

How to Plan a Low-Budget Conference

A Step-by-Step Guide

Think about the best academic event that you have attended. Were all of the bells and whistles necessary? Could that event have occurred on a lower budget with similar success? The point is that small-scale conferences can be put together with a relatively small amount of money, and participants can still reap many benefits. This guide will offer some suggestions for organizing an academic event that is within reach using your leadership abilities and limited resources.

Academic conversations can occur in multiple formats. Which will best accomplish your goals?

1.) "Traditional" conference format:

This includes panels of presenters, who each read 15-20 minute papers, often with a respondent. It also includes a plenary speaker who addresses the theme of the conference.

2.) Roundtable conference format:

This includes conversation sessions organized around a topic. You can invite presenters to speak to the topic, or allow for a more informal conversation to occur among participants with the help of a moderator. Participant numbers can be limited to allow for in-depth discussions.

3.) Workshop conference format:

Workshops can include invited presenters who guide participants through a particular topic, method, or research tool. They can also be interactive, with participants bringing material to "workshop" with their peers.

Things to consider as you brainstorm for your event:

- *What is the goal of your event?*
- *What theme(s) will organize the event?*
- *What type of conversations do you want to encourage at this event?*
- *Are these conversations best achieved by paper presentations or other forms of academic conversation?*
- *How many presenters are there? How long will each present? Do you need the papers ahead of time? How much time for Q&A? Do you want respondents?*
- *Do you need a plenary speaker?*
- *What other sessions might help accomplish your goal (movie screening, roundtables, workshops, etc.)?*
- *Who do you want in the audience? How will you advertise to get them there?*
- *How much will it cost?*
- *How much time do you have to plan it? What type of help will you need?*

As you plan your event, be flexible. You may not get your first choice plenary speaker or the best conference room, but less glamorous options may still accomplish your goals. In the words of Tim Gunn, "Make it work!"

Options for Advertising Your Event

- 1.) Email department mailing lists and other lists relevant to your conference
- 2.) Create flyers and post around campus
- 3.) Distribute flyers at local academic events
- 4.) Ask to post flyers on office doors
- 5.) Create a website
- 6.) Create a Facebook event page
- 7.) Ask relevant websites to post your event
- 8.) If you want someone to participate, ask in person and put a flyer in their mailbox.

Tips for Refreshments

If budget allows, refreshments can be a great way to bring together conference participants in informal conversations.

- 1.) Be aware of food restrictions. Offer a variety of snacks and drinks.
- 2.) Look into catering options (ex. UCEN catering or local restaurants)
- 3.) Provide enough plates, utensils, napkins
- 4.) Plan refreshment breaks into the event

Creating Committees

If you have many volunteers, you can organize them into committees. Examples:

- 1.) Proposal Selection Committee
- 2.) Respondent/Speaker Committee
- 3.) Registration/Welcome Committee
- 4.) Advertising Committee
- 5.) Logistics Committee

Utilizing Volunteers

Who will help? What do you want them to do? When asking for volunteers, include a list of the tasks they can choose from. When they volunteer, ask if they have particular strengths or unique resources. You probably do not want the person with program layout skills to be assigned to refreshments, and the person with catering experience to create the program.

Possible tasks to delegate:

- 1.) Distributing Call for Papers
- 2.) Responding to general inquiries. Set up a conference email account for this purpose.
- 3.) Inviting respondents. Ask local professors/independent scholars to respond.
- 4.) Inviting/following-up with plenary speaker.
- 5.) Selecting proposals/creating panels
- 6.) Emailing acceptances and rejections
- 7.) Creating conference flyer and program
- 8.) Distributing flyer
- 9.) Emailing mailing lists about the conference
- 10.) Creating and updating a website
- 11.) Printing conference materials
- 12.) Planning/ordering/buying refreshments
- 13.) Creating name tags
- 14.) Creating welcome packets, with info about campus and food options
- 15.) Picking up presenters or speakers from airport. Arranging hotel or home stays.
- 16.) Setting up, cleaning up
- 17.) Taking notes during the conference. Writing a report of the conference to distribute to those involved.
- 18.) Sending Thank-you notes after the conference to those who presented, responded, moderated, or helped in other significant ways.

Event Planning Checklist

- ☐ Identify conference theme and goal
- ☐ Ask for volunteers
- ☐ Choose conference format
- ☐ Assign committee roles and plan meetings
- ☐ Choose a conference date and location
- ☐ Book the location (some venues require you to book 6-9 months in advance)
- ☐ Check conference room equipment
- ☐ Write and distribute a CALL FOR PAPERS
- ☐ Select proposals & organize into panels
- ☐ Notify presenters that have been accepted, require them to confirm/commit
- ☐ After all have confirmed, notify those not chosen.
- ☐ Invite scholars to respond to panels
- ☐ Invite scholars to moderate panels
- ☐ Invite plenary speaker
- ☐ If possible, create a website. Update it.
- ☐ Create conference flyer (w/ website link)
- ☐ Advertise, using multiple strategies
- ☐ Create conference program and name tags
- ☐ Order/plan refreshments
- ☐ Send reminders and directions/parking info
- ☐ Provide key participants with your cell number, in case something goes wrong at the event!

Checklist for the Day of the Event

- ☐ Set up registration table, with programs, name tags, and someone to greet people.
- ☐ Set up refreshments
- ☐ Greet all presenters, moderators, and respondents and make sure that they are clear on their roles and presentation times
- ☐ Give Welcome Address
- ☐ Make the best of whatever problems may occur!
- ☐ Thank everyone for participating!
- ☐ Clean up after event!

How to be a Good Host: Before the Conference

- 1.) Let presenters know their time limits.
- 2.) Let them know if there is a respondent.
- 3.) Email them directions and parking info.
- 4.) If you can, offer them homestays.
- 5.) If not, email them hotel options.
- 6.) If food will be served, ask if they have food restrictions.
- 7.) Ask them if they have any questions!

How to be a Good Host: During the Conference

- 1.) Greet the participants!
- 2.) Give them name tags and programs
- 3.) If food is not served, give them handouts on food options, including directions
- 4.) Before a panel begins, ask presenters how they would like to be introduced. Clarify name pronunciations.
- 5.) Be available throughout the day to answer questions.

Sample Name Tag:

Title of Academic Conference
May 20th, 2010

JANE SMITH
University of California Santa Barbara

Presenter

Your budget will depend on how much money you have, how many things you get donated (it never hurts to ask for donations if you do it politely!), how creative you are, and how much money you want to spend on speakers. Consider these sample budgets:

Budget for the Evangelical Studies Graduate Student 1-day Conference:

\$0	Booked McCune room (Research Focus Groups book room for free)
\$350	Honorarium for speaker, who also screened a documentary he helped create
\$0	100 2-sided programs (Research Focus Groups receive free B/W printing)
\$0	200 conference flyers on colored paper (see above line)
\$15	20 printed name tags w/ plastic holders (for presenters/committee)
\$75	Morning and afternoon refreshments for 30 people (from Costco)
\$10	Plates, plastic utensils, and napkins for refreshments
\$0	Small thank you gifts (\$50 of merchandise donated by University Bookstore)
\$450 TOTAL	

There are two options for compensating speakers. These options may be combined if funds allow:

1.) Provide them with an Honorarium

2.) Reimburse them for travel and lodging*

**This option requires receipts. Some speakers prefer to be reimbursed for travel and lodging because, in many cases, they can write it off as a work expense on their taxes.*

\$1000 Sample Budget for a 2-Day Conference:

\$300	Book a conference room for Friday and a Saturday
\$300	\$50 honorarium per respondent/workshop leader, 6 respondents
\$60	150 2-sided B/W programs on colored paper (20 cents per side)
\$50	250 conference B/W flyers on colored paper (20 cents each)
\$20	100 stick-on name tags and markers for participants to write their names
\$250	Morning and afternoon refreshments (from UCEN Catering*)
\$20	Extra plates, plastic utensils, napkins, and plastic cups
\$1000 TOTAL	

**UCEN Catering provides refreshment packages with food and drinks. They set up the refreshment table and take it down. They provide some plates, cups, and utensils, but extras are often needed. Ask them how much food is included in each "serving" that you order. Also, bring plastic bags because they will not allow you to take the food remaining from your event unless you have a sealed plastic container.*