CUR Focus

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Sustaining Success: 40 Years of the Western Pennsylvania Undergraduate Psychology Conference

The Western Pennsylvania Undergraduate Psychology Conference (WPUPC) celebrated its 40th annual gathering in the spring of 2012. Initially serving a smaller region of Northwestern Pennsylvania, the conference has grown to encompass both liberal arts colleges and larger universities across Western Pennsylvania. Hosting the conference currently rotates among 11 institutions. Looking back over the past 40 years, we used our extensive archive and the recollections of current and former steering-committee members and conference coordinators to examine the development of the WPUPC and the features that have made it a sustainable, regional undergraduate conference.

The first meeting of the WPUPC was held in 1973 with the sponsorship of the Northwestern Pennsylvania Psychological Association. It was conceived by a group of faculty members at neighboring institutions as a professional conference in which students could present their work. Even at its inception faculty members appreciated the challenges any one institution would face in sponsoring the conference yearly. In particular, the cost of hosting the conference, along with the time commitments and resources required for organizing the event, were prohibitive for a single institution to shoulder annually. By combining resources and rotating the conference among member institutions, however, these burdens were minimized.

Sustaining Principles

The *steering committee,* instituted in 1980, is key to sustaining the WPUPC. It currently consists of psychology faculty from 11 institutions (see Table 1), which are required to contribute an annual assessment (currently $200) to help finance the conference. Assessments are collected at the beginning of the academic year, allowing the conference host to access funds early in the preparations for its conference. Members of the steering committee meet annually (during a lunch meeting held during the conference) to discuss and critically assess that year's conference and to make shared policy decisions. The steering committee is also available to assist with the planning of the conference, although the host institution has always been responsible for undertaking the majority of the on-site arrangements.

Despite the relatively minimal involvement of the steering committee in the maintenance of the conference, the respondents to a survey of conference planners identified

Table 1. Participating WPUPC Institutions

College	Years Hosted Conference
Current & Former Steering Committee Institutions	
Alliance College	1973
Allegheny College*	1974, 1977, 1981, 1988, 1992, 1998, 2004
Chatham College*	1978, 1983, 1991, 2005
Clarion University	1985
Duquesne University	----
Edinboro University*	1975, 1979, 1982, 1989, 1997
Gannon University*	1987, 1995, 2006
Grove City College*	1996, 2007
Hiram College	----
LaRoche College	----
Mercyhurst College*	1976, 1980, 2003
Penn State Behrend*	1984, 1994, 2001, 2008
Robert Morris University*	2009
Slippery Rock University*	1990, 1999, 2010
Thiel College	----
Washington & Jefferson College*	2002
Westminster College*	1986, 1993, 2000, 2011
Youngstown State University	----
Sample Participating Institutions	
Bethany College California University of PA Carnegie Mellon University College of Wooster Gallaudet University Geneva College Houghton College Indiana University Juniata College Kent State East Liverpool Kent State University Penn State Beaver SUNY Fredonia University of Pittsburgh Wells College	

* Current Steering Committee Institution

the committee as extremely important to the longevity of the conference. In particular, they cite as essential the continuity and sense of institutional history the committee provides. This sense of continuity is largely due to slow turnover in membership on the committee, with several representatives having served for over 30 years. In addition, the steering committee identifies host institutions three years in advance, which facilitates planning the conference and reserving the date in busy academic calendars. Finally, respondents emphasize that the feedback the steering committee provides during the yearly debriefing is quite helpful to future hosts.

A second feature of the conference vital to sustaining its success has been the development of *reliable funding streams.* Survey respondents indicated that the yearly institutional assessment and small conference registrations fees (currently $15 per student) have been adequate for covering the costs of the conference. In fact, there has only been one year in which the assessment was not sufficient, and funding reserves defrayed those additional costs. The yearly assessment has been raised to cover increased costs associated with hosting the event only six times over the last forty years. The small registration fee (often paid by the students' home institutions) helps cover the cost of food during the conference. The registration fee also allows the WPUPC to acquire some funding from institutions that are not a part of the steering committee, but that regularly have students present at the conference (see Table 1). These participating institutions are mostly from Pennsylvania or Ohio, and they appreciate the ability to have students attend the conference, without their having to take on the duty of hosting. Moreover, host institutions have been creative in identifying additional funding, including contributions from institutional offices (e.g., undergraduate research offices, college deans, academic departments, and student organizations) and outside sources (e.g., sponsorships by textbook or software companies).

Although these additional sources of funding may be small, they have generated a modest reserve fund that can be tapped if future costs should exceed the yearly assessments. Overall, the combination of steady funding streams and additional funding opportunities has provided the WPUPC with adequate finances and has equitably spread the cost of operating the conference across member institutions.

New technologies have helped the conference manage logistics. Virtually all conference communications utilize e-mail. The development of a permanent conference website has provided a consistent web presence (https://sites.google.com/a/allegheny.edu/wpupc/home), and the creation of temporary host institution websites has facilitated the submission and approval of student projects, the development of conference programs, and the distribution of resources

for students (e.g., http://www.westminster.edu/acad/psych/wpupc.cfm). Communication among member institutions has been streamlined by electronically circulating conference organizing materials (including mailing lists and web material) among host institutions, eliminating the need for these to be created each year. Such materials include directions for the online registration process, formats for student acceptance notices, and instructions for students regarding the appropriate development of posters and presentations. In fact, despite occasional issues with the availability of technologically capable presentation spaces, the WPUPC has embraced new technologies as they have evolved so that student presentations reflect the professional standard. When overheads were the new "great invention," presenters received detailed instructions for their use. Similarly, as PowerPoint became the standard, the WPUPC developed a description of best practices for its use.

Finally, the *conference archive* has established an institutional memory that facilitates the organization of the conference from year to year. The WPUPC's archive consists of materials gathered across the 40-year lifespan of the conference, including conference communications, steering-committee minutes and exchanges, and programs from each year of the conference. The programs provide the schedule of events for each meeting, names of the keynote speakers, and the titles of keynote addresses, as well as the names of the student presenters, their institutions, and the abstracts of their posters or presentations. The archive allows us to track the presentation opportunities provided to students and to connect with conference alumni. In addition, the WPUPC website also provides a year-by-year list of participants, as well as links to the previous websites created by former institutional hosts of the conference.

Challenges and Benefits of Institutional Rotation

By establishing a steering committee, generating reliable funding streams, utilizing technology, and maintaining conference practices and history through our archive, the WPUPC has succeeding in minimizing the challenges associated with rotating the conference, while maximizing the benefits of sharing its implementation. Because the host institution has the final word on the elements of each year's conference, the consistency of our conference structure is coupled with the flexibility to adopt fresh perspectives (e.g., t-shirt sales, publication of full proceedings, two-day programs, the filming of student presentations, and the introduction of poster presentations). Overall, respondents to our survey suggest that the biggest challenge of rotating the conference is transitioning the physical logistics of organizing the conference (e.g., making space reservations, identifying support staff, ordering food, creating the program, etc.),

especially given that no one institution may develop sufficient experience with it to offset changes in departmental personnel. Having a different institution organize the conference every year can generate a sense of "starting over." On the other hand, respondents also identified sharing the load of hosting the conference as the biggest benefit of rotating it. As the respondents emphasized, this allows "ownership" of the conference to be shared and, consequently, increases the energy and commitment to hosting and keeps the conference "fresh." The majority of respondents report that the benefits of rotating the conference far outweigh the challenges and that no one college could take on the responsibility of hosting the conference every year. Thus rotating the hosting of the conference clearly has been the key to its longevity.

Changes Across Four Decades

The number of students and institutions involved in the conference has fluctuated. Early in the conference's history, a conference low of approximately 40 student presentations led to the establishment of the steering committee. The members were made responsible for recruiting institutions near their own campuses and encouraging institutions and departments to participate in the conference. These efforts were successful and led to a consistent representation on the steering committee of 10 to 12 institutions. In the late 1980s, a growing number of regional conferences also generated attendance challenges, especially in terms of the ability to draw participants from outside western Pennsylvania. Again, however, through the recruitment and promotional efforts of steering-committee members, we were successful in maintaining interest in the conference (see Figure 1). In the late 1990s, the conference averaged 120 student presenters and has now leveled off to approximately 100 student presentations each year. Moreover, from 2008 through 2011 the conference averaged 220 registered attendees per year, including faculty members and students attending the conference as observers, but not as presenters.

Given the longevity of the WPUPC, our archive also provides a unique perspective into the changing landscape of regional conferences and the *kind of undergraduate work* conducted over the past 40 years. A few years ago, the former chair of the WPUPC presented an in-depth review of these changes at the American Psychological Association conference (Anderson 2008; available through WPUPC website). At the first conferences, students orally presented their research, primarily experimental projects. Gradually, students began to present non-experimental papers and were encouraged to submit internship reports, case histories, or literature reviews as well. The introduction of poster presentations in 1996

Figure 1. Number of Institutions Represented at the WPUPC, 1973-2011.
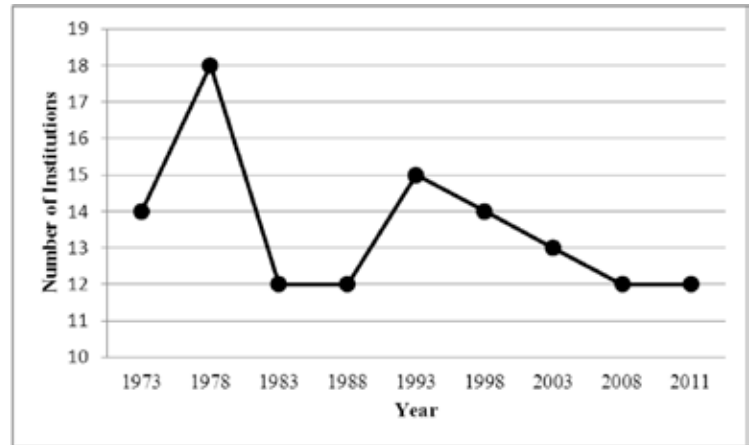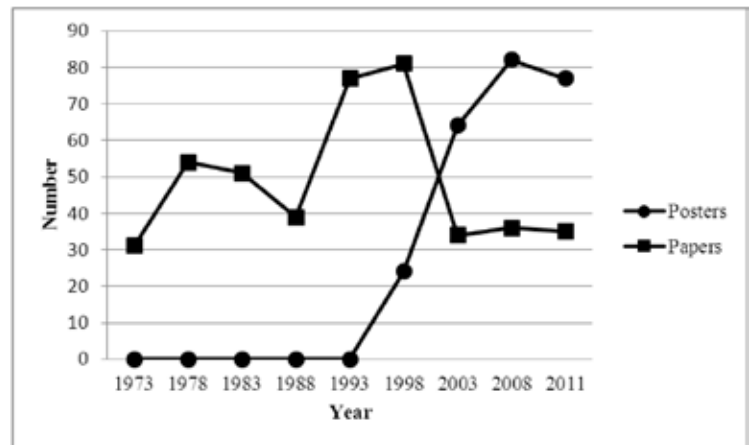

Figure 2. Number of Paper and Poster Presentations, 1973-2011.

had a major impact on the conference, and now approximately two-thirds of the student presentations are posters (see Figure 2). This significant change has been coupled with a shift from primarily individual presentations to a strong showing of collaborative work.

When students first began to present in groups, the standard practice was to have only one representative present. Now, it is common for collaborators to share in the presentation of their work. Some faculty have expressed concern over the predominance of posters at the conference, but their use, along with an emphasis on collaborative work, reflects current practices in our field.

The mechanics of running the conference have also undergone changes, especially as the conference rotates among member institutions. We have experimented with the length and time of the event, discovering that a one-day conference with early starting and ending times has been the most effective format for discouraging early departures. We have

also varied the organization of the day's events, finding that providing sufficient concurrent paper and poster sessions is vital to supporting a sense of community. In addition, adhering to a common presentation time schedule has been important so that all students have an equal opportunity to receive feedback on their work. Faculty moderators are provided with instructions for running the paper sessions and are encouraged to prepare questions to stimulate discussion when necessary.

Student participation in structuring the conference has varied. At some institutions students are key organizers and hosts. Student feedback has also been used to shape offerings at the conference. For example, in 2011, based on the request of former attendees, we instituted a lunch meeting for officers of psychology clubs and honorary societies to foster collaboration across member institutions.

Finally, host institutions have varied in their approaches to identifying and sponsoring the keynote speaker. Choice of these speakers often emphasizes local and regional connections, but many keynote speakers have also had broader-reaching reputations (e.g., Michael Grazzaniga, Martin Seligman, and Walter Schneider). Perhaps most importantly, several WPUPC alumni have been keynote speakers, sharing their experience of becoming successful professionals in the field.

Competition from New Venues

The regional undergraduate research conference faces competition from both national undergraduate conferences and student venues at professional conferences. Faculty members in our region regularly encourage students to present at national undergraduate conferences such as NCUR (National Conferences on Undergraduate Research) and NEURON (NorthEast Undergraduate Research Organization for Neuroscience) or at regional professional meetings (e.g., the Eastern Psychological Association) and even at national meetings, including the American Psychological Association, the Association for Psychological Science, and the Society for Neuroscience.

There are several benefits for students presenting at national undergraduate or regional professional conferences, compared to the regional undergraduate conferences. First, national and professional conferences tend to be more *selective,* resulting in a higher overall quality of presentations. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Some of the faculty members we surveyed said that they found the WPUPC to be less threatening for students and a better place for them to learn about making research presentations. Usually the WPUPC is a student's first experience presenting research outside his or her home institution. The faculty members work hard to insure that the conference is a good

first experience. Seeing the other student presentations helps the student evaluate his or her research in an appropriate context. Many students wouldn't be ready to present at a larger venue, but after the WPUPC, they are prepared to take their presentations to the next level.

An obvious advantage of the regional conference is *proximity.* It is much less expensive to take students to a local conference and to schedule travel time during the hectic period near the end of the academic year. Proximity can also be a disadvantage, in that students who drive themselves often don't stay for the entire conference. Many students leave after their own presentations, making the afternoon audience sparse. If a conference is held at an appreciable distance from their home institution, students are more likely to stay for the presentations of others. The selective nature of those conferences may also produce more engagement. Students who know that their work has been judged to be of high enough quality to get on the program are also likely to value the other work on the program accordingly.

Breadth of exposure is another difference between the national conferences and the regional undergraduate conference. Students can witness a wider range of types and levels of research at professional conferences. A benefit of the local conference, however, is that students can see that undergraduate research is the norm in their own small part of the world. This has great benefits for developing a culture of research. It is why many faculty members encourage students to present research at the WPUPC before the student's senior year. Sophomores who present research projects (often done in conjunction with a research methods class) are prepared for future presentations and are excited by the research they see modeled by the seniors.

Social comparison is a benefit of the local conference cited by some of the WPUPC faculty members surveyed. No formal means of assessing the impact of conference attendance on undergraduate research outcomes has been consistently applied, but students see and comment on how students from other institutions perform. They compare their own performance and research quality to what they see. This seems to motivate them to conduct more and better research. They appreciate research more, and they are ready for the next project.

A major advantage of the regional conference is *inclusion.* The high acceptance rate for students' proposed presentations means that we strongly encourage many students to present. The opportunities for presentation at national and regional professional conferences are usually limited to co-authored work with faculty members or to sessions hosted by Psi Chi (the international honor society in psychology). Average students are left out. Additionally, the lead times for presentation at many professional conferences are incom-
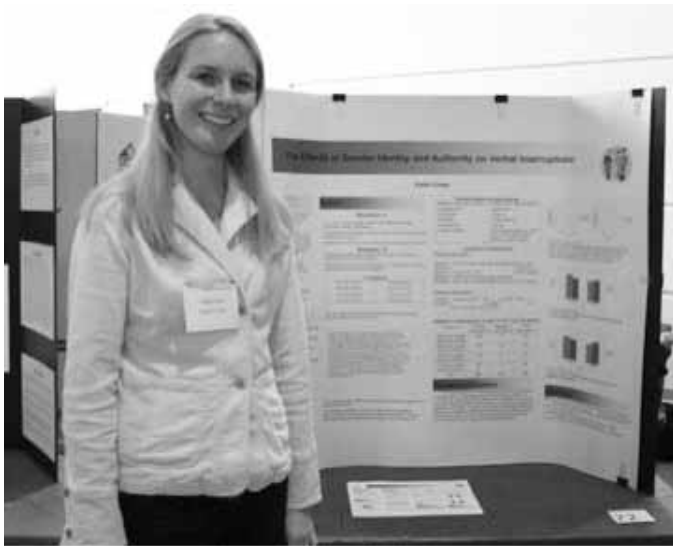
Katie Cross presents her poster at the 2008 WPUPC at Edinboro University.

patible with the seasons of student research. The WPUPC has a very late application date (usually the first week of April) that allows students more time to do the research and still present while they are undergraduates.

We feel that the national conferences are a good opportunity for some students, but that even those students benefit from the regional undergraduate conference. The regional conference is important for developing a culture of undergraduate research because it has broader participation by more students in a context relevant for social comparison: their own peers from nearby colleges. We believe that the expense in both money and time make national and regional professional conferences available to only a few select students. Likewise, the selection standards for those conferences rule out many average students who may become superb researchers. Thus we believe the niche for the regional undergraduate psychology research conference remains important. It is a good entry point into more professional research experiences for a great many students.

Moving Forward

The respondents to our survey defined success for a regional undergraduate conference in terms of longevity and ability to attract students. Moreover, most respondents noted that simply providing an opportunity for students to share their work and experience a sense of accomplishment indicates success. By each of these definitions, the WPUPC has been very successful. However, moving forward, it is important for even the most successful undergraduate conferences to assess where they have been and where they are going. A primary objective for the WPUPC will be implementing student and faculty assessment of the conference to provide important additional information for the conference archive. We need a stronger emphasis on student perceptions of the confer-

ence (something that is obviously missing from our current documents) and a more systematic account of faculty and institutional participation. Although the majority of respondents report no need to make any major changes, we will need to continue to assess our position among the growing number of regional and national undergraduate conferences and to publicize the unique benefits of student and faculty involvement in our conference. Finally, as has been the case in the past, maintaining a strong sense of community and commitment among steering-committee representatives will play a vital role in the future of the WPUPC.

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