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So You Want to Organize a Conference?

By Gary DeCoker

I've always known that writing my dissertation was the most all-consuming period of my academic career. Nothing else came close to the sustained effort required for that task. Nothing, that is, until I decided to organize an academic conference.

That conference commemorated the 50th anniversary of Japan Study, a partnership between Waseda University at Tokyo and two Midwestern consortia representing 27 liberal-arts colleges. I figured I would get two or three participants from each college and put together a conference of about 75 people. How hard could it be? I've taught courses with enrollment that approached that number.

Fortunately, I scheduled the conference for early October, which allowed plenty of time to work out last-minute details over the summer. Still, in the weeks leading up to the conference, I rode an emotional roller coaster from confidence to despair and finally, once the proceedings were under way, to exuberance followed by exhaustion. Here's what I learned along the way.

Let the participants take the lead. I figured that a group of prominent professors, politicians, and artists would attract a good crowd. So my initial idea was to have five or six speakers (over a few days) asking each of them to make two-hour presentations. But estimates of the cost of honoraria, transportation, and lodging for those speakers shifted my thinking, and, in the end, I sent out a call for papers. Of the 70 faculty members who attended, almost everyone presented at a session. Younger faculty members especially seemed to appreciate the opportunity to present. Another line on the CV never hurts as the tenure decision approaches.

Never on a Sunday. "Don't have sessions on Sunday," was advice I received from many sources. "People don't want to give up their entire weekend." I didn't quite ignore the advice, but I didn't follow it either. The conference went from Friday evening to Sunday noon. My concern was that people would leave late Saturday and skip the Sunday sessions. So I decided to use food as an incentive to stay. On the conference registration form, people could reserve a free sack

lunch after the last session. We still had some early departures, but about 70 percent of the participants picked up a lunch on the way out the door.

Ask for help. On Saturday evening, we invited a *koto* performer from New York City to give a concert on the stringed instrument that is the national instrument of Japan. I made the initial contact with the musician and then informed our campus events coordinator who asked me whether I would like her office to run the event. Because it was part of our conference—and I'm a bit of a micromanager—I initially said that I would take care of all the arrangements.

A few days later, the events coordinator sent me a planning checklist, which led me to change my mind. And I'm glad that I did. With her office in charge, all I had to do was list the performance in the conference schedule. She handled tickets, ushers, the venue, the green room, hotels, local transportation, meals, a master class with the music-department students, and countless other arrangements, including the extra airline ticket for the *koto* (whew!).

Get a grant and spend it wisely. We were fortunate to receive a grant. That money, along with our program's contribution, allowed us to offer transportation and two nights' lodging to conference participants. I had hoped that people would agree to share rooms, but, without a financial incentive, most people chose a single. We were more successful with our approach to transportation. By limiting airline fares to \$400, we encouraged early ticketing. For those who came to the conference by car, we offered 30 cents a mile if you drove alone and 50 cents a mile if you came with another participant.

One of my concerns was that people would register for the conference over the leisurely summer months and then decide to cancel once they got caught up in the busyness of the new academic year. My solution was to require a \$75 nonrefundable, registration fee, hoping that a small financial investment would make people more committed to attending. In the end, everyone who registered showed up.

Start slowly. I knew that people wouldn't arrive at the same time, so I began the conference with a 90-minute reception in our library gallery. Our Japanese art historian agreed to install an exhibition from the college's East Asian art collection, and many people gathered there upon arrival. After the reception, we went directly to dinner. The official beginning came with the keynote addresses at 7 p.m., and most people had arrived by then.

Communicate with your speakers. For the keynote addresses, I invited two former college presidents. One, who was about to turn 99 years of age, spoke of the history of our consortial program; the other about the future of East Asian studies at liberal-arts colleges. I was worried about the stamina of our centenarian, so I told him that he shouldn't feel obligated to join us for dinner. To my surprise, he was one of the first people to arrive at the opening reception and had met most of the participants before we left for dinner.

The other former president also had me worried. We had been communicating fairly regularly in the months leading up to the conference, but about three weeks prior he stopped returning my e-mails. During the week before the conference, I started a list of potential replacement speakers. Then his e-mail arrived. It turned out that he and his wife were travelling with limited Internet access, and a message he had sent me about that got caught in my spam folder.

In the end, their talks set just the right tone for the rest of the weekend. So my advice would be to invite people who are engaging speakers, to share with them in detail your expectations for their talks, and to find out whether they're coming to dinner. Then trust that they'll show up. Better still, ask them for contact information during the weeks before your conference.

Be ready for phone calls. On the day of the conference, we made sure to have someone at the office phone to receive last-minute questions. Calls came in from food service, tech support, and the participants themselves. The funniest involved two people who couldn't find each other at the airport. We had arranged for them to share ground transportation, but they had never met before. I walked into the office and watched our administrative assistant on the phone repeating commands back and forth between the two travelers as they wandered the terminals at O'Hare Airport: "Tell me what you see now." "Keep walking." And finally, "Hold up your hand." They met and arrived on time.

Write a call for papers. I posted a long list of possible topics on the conference Web site. But it took quite an effort to secure enough proposals. Over half of the panels came from personal invitations and introductions I made between people on various campuses who share similar interests. I also posted possible presentation styles including lightening talks and PechaKucha. I'm still not exactly sure what those are, but the lists of presentation topics and styles let people know that we were hoping for more than the reading of a research paper.

Beware of politicians. About a year before the conference, I contacted our regional Consulate General of Japan and invited the Consul General to give an opening address on the topic of Japan's changing role in East Asia. He accepted, but a few months later I received word that his talk would have to start a bit earlier as he needed to fly to another location that same evening. Not long after, I received an e-mail stating that the Consul General couldn't come at all, but his deputy would take his place. A few more e-mail exchanges assured me that the content of the talk would not change. Then, during the summer, the Consul General was called back to Tokyo due to an emerging political crisis.

With that change we lost the deputy whose scheduled appearance at our conference was replaced with another official. He proposed a new topic, one that I knew most of the conference participants would not find engaging, so I canceled the opening keynote and added the reception in the art gallery.

To smooth things out with the Consulate General's office, we hope to host the new Consul General for a campus lecture as soon as he is appointed. Our plan is to make it a local, stand-alone event in case the schedule needs to be changed.

Expect miscellaneous issues. No matter how carefully you plan, unforeseen things arise: technology glitches, laptops forgotten in hotel rooms, dead car batteries, and locked meeting rooms. You need to have at least one person at the conference dedicated to nothing but problem solving—24/7 for the entire conference.

Follow your instincts. Listening to colleagues share information at panel sessions and during informal conversations gave me great pleasure, but the most gratifying part of the conference came from a last-minute decision. The week before the conference, I invited a couple of long-retired faculty members who live nearby to join the two former presidents for Saturday dinner. Their exuberant conversations, peppered with stories about the old days, fit well into the festive banquet atmosphere. I can see myself at such a dinner in my retirement future, talking with similar enthusiasm about the nuts and bolts of organizing an academic conference.

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