

Beyond the Name Tags: A Thoughtful Approach to Hosting a Conference

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CONFERENCES ARE WHERE PSYCHOLOGY comes alive. They are the breeding grounds for intellectualism, the birthplace of collaborations, and the source of motivation to perform interesting research. I realized this last year while making the conference rounds. Since then, I have been experiencing an intense desire to introduce other budding psychologists to the magic that conferences possess.

Although I am not a professional conference planner by any stretch of the imagination, my attempt at founding the first-ever undergraduate psychology research conference at Stanford University has provided me with some insight on how to go about approaching such an endeavor. The purpose of this article is thus to impart some of what I have learned from my experience.

There are a number of logistical decisions that need to be made when planning a conference, from whether to host paper or poster sessions (or both), to the color of the name tags. Those are the things I am not going to address. Instead, I would like to discuss some of the higher order issues to consider.

Don't Wait

I cannot stress enough the importance of starting early. I began thinking about what I wanted the conference to look like an entire year in advance, and we are still not ahead of the game. Brainstorming, revising, and implementing the best ideas can consume a lot of time. The more time you give yourself to sharpen and resharpen your ideas, the better your final product will be.

Leveraging Power

Your first job as conference director should be to select one or two faculty advisors. Beyond being able to offer guidance based on years of personal experience, a helpful advisor will act on your behalf to generate support for the conference in your department.

I guarantee that some faculty members will be skeptical of your sizable endeavor. By dropping your advisors' names, you should have little problem winning over those who are suspicious. We are fortunate to have two incredibly helpful advisors: Drs. James J. Gross and Philip G. Zimbardo. You should aim for the same.

Dream Staff

Selecting the codirectors for the conference is probably one of the most important decisions you will make. Be sure to select individuals who are excited about psychology, who are reliable, and who will be willing to put in the necessary time. Sometimes people will convince you that they are perfect for the job when, in truth, they are a poor fit. In these instances, use your best judgment and choose carefully.

What's My Name Again?

When selecting the conference job titles for you and your codirectors, make sure you choose titles that are empowering, not petty. Director of Marketing and Communication, for example, is much better than Assistant Coordinator. In general, the titles should suggest importance and independence. They should also be titles that you could proudly put on your résumé.

Exponential Marketing

Snail mail is costly, cumbersome, and unlikely to be distributed beyond the person to whom you are sending your material. In contrast, e-mail is inexpensive, simple, and, if you ask properly, likely to be widely distributed. After five days of marketing, we sent out 240 e-mails, but received more than 1,070 unique hits on our website. You do the math.


Social Entrepreneurship

This is your chance to think outside the bubble. When identifying the people you want to benefit, look beyond just undergraduate psychology students. Use the conference as an opportunity to touch the lives of less-fortunate individuals in your community. We have chosen to donate our proceeds to a class of underprivileged high school students studying psychology, but one could think of many other worthy causes.

So far, I have painted a rather pretty picture of what it means to host a research conference. Hosting a conference, however, is by no means an easy task, and it is likely to be complicated by a number of obstacles that will surely arise. Let me give you the partial skinny on what you can expect.

You will wonder whether hosting a conference is the "right" thing to do.

Your codirectors will miss deadlines, financial funding will be tight, at least one faculty member will say you're wasting your time, and you will constantly worry about whether anyone will attend. During these difficult times, sit back, relax for a moment, and reflect upon the following slice of wisdom: Life's riptides are nothing more than action potentials. When you are finished reflecting, get back to work.

It is the fundamental nature of a scientist to do things differently than those who have come before. Hosting the first-ever Stanford Undergraduate Psychology Conference is my way of staying true to that nature. It is also my way of making sure that psychology continues to come alive. If this goal resonates with you, I strongly urge you to consider hosting your own conference. And if you end up deciding to do so, I wish you the best of luck. 

[EDITOR'S NOTE: For details about the First Stanford Undergraduate Psychology Conference, see "Other Meetings" in the Convention Calendar on page 57. For additional information on planning a convention, refer to the Psi Chi website to read "Hosting Your Own Convention" by Dr. Michael Robinson (www.psichi.org/content/publications/newsletter/volume/vol_19/19_2/robinson.asp).

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