

Top Priorities for Conference Planning: A Tale of Two Higher Education Groups

Audra Richburg
(979) 218-4297
audraw@tamu.edu

Theresa Pesl Murphrey
(979) 458-2749
t-murphrey@tamu.edu

Rilee Hall
(832) 454-4011
rileehall@gmail.com

Texas A&M University
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications
College Station, TX 77843-2116

Christi Esquivel
(254) 299-8228
cesquivel@mcclennan.edu

McLennan Community College
Business Programs
Waco, TX

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 2040493.

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Conferences often serve as clearinghouses of new research, required trainings, best practices, and networking opportunities for all levels of agricultural education from K-12 to post-secondary. However, conference evaluations rarely examine attendees' use of new processes, concepts, and methods learned (Spilker et al., 2020), and attending a session on evidence-based student mentoring, for example, does not guarantee that the attendee will use those practices. Many factors affect the transfer of new knowledge into the workplace, including individual motivation, workplace climate, and quality of instruction (Daffron & Caffarella, 2021). Additionally, attendees must carefully consider the many demands on their resources (Griffin, 2022) and plan their conference attendance carefully. Conference planners should therefore aim to produce a conference experience that can provide tangible benefits to attendees beyond simply meeting others in their field if they are to address the AAAE's National Research Priority Areas 3 and 4 to effectively communicate with and deliver education and resources to diverse audiences (Roberts et al., 2016).

Our study of conference effectiveness is rooted in Rossman and Schlatter's (2019) situated activity system and Knowles' andragogy concepts (1980). Rossman and Schlatter (2019) noted six major categories (people, relationships among them, objects used, rules that provide structure, and timing) that uniquely characterize any event, providing a framework for organizing conference activities and formats. Additionally, andragogy provided a framework for viewing conference attendees as learners with specific and valuable characteristics (Knowles, 1980) and supported many questionnaire items.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to identify preferences for conference activities and characteristics and compare the preferences across two populations. The goal was to provide recommendations for conference planners. An extensive literature search resulted in a list of 25 unique characteristics for comparison. Questions guiding our study were: a) what are the conference preferences of the two populations, and 2) how do these preferences differ or align across the two groups?

Methods

The populations for this study were faculty of a R1 flagship university (group A; $n = 276$) and faculty members involved in projects funded by a national initiative for diversity and inclusion in the sciences (group B; $n = 109$). Data was collected in Spring 2022 via a Qualtrics questionnaire emailed to group A three times and group B two to three times (i.e., project leaders were contacted three times). Although the questionnaire's primary emphasis was on the 25 items identified in an extensive literature review, the instrument included questions about prior conference experiences, characteristic group rankings, and demographics. Data were initially analyzed using descriptive statistics (counts, means, and percentages) using Microsoft Excel.

Results

Respondents identified as primarily white in group A (77%) while group B was only 43%. Related to gender identity, 45% of group A identified as female and group B was 58%. Additionally, respondents had participated in conferences in a variety of roles, including as attendees (89%; 85%), presenters (84%; 73%), planning committee chairs or members (51%; 49%), and advisory committee chairs or members (37%; 28%). Respondents indicated definite preferences for some characteristics. The five items ranked most highly by population A included: I choose to attend the event ($f = 216$); event content focuses on specific skills and practices ($f = 216$); my institution provides support to attend the event (i.e., financial, logistical, etc.) ($f = 200$), the event flexes with participant needs and interests ($f = 196$), and I am able to take home materials or resources after the event ($f = 196$). Group B's top five characteristics were: event content focuses on specific skills and practices ($f = 89$), the event focuses on a setting of respect and safe space for open dialogue ($f = 89$), I am able to take home materials or resources after the event ($f = 84$), the event flexes with participant needs and interests ($f = 83$), and the event includes decompression/reflection time ($f = 82$). Three of the five lowest-ranked characteristics for both populations related to relationships to other attendees: attendees are in the same field as me (group A $f = 75$; group B $f = 12$), I know most other attendees ($f = 28$; $f = 8$), and I do not know most other attendees ($f = 20$; $f = 10$).

Five of the 25 characteristics were ranked the same by both groups: the event flexes with participant needs and interests (#4 of 25), I create ideas, outlines, or other items during the event (#7), the event includes breakout and small discussion time (#8), there are interactions/activities after the event (i.e., peer mentoring, coaching, follow-up calls) (#11), and I receive pre-conference materials with action prompts (i.e., goals or issues to work with) (#17). Five additional rankings only differed by one place between the two groups. Three rankings greatly differed between populations: the event includes decompression/reflection time (group A's #13; group B's #5), the event is face-to-face rather than virtual (group A's #10; group B's #19), and the speaker is an expert in my field (group A's #12; group B's #22).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Preliminary results indicate that while some conference activities are true best practices and beneficial to many, other activities will differ by population. Both groups preferred that session presenters treat their attendees as adult learners, presentations were tailored to current needs and sessions focused on practical rather than theoretical knowledge. Population characteristics may account for major ranking differences. Group B's focus on diversity and equity, a weighty topic, could contribute to a strong preference for decompression and reflection time, while group A's responses were based on any prior conference experience. Group B's focus on multidisciplinary collaborations could have impacted their acceptance of advice of a speaker not from their field.

Conference and professional development organizers can use our simple questionnaire to examine their populations' wants and needs and incorporate findings into programming. Most characteristics used in the questionnaire are applicable to both virtual and in-person events and can be used for many fields of study. Additional studies using the instrument are recommended to fill gaps in the literature and inform conference planning across the nation.

References

- Daffron, S. R., & Caffarella, R. S. (2021). *Planning programs for adult learners: A practical guide* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Griffin, G. (2022). The 'work-work balance' in higher education: Between over-work, falling short and the pleasures of multiplicity. *Studies in Higher Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.2020750>
- Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Follet Publishing Company.
- Roberts, T. G., Harder, A., & Brashears, M. T. (Eds). (2016). *American Association for Agricultural Education national research agenda: 2016-2020*. Gainesville, FL: Department of Agricultural Education and Communication.
https://www.ageds.iastate.edu/files/inline-files/AAAE_National_Research_Agenda_2016-2020.pdf
- Rossmann, J., & Schlatter, B. E. (2019). *Designing, staging, and managing the delivery of leisure experiences*. Sagamore Publishing.
- Spilker, M., Prinsen, F., & Kalz, M. (2020). Valuing technology-enhanced academic conferences for continuing professional development: A systematic literature review. *Professional Development in Education*, 46(3), 482–499.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2019.1629614>