

What We Learned... By Organizing and Hosting an MAA Sectional Meeting

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You have probably attended an MAA Section meeting recently, enjoyed the talks and the networking with colleagues. But have you thought of hosting one on your campus? Saint Michael's College had the pleasure (and challenge) of hosting the Spring meeting of the Northeast Section (NES) last May. Located near Burlington, VT, Saint Michael's has about 2,000 students and five permanent mathematics faculty. Despite our department's small size, we found the job both manageable and rewarding. We hope our experience will encourage others to take the plunge.

Meeting organization is not exactly *terra incognita*: MAA documents provide rules and guidelines; most components of Section meetings are well-established by tradition; and Section officers are ready and willing to help. The organizing work is split between two committees: the Program Committee, charged with inviting speakers and scheduling events, and the Local Arrangements Committee, which handles facilities, meals, and lodging. The two groups must work together to coordinate events and publicize the meeting.

Starting early is important — there are many pieces of the puzzle that have to come together. We had about 18 months advance notice, and started thinking seriously about specifics a year before the meeting. A few of us attended the Spring 2007 NES meeting and took careful notes: talking with the organizers and thinking about facilities and programming. Later that summer, we did some initial brainstorming and made a timeline with specific tasks.

Preparing the Program

About a year before the conference, we selected two Program co-chairs from the host institution. Our Section officers helped us identify additional Section members representing the diversity of our membership; two Section NExT



University of Vermont Professor George Pinder demonstrating groundwater methodologies.

participants, one from a two-year college, completed our committee.

We chose the conference theme “Mathematics in Biology and the Environment.” While a theme is not required, it helped focus our planning and provided cohesiveness to our program. Our choice was motivated partly by the speakers on our preliminary list and partly by the desire for a topic that would be timely and of broad interest. While most talks were related to the theme, we allowed ourselves some leeway by including a workshop on teaching with Maple and another on the mathematics of juggling.

Next we identified potential speakers. Besides our own contacts, sources included previous Section Program committees, Pólya lecturers, lists of faculty from nearby institutions, and recommendations on the MAA web site. Even invitees unable to attend were helpful: one gave several suggestions of other good speakers who fit our theme.

We created a ranked array of possible speakers for various events, and then distributed invitation duties among the Program Committee members. By starting the invitation process about nine months before the meeting, we allowed enough time to deal with multiple invitations in case of a sequence of speakers unable to accept our invitations. We found excellent speakers, mostly within easy travel distance.

In parallel with inviting speakers, we developed the meeting schedule. Several elements, such as Section NExT and the executive and business meetings, had traditional time slots, and we adopted these. Space availability and attendance estimates influenced the

timing and whether to run simultaneous sessions for contributed talks and workshops. Some special sessions, such as Section NExT, contributed talks, and student papers, have standing Section organizers with whom we coordinated these events. We gathered a title, abstract, and biography for each plenary speaker, as well as contributed session information, for inclusion in the website, advertising, and printed program.

Local Arrangements

Our Local Arrangements Committee consisted of four Saint Michael's faculty. The MAA web site provides an encyclopedic list of tasks and responsibilities; we'll highlight the major components and offer a few tips.

Meeting Rooms, Meals, and Lodging. The basic facilities needed are: a large lecture room with appropriate technology, some well-equipped classrooms for smaller sessions, and an area nearby for registration, displays, and refreshments. Book your rooms with the scheduling office as soon as possible; also alert Information Technology well in advance. If at all possible, arrange to have an IT professional available for the conference. Although almost all speakers will arrive with their own laptops and plug into your system smoothly, there's always some speaker whose computer just won't connect and other unexpected challenges. When one of our presenters arrived with a two-projector presentation, our IT expert re-wired a classroom system on the fly to make it work. He was our hero!

A congenial setting for meals enhances the ambience of the meeting. We planned a lunch barbeque with a view of the Green Mountains. Torrential downpours intervened, but luckily we had a backup plan. Presumably your on-campus catering service will provide the meals; some thought and consultation will help them put on the best possible meal for your budget. Cost is a consideration, as you need to cover speakers' expenses and want to keep prices reasonable. Investigate lower cost options for the afternoon coffee break and morning refreshments. Sometimes a local business or hotel is willing to fund refreshments, or your Academic Affairs Office may have funds to support academic meetings.

If lodging is to be provided on campus, consult with your Conference Office before committing to a specific date; they undoubtedly have systems in place for everything from arranging payment to check-in and parking. For local hotel

Online Sources of Information

National Guidelines for Section meetings:

<http://www.maa.org/sections/guidelines/preparation.html>

http://www.maa.org/sections/guidelines/local_arrangements.html

Some Sections post additional guidelines. For example, from the NES web site:

http://fileserv.wheatonma.edu/tratliff/NES/downloads/Program_Guidelines_may_2004.pdf

http://fileserv.wheatonma.edu/tratliff/NES/downloads/Local_Arrangements_Guidelines.pdf

The Spring 2008 NES Conference web sites:

http://academics.smcvt.edu/MAA_NES_Spring2008_Meeting/index.htm

http://academics.smcvt.edu/MAA_NES_Spring2008_Meeting/ProgramSchedule.htm

information, we simply provided a link to the list maintained by our College and mentioned a few attractive alternatives. We contacted these hotels to alert them to our meeting and check on discounts; you could go further and ask them to hold rooms.

Financial Matters. The budget for Section meetings is quite limited, so careful planning is needed. Honoraria are not offered, but speakers have registration, meals, and on-campus lodging covered. You may also need to cover travel for out-of-Section speakers. This will constrain the Program Committee's speaker choices. Consider local talent whether or not they are MAA members, or a national MAA officer with expenses covered.

Conference fees in the NES are collected by mail at the local site and then handed off to the Section Treasurer; we are not currently set up for Internet registration/payment. An administrative assistant can help track registration on a spreadsheet, provide receipts, serve as a contact person, and offer other support.

Web Site, Exhibits, Registration. An exhibit of MAA books is a regular feature of meetings. The MAA will ship a selection to you, with sales instructions. Consult with Section officers about inviting other exhibitors. Some are willing to donate a few books or promotional items to give as prizes to student presenters or to raffle off to participants.

Our conference web site was essential for spreading the word about the conference as well as facilitating registration. We continually updated it with the evolving program, abstracts, and registration information, which made it easy to produce the printed program for distribution at the meeting. Final details included producing registration packets, posting signs, staffing the registration desk, and welcoming visitors.

Overall, it seemed that our planning paid off in a successful conference. We had stimulating talks and lively interaction all weekend. Although we would have liked greater participation from a broader range of institutions, the overall turnout was quite good, especially given our distance from the population centers of our Section.

Despite initial reservations about the magnitude of the task, we found the entire process quite rewarding. We especially enjoyed the opportunity to work with MAA colleagues from other colleges. The networking involved in finding speakers gave us a new appreciation for the breadth and vigor of mathematical activity in our Section and beyond. To lay the foundation for success, it is essen-



Bentley University Professor David Carhart receiving the Northeastern Section Teaching Award from Chair Jason Moliterno.

tial to start early and have a convivial group that is ready to pitch in and get the job done. And have fun. 🍷

George Ashline (Saint Michael's College) Karl-Dieter Crisman (Gordon College), and Joanna Ellis-Monaghan (Saint Michael's College) made up, with Amy Adams (Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology), the Program Committee for Spring 2008 NES MAA meeting. Zsuzsanna Kadas, Greta Pangborn, Lloyd Simon, and James Hefferon (all at Saint Michael's) were the Local Arrangements Committee.

Career Mentoring Workshop for Women

The third annual Career Mentoring Workshop for Women will be held July 26–28, 2009 at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. The goal of the workshop is for participants to leave with a good understanding of the job search process together with mentors and a group of peers from across the nation who can assist her as she navigates the job market. Topics of discussion include professional opportunities, an overview of the job search process and the employment register at the Joint Mathematics Meetings, revising application materials, the interview process, and starting your postgraduate career.

Applicants should be women in the mathematical sciences entering their final year of graduate studies. Participants will receive partial funding for the workshop. The application deadline for the 2009 workshop is May 15, 2009. More information about the conference, including application materials, is available at <http://www.wheatoncollege.edu/CaMeW>. Questions may be directed to Rachelle DeCoste at decoste_rachelle@wheatonma.edu.