers	1 year before conference
Second call for papers	6 months before conference
Abstracts due	5 months before conference
Accept/reject abstracts	4 months before conference
Draft papers due	3 months before conference
Final papers due	6 weeks before conference
Publish Proceedings	3 weeks before conference

In parallel with the paper activity, workshops and special speakers fitting the theme can be pursued. Because of the extended period of a typical workshop, these may be scheduled either pre or post conference. Be aware that attendance before and after the conference can be substantially different than attendance during the conference.

Utilizing Membership

To plan, organize and carry out a section conference, many individuals working as a team will be necessary. There will certainly be a need for a conference committee to oversee the operation of the entire conference. This can be organized differently depending on the circumstances at your site. As an example, your university may have a conference center with a connected hotel located on the edge of campus. This is quite typical of many campuses today. What works quite well, is to have co-chairs of the conference; one, responsible for the facilities and the second responsible for the technical program. Each co-chair has 4 people to coordinate the activities in their part of the conference. This way the conference committee contains 10 people total so the size is manageable to accomplish work without too many opinions slowing down progress. The breakdown of responsibilities is as follows:

Facilities:
        Conference Center
        Hotel Accommodations
        Registration
        Transportation, spouse program, tours

Technical Program:
        Programming Planning and vendor display
        Workshops
        Abstract review
        Proceedings

Each task included in both facilities and technical program has two people responsible for the respective tasks. One person should sit on the conference committee. It is helpful to have two when it comes to scheduling meetings as either can attend. Additionally, they recruit the number of people they feel they needed to accomplish the task at hand. In some situations this is as many as four additional people for a total of six. Some of the major tasks need to be handled by specific people within the university because of their position (Ex. Special Program Director). The breakdown of the subcommittees follows:

Facilities:
Conference Center	Director of special programs and secretary
Hotel Accommodations	2 ASEE members
Registration	Director of special programs, 1 ASEE member
Transportation,	
Spouse program, tours	2 ASEE members

Technical Program:
Programming Planning,	
Vendor display	2 ASEE members
Workshops	2 ASEE members
Abstract review	2 ASEE members
Proceedings	2 ASEE members

With the numbers shown above, 13 ASEE members are recruited to play very active rolls on the conference committee. In total, 25 people are needed to organize and carry out this conference.

Impact on Local Membership

The key to hosting a successful conference is planning well in advance, organizing motivated people and having contingency plans in place for most everything just in case something goes wrong. In this planning cycle, ASEE members that rarely work together get a chance to do so. Communication can not be stressed enough in this entire planning stage. Everyone must be engaged and motivated to accomplish the task successfully.

Faculty and staff members who were not ASEE members may become members after the conference. Some do not stay members long because without the sense of purpose that the conference provides, they drifted from the organization. Others who join after the conference remain active for a long period of time. They attend conferences and take active roles in promoting ASEE on the campus.

The conference also allows for faculty members to get students involved individually or through the many student professional organizations on the campus. The student involvement through planning the conference helps build bonds between students and faculty.

Summary

Hosting a sectional ASEE conference is both challenging and rewarding. Gaining support from faculty, departments and administration can be difficult. However, with the proper management and motivation, all parties can feel proud of a well run conference. The connections between faculty, administrators, and students are enhanced during this period on campus. Because the planning process takes about 18 months, the parties involved work together for an extended period of time and get to see the final outcome of the work. This can be a very rewarding experience.

References

[1] "Planning and Organizing a Regional ASEE Annual Conference", Karimi, Barr, Brannan, 1995 ASEE Annual Conference Proceedings.