Society for The Teaching of Psychology (STP) Toolkit for Developing a Teaching Conference

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Do you want to develop a teaching conference? Kudos to you! This "conference toolkit" will help you get started. As the figure above depicts, there are a set of interdependent considerations to make when imaging what the conference could look like: **Conference Needs, Conference Finances, and Conference Planning and Details**. Especially in an age where conferences can occur virtually, in-person locally, in-person nationally—or even internationally—the interrelatedness of conference needs, finances, and planning details is of paramount importance.

Conference Needs

Conference Audience & Goals

Before planning anything else, you should determine the goals of the conference. Who do you hope will attend the conference? What do you hope will happen at the conference? What outcomes do you hope will be achieved for those who attend by hosting the conference? A conference for high school teachers of psychology might be different than one designed for teachers from 2- and 4-year institutions. A conference that includes lots of student experiences might be different than one designed primarily for instructors. If you want to attract a diverse audience, make sure that your program is diverse (i.e., includes topic and sessions that appeal to all the audiences you hope will attend).

If you haven't done so already, it might be useful to reach out to some individuals you hope will attend the conference to do some preliminary information gathering. This could occur over email or through the use of some polling or survey tools. What kinds of conference experiences would they enjoy? Is there a need for a particular kind of conference for them, perhaps especially in the geographical domain in which the conference might occur, if it's in-person? Or, if you are seeking to start a virtual conference, in what ways will doing so be useful for the many individuals who might attend, regionally, nationally, or internationally?

At this initial phase, it might be useful to reach out to individuals who lead other conferences that you have attended, or those who oversee conference programming within the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, such as the Vice President for Programming, the Director of STP Programming at Regional Conferences.

Conference Modality, Format, and Duration

After reflecting on the audience and goals you have for the conference, it is worth considering how you would like the conference to look. Should the conference be in-person or virtual? This determination will have a significant impact on how you can solicit and execute programming for the conference. If the conference is in-person, then there are a number of features to consider that are absent in virtual conferences (travel time, lodging, meal expenses, poster board rentals, etc.). Though, if the conference is virtual, there are some features to consider that are less common in in-person conferences (recording of presentations, developing a set of streamlined computerized tools to navigate the conference, etc.). Many of the considerations you must make about a conference will look similar across virtual or in-person modalities, but of course, the specifics will vary based on which you choose.

If you choose to have an in-person conference, here are a set of considerations to make regarding format and duration:

- From how far do you expect your audience to come? If you have participants coming from long distances, be sure to consider driving times when creating the program.
- Do you anticipate a one-day conference or a conference that is more than one day long? Also keep in mind that participants may expect you to provide hotel suggestions, a block of hotel rooms, restaurant recommendations, etc.
- What days of the week would be ideal for the conference to occur? Many conferences occur partially over the weekend so that attendees have more liberty to travel, but at the same time, some individuals prefer that conferences occur during the week so that their weekends do not become dedicated worktime.
- Do you plan to host your conference at a college or university, at a hotel, or some place else? These decisions affect costs, the need for contracts, and other factors. You should also be prepared to provide signage and information about parking and walking directions at the conference sight.
  - Holding the conference at a hotel has some advantages. First, it's very convenient for participants who have to stay overnight. Plus, a hotel might provide a better ambiance than a campus location. It also gives participants from the host institution a chance to "get away." The down side to a hotel is the likely increase in costs for food, equipment rental, and space usage fees. If you decide to use a hotel, try to find someone experienced in negotiating with a hotel to assist you. If no one is available, keep the following in mind

during your negotiations:

- Consider constructing a Request for Proposals (or RFP) for your event to get competing offers from hotels in your desired location. This will better allow you to compare apples to apples in terms of what competing hotels offer.
- Hotels want your business. You are doing them a favor and should take advantage of this and ask for perks (e.g., complimentary rooms, fruit baskets for keynote speakers or conference staff).
- Try to get the food costs locked in at the time you sign the contract. Food costs can rise substantially over the planning period.
- If you expect that participants will need to (or want to) stay overnight, you should reserve a block of rooms. The hotel will probably make you financially responsible for this block of rooms, so be conservative. Hotels are unlikely to reduce the number of rooms in your block but are often willing to increase it. Be aware that the hotel may sell out of rooms so check often to see if you need to increase the number of rooms in your block.
- Explore the possibility that the hotel will allow you to supply your own technology (e.g., computers, projectors), or get it from an outside vendor. Equipment rental is often *very* expensive, so you will want to bring as much of your own equipment as possible.
- Be attentive to high as well as hidden costs in hotel contracts. Some examples: equipment rental fees, including charges for a power bar and extension cord; set up and catering service charges (catering service charges can be up to 30% of the food costs); additional fees for a bartender or cashier; and WIFI fees (which may be *very* high).
- If available at your institution, see if someone with legal experience is willing to look over any contracts provided.
- Check to see if you are exempt from taxes.
- *Carefully* read the penalty clauses associated with failing to meet room block commitments and cancellation.

Conference Finances

Budgeting: Expenses and Revenues

Conference budget preparation should take into account both **revenues and expenses**, with a goal of breaking even. Likely **expenses** include:

- Food and beverage expenses, including service fees. Food is often less expensive at an institution-hosted conference, rather than one hosted at a hotel. However, expect that the expenses for food will be quite high, when accounting for service and other catering fees. For many conferences hosted at hotels, the space rental (below) is free, but with the agreement that you spend a certain amount on food and beverage, as well as a certain amount of attendees staying at the hotel during the conference (what are referred to as "room nights.") It is helpful to get a catering estimate before your event.
- Space rental is another cost to consider. Depending on your working relationship at a host institution, it may be free or low cost. However, if working with a hotel, there will almost certainly be a fee for using their space (unless the space is "comped" based on the food and

beverage agreement).

- Expenses for recruiting keynote or other notable speakers that will present at the conference (e.g., travel expenses, hotel accommodations, honoraria).
- It is often wise to host one or more poster sessions during your conference, as this will bring in a large amount of participants. If you do, there will need to be materials for them to display their posters (easels or boards, pushpins, number sign indicators for poster locations). You or the host institution may own easels that you can use, which can save costs. But if using an outside vendor to acquire and install poster boards, this is an added expense. It is helpful to get an estimate for the boards before your event.
- Costs for audio-visual (AV) materials and support. These can be provided by the hotel, institution, or an outside vendor. But the materials themselves are fairly expensive to rent. And, additionally, it is often helpful to have dedicated support staff from the AV provider during the event to troubleshoot computer connections, projectors, and speaker systems. It is helpful to get an estimate for AV your event. Be sure to ask your institutional technology support team directly if they can assist with your conference, if you are hosting the event at your institution. They may be able to provide assistance for free or at a reduced cost.
- Though WIFI access is sometimes provided by the host institution or an AV provider, if it is not, you will want to secure such access. Attendees will use it during the conference.
- Any printing costs, though many materials can be prepared and distributed virtual using free or institution-owned software (G-Suite tools, Microsoft tools, webpages).
- Supplies for needed for the conference, such as folders, packet materials, pen and paper, name badges, SWAG, etc.
- Costs for utilizing a conference ap such as [Guidebook](#), [Sched](#), or [Whova](#). Though these are often only worth the expense for fairly large conferences.

Likely **revenues** include:

- Registration fees for the attendees. This is likely the largest block of funds that you can expect to earn, so count on it for covering most of your expenses.
- Support from publishers, who may be willing to provide funds for their authors to serve as keynote speakers.
- Co-sponsors can also provide funds that serve as revenues. Co sponsors may include publishers, educational technology companies, branches of the APA, or nearby universities who may be seeking to recruit students (especially likely at conferences with a lot of undergraduates). These co-sponsors may have a table at which they can display materials to be distributed to your attendees. They may also pay to have their logo included on conference materials, or to have their organization named during opening remarks at the conference.
- Your institution may also have funds that can be used to defray costs. Check with related departments (e.g., psychology, education), administrative units (Deans, Provosts), or program grants. The closer the institutional entity to the goals of your conference, the more likely you'll receive funds from them.
- STP has a [Partnership Small Grant Program](#) that can provide funds for events such as small conferences.
- STP also has a [Conference Presenter Grant Program](#) that can be used to reimburse the expenses of a presenter at a conference, such as an invited keynote speaker.
- Though not a revenue stream per se, you can encourage your attendees to apply for one of many STP [Travel Grants](#), which can defray their costs. This may encourage greater attendance.

Marketing and Messaging your Conference

Your approach to messaging will likely depend on your target audience, as well as intended approach for the conference (local in-person vs. virtual, undergraduate focuses vs. college instructor focused). So, first consider who your target audience will be.

For reaching members of the STP, there are [numerous pathways](#), including major social media networks. Additionally, those who have joined the STP listserv (accessible [here](#)) can also post messages about their event there.

It might also be worth reaching out to professional societies or groups that exist nearby or have a similar function or mission. For example, if you were hosting a teaching conference, you could consider sharing that information with a nearby educational development organization.

It is also helpful to do direct messaging to target audience, or those who could distribute your message to target audiences. If you hope to host a conference that will include many regional undergraduates who wish to present their research, message department chairs or faculty members in psychology departments within that region. For large email lists, a mail-merge approach will likely save time and cut down on errors in distribution.

You could also try reaching out to other conference leaders with a similar audience to your own to see if they would be willing to share their recent participant lists. If so, this is an easy way to reach a number of potential attendees directly.

Especially if your event is directly associated with STP, consider posting it in its [monthly newsletter](#). For details reach out to STP's Executive Director at stp@teachpsych.org.

Conference Planning and Details

The specifics of your conference should take into account all the major ideas detailed above: including conference needs and conference finances. What follows are a set of considerations you can make when determining what your conference might look like: what to include, how to configuring the timing, etc. If you have never been a part of a conference planning committee before, it would be advisable to contact someone with conference programming experience, such as the [STP Vice President for Programming](#), or one of its many conference directors, which can be found [here](#).

Program Considerations

What kind of programming would you like to include at your conference? There are a variety of things to think about when approaching this question: what are your goals for the conference, what do you hope for in terms of modality and duration, what expenses and revenues do you anticipate for the conference (and thus, how many attendees do you hope to recruit), and so on.

Conferences are comprised of a mixture of different events, including many of those listed below. Some or all of these events can be based on a selective proposal review. Toward the end of this section, we will include some links with sample conference programs to provide some ideas.
- One or more keynote speakers, depending on the length of the conference

- Concurrent sessions or symposia, which can vary in duration, sometimes categorized by theme
- Meals (either hosted at the event, or at nearby restaurants)
- Affinity group meetings, or other meetings
- Participant idea exchanges (PIEs), often occurring over meals
- Poster session
- A social hour with food and drink, often occurring during a poster session
- Other social opportunities

Staffing

Especially if your conference is larger, it can be worthwhile to solicit the help of a planning committee or steering committee. In addition to sharing the burden of the work, these individuals can bring different perspectives, expertise, or regional representation that can be helpful for the conference. Over time, such individuals can also be a good pipeline for future conference leaders.

You can also consider what other sources of assistance you might have for your conference, often for pay. For example, is there administrative assistance at your institution that can help with things like printing name badges or preparing other materials?

Dates

When selecting conference dates consider the following factors: potential conflicts with other professional meetings that your audience may attend, holidays and religious observances (see this site for one example), and typical campus break periods (e.g., Spring Break). Note that it may not be possible to avoid all the potential dates of conflict, but if your conference will occur regularly, attempt to avoid the same conflict from occurring often. We also recommend avoiding the beginning and ending weeks of a typical semester, especially if your attendees work at institutions with the same beginning or end of the semester timeframe.

Recruitment of Attendees

At most psychology and psychology teaching conferences, the majority of attendees will be individuals who are presenting at the conference. So a big part of your recruitment comes in the form of constructing and distributing a **call for submissions**, which often include the following:
- Indicate the type of proposals you are soliciting (concurrent session, poster, etc.)
- Clearly state the format and length for submission titles, descriptions, and abstracts, including a "short form" abstract that you may wish to include in the conference information for attendees
- Request all information you would need from the presenters if they are accepted: name, institutional affiliation, email address, etc.
- Include information about items you will provide or not provide during the conference (e.g., laptops for presenters)

After proposals have been submitted, it is likely that you or your conference planning committee will have a period where you will review the proposals, often with some kind of rubric. Allow enough time for proposals to be submitted, reviewed, then feedback to be provided to those who have submitted to present at the conference. It is desirable to provide a rationale for decisions to reject a proposal submission.

If you have not already opened the opportunity for individuals to register to attend your conference, make sure you do so by the time the proposal review phase is complete. Once individuals have been accepted to present at the conference, they will want to register for the conference.

Building the Schedule

Once proposal acceptances have been distributed, you should start to build what you anticipate the schedule will look for the conference. For concurrent sessions, it is desirable to avoid having too many sessions on similar topics at the same time, so that attendees can maximize the opportunity to attend sessions of interest to them.

Be sure to keep in mind the participant experience as you're building your schedule. Build in breaks or interactive sessions throughout the day to help attendees maintain their energy. Also try to keep in mind how the logistics of the physical space will work for in-person conferences. If possible, try to avoid the likelihood that many attendees will have to walk long distances or use the stairs or elevators frequently in between sessions.

Logistics are also important from the standpoint of inclusiveness. Attendees who use a wheelchair will need access to elevators if conference events are not on the ground floor. Access to a private lactation room also inclusive to attendees who have recently given birth (this webpage provides some useful suggestions for conference lactation rooms).

Conference Registration

In addition to presenters attending your conference, your conference schedule is also useful as an attendee recruitment tool for those who might not be presenting. As soon as you have finalized your schedule, distribute it to potential attendees to recruit them to come to the conference.

Use some kind of digital tool for conference registration (Qualtrics, Google Forms, etc.). This tool might also be linked with conference registration payment, such as PayPal.

When participants register, they should also report a series of relevant information that you will need to know as the conference organizer (dietary restrictions, accessibility needs, etc.).

Finalizing

As you approach 2-3 months before the conference, you will have a series of tasks you will need to complete to get ready for the conference. These might include some of the following:
- Printing any necessary materials, including name badges
- Welcoming attendees over email
- Communicating with attendees, including last minute travel need-to-knows
- Hotel, lodging, or restaurant recommendations
- Shipping materials to the conference site
- Signage near the conference site to indicate where individuals should go
- Final checks on any rented materials or contract services (e.g., catering, hotel, AV, poster board rental)

Examples

The following are examples of number of other conferences that might be useful as you start to consider what yours might look like. Feel free to examine their websites and available information online, or also reach out to their leaders for suggestions. And of course, STP's Vice President for Programming remains a valuable contact as you start to develop your conference.

STP's Annual Conference on Teaching (and schedule)
Regional conferences with STP Coordinators
Psychology One Conference
The Neuroscience Teaching Conference
Intro Psych Coast-to-Coast (virtual)
The Teaching Preconference at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology
New England Psychological Association, and NECTOP (a teaching conference)
The National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP) (and schedule)