

Inside LRA (3): Creating the Annual Conference Program April/May 2010

In this third installment of Inside LRA, I address how the annual conference program is created focusing on the following issues that have been raised at town meetings, in feedback from the post-conference commentary, etc.:

1. My proposal was rejected because of poor reviews.
2. We should add more sessions, so we could accept more proposals.
3. There are many sessions on my topic scheduled at the same time.
4. My session always seems to be scheduled at an inopportune time.
5. There seems to be no clear connection among the papers grouped into a paper session.
6. I was scheduled to participate in two or more events at the same time.

No system is perfect, but I can assure you that each of these issues is considered and addressed in the process of creating the annual program. Nonetheless, if you are concerned about any of these issues or want to learn more about how they are addressed, I encourage you to read on.

Issues 1 and 2 can be addressed by considering the process for conducting reviews as well as the data about the proportion of proposals accepted. I will not detail here the process for reviewing proposals, because that information can be found in the call for proposals and also in the attached Area Chairs Manual. These sources document efforts to insure that the review process is valid, reliable, and fair.

A large majority of the proposals receive consistent overall evaluations from the three reviewers assigned to each proposal, which makes a decision relatively straightforward. Proposals that have decidedly mixed or borderline reviews (in my experience approximately 15%) are reviewed more carefully by the Area Chairs and often again by the Program Chair, who makes the final decision and who can easily access online every proposal, its ratings, and every review.

The acceptance rate for proposals has been remarkably consistent (72- 76%) for many years, despite that there is no predetermined rate of acceptance (see attached data). Thus, only 1 in 4 proposals are rejected, some because the guidelines were not followed and most because at least two of the reviewers gave low ratings. That reduces the odds substantially of a good proposal being wrongly rejected. Of course, there is always the likelihood of “false positives” (poor proposals being accepted), which lowers the quality of the program, but most members would likely agree that false positives are better than false negatives.

These data also speak to the issue of expanding or contracting the number of sessions on the program. First, to my knowledge, we have never reduced or increased the number of proposals accepted because of available space. We always find space for proposals judged acceptable for the program. Thus, arbitrarily

increasing the number of sessions would mean accepting proposals with lower ratings, thus lowering the overall quality of the program while reducing the average number of attendees across all sessions.

Issues 3-6 are informed by an understanding of how the program is developed. Scheduling sessions for the program typically requires the program chair, assistant chair, and executive director to meet for a day and a half in May or June at LRA headquarters. Before the meeting, a computer search is conducted to determine if anyone's name appears on more than 3 peer-reviewed papers/symposia. Individuals in that category are contacted to determine on which session(s) they wish to withdraw their names.

Once the meeting starts, here is the scenario: a room with lots of empty wall space. The walls are covered with large sheets of paper and divided by day of the conference below which are columns for available session times and rows for the meeting rooms with an indication of the rooms' respective capacities. On a central table are stacks of index cards that each includes all of the information about the sessions to be scheduled. The stacks, randomly ordered, are grouped by area of submission and color coded for type of session. A preliminary step is to group typically about 30 "orphan papers" that the Area Chairs could not group into a set of three related papers. In some cases, that task requires creativity in finding a unifying theme and explains why there may be a few paper sessions on the program where the connections are a bit strained.

The scheduling process begins by taping to the wall a card from each area stack and placing it in a room working down a column representing a time slot. Selecting a card from each area in turn for a particular time slot is the first step toward preventing sessions likely to appeal to the same members occurring at the same time. Later, there is a closer examination of titles within a particular time slot to determine if there may be overlapping topics at the same time, and adjustments are made as needed. Some adjustments are also made for room size based on the anticipated draw of a session as estimated by area chairs when submitting their recommendations. Finally, a computerized check reveals if any first author is "double-booked" at a time slot and adjustments are made as necessary.

As this bare-bones overview suggests, the process is both somewhat random in terms of who gets placed into what time slot in the program and systematic in terms of insuring that there is little overlap of topics within a time slot, that first authors are not double-booked, and that the size of a room is matched to an anticipated audience.

Again, these processes are not perfect and mistakes and misjudgments will occasionally occur. However, specific efforts are made to address issues and concerns raised by the membership, such as those addressed here. The LRA leadership welcomes any of your thoughts and suggestions for improving the process or additional concerns that we might address.

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