

# **Guidelines for the Program Chairs of the International System Dynamics Conference**

v0.02 November 21, 2011

## **Version History**

- v0.01 October 6, 2011. Prepared by Rogelio Oliva (SPOC Chair).  
Captures experience from the 2007 conference, conversations with program chairs for the 2009 conference, and debriefing meeting with the chairs of the 2011 conference.
- V0.02 November 21, 2011. Prepared by Rogelio Oliva (SPOC Chair).  
Incorporates feedback from past program chairs to v0.01 and adjustments after the Thread Chair selection and appointment process during the fall of 2011.

## **Document Purpose**

The purpose of this document is to capture the lessons and insights developed by System Dynamics Conference Program Chairs so that they can easily be transferred to subsequent program chairs. Ideally this document should be continuously updated as new issues and resolutions emerge, but at least one update a year should be done after the SPOC debriefing meeting with the conference chairs. The responsibility of updating this document is that of the SPOC chair but all changes to policy and practices should be approved by the full SPOC. While all topics related to the conference program could be captured in this document, its main focus should be in the preparation of the conference academic program.

## Plenary Sessions

The conference plenary sessions are one of the critical elements of the conference program. Not only do they have a wider impact on the attendees as all the conference participants benefit from it, but it is also the most mentioned item in the program when asking members to judge the quality of the conference. As such, plenary sessions deserve special planning and consideration from the program chair (PC). Following are some guidelines for structuring plenary sessions.

1. It is often the case than not enough 'plenary quality' papers emerge from the regular submissions to the conference. As such, the PC needs to take a proactive role in inviting guest speakers for this session. These invited speakers are also a good way to shape the conference around the desired conference themes. In the last few conference only about 60% of the plenary talks have been based on papers submitted to the conference (the other 40% being guest speakers). The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference (Boston, 2007) was an exception to this as most of the plenary sessions were invited.
2. When selecting a paper for a plenary session please keep in mind that a great paper does not necessarily mean a great presentation. Ideally, only *excellent* speakers should be selected to deliver plenary presentations. Of course, we can take some risks in this dimension, but if a speaker of unknown quality, or English speaking skills, is being considered, the program chair should try to obtain references from colleagues.
3. Program chairs should help the speakers structure their presentation so that the presentations become more effective in the context of the other presentations in the same plenary. For instance, a great paper might be selected for a plenary because of its methodological approach. If the other papers in that plenary were selected to provide an interesting methodological contrast, it would be inappropriate for the presenter to spend most of the time talking about her results while ignoring the methodological dimension of the paper. Good design and coaching from the program chair will do wonders to structure the plenary session and make it more effective. Program chairs may ask plenary speakers to send their slides and presentations in advance for comment and suggestions, and the program chairs should review these to make sure the presentation suits the context of a plenary talk, will fit in the time available, and so on. Program chairs should not, of course, seek to alter the substance of these presentations (unless there is objectionable or inappropriate material).
4. To the extent possible, efforts should be made to increase the diversity of speakers and moderators in the plenary sessions—but not at the cost of quality of contributions and/or presentation.

## Other Sessions

The remainder of the conference academic program (parallel and poster sessions) is organized by academic threads. As such the Program Chair relies on the Thread Chairs (TCs) to structure a Thread Suggested Program (TSP). Specifically,

1. TCs recommend to the program chairs whether a paper allocated to their thread should be accepted or rejected, and if accepted, whether the paper deserves to be in a poster, poster+, a parallel, parallel+, or a plenary session. Classification of papers should only be into the categories approved by the PC. For instance, a few years ago we used the category 'research session.' Those sessions have been discontinued, yet some TCs still classify papers in this category. Instruction on what are the acceptable categories should be clearly communicated to TCs (see next section).
2. TCs need to provide a justification (one or two sentences) for the allocation decision. This is particularly important when the final recommendation differs from the recommendation of

one of the reviewers of the papers. If the recommendation is to reject a paper, and none of the reviews support that position, the thread chair should also include a brief review for the authors.

3. Provide a grouping of papers into parallel sessions and a justification (one or two sentences) on the reason or theme behind the grouping. In structuring these parallel sessions, the TCs should take care to ...
  - a. Create a title for the session to be listed in the program schedule.
  - b. Consider only papers within their thread.
  - c. Consider only papers that have been deemed worthy of a parallel session, i.e., don't fill the required number of papers on a parallel session with papers originally classified as poster, poster+, or plenary. The role of the poster+ classification is to allow the PCs to complete a session in case of withdrawal from an author in a parallel. As such, poster+ papers should be of enough quality to be in a parallel session but are probably not there because of a lack of fit.
  - d. All parallel sessions should include three papers. If groupings are not evident, or there are not enough papers to fill a parallel session, the TCs should leave an incomplete session and let the PCs fill them with papers from other threads or re-allocating papers into the parallel status.
4. By their nature, the TSPs will be incomplete and will not consider overall optimization of the conference program. It is the responsibility of the PCs to resolve all the conflicts, decide on the final allocation of papers for the plenary sessions, and structure all the parallel sessions. See next section for guidelines on how to manage the thread chairs.
5. The PCs are responsible for the final decision on all papers and should only take the TSPs as recommendations. For example, the PC can decide that a higher rejection rate is needed to maintain the program within the space and time constraints of the conference, and to ensure high overall quality for the conference.

## Managing Thread Chairs

If Thread Chairs (TCs) do not perform their job effectively all conflicts will have to be addressed and resolved by the program chair (PC)—see previous section. Thus, setting expectations for the thread chairs is one of the most significant activities for the SPOC and the PCs. The job of structuring the conference program will be made simpler to the extent that PC can effectively set the expectations and manage the TCs. Here are some basic guidelines for that process.

1. The outgoing PC should send a 'thank you' note to all the TCs after the conference and with it solicit feedback on the experience, and whether the TC wants to continue serving next year. The email should also note that re-appointments are not automatic and that the new PCs, in conjunction with the SPOC, will be responsible for those re-appointments.
2. All TCs should be evaluated by the conference PCs at the end of each conference and specific recommendations for changes and reallocations should be made to the SPOC and the next conference PCs. These recommendations should also be based on the information collected as a result of the 'thank you' notes. The chair of the SPOC should be involved in this evaluation to assure continuity of policies and practices. We currently have no formal evaluation criteria for the TCs, and the evaluation is just based on the impressions of the PCs. There is, however, a template for the review process and recommendations made by the 2010 PCs and SPOC chair. If developed later these criteria should be included in this document.
3. At the time of making the TC assessment, the SPOC chair and exiting PCs should also assess the *threads* themselves, and consider whether they should be continued or not, and whether

threads could be merged or split. The main criteria for this recommendation should be the volume of submissions into a particular thread and any significant changes in the application or development of SD.

4. In conjunction with the SPOC chair, the incoming PC is to decide on the threads that will be available in next conference. In addition to the recommendations from the previous TCs and the SPOC, the PC might suggest special temporary threads to capture a specific conference theme. For example, during the 2010 conference in Seoul we had a special thread on SD and oriental philosophies.
5. Once a list of proposed threads and TCs is assembled by the SPOC and the new PCs, the list should be approved by the full SPOC through an email asking for feedback or concerns regarding the proposed changes.
6. Once approved by the full SPOC, the incoming PC should make the appointments (or re-appointments) for *all* the TCs of the agreed threads. While the communication to the TCs might come from the Home Office, it is important that the PC signs that message to signal the TCs realize that this is a new appointment under 'new management.' This appointment of the team of TCs should be done by the end of September to allow for all the promotional materials to include this information. Note that is current policy that most threads should have two co-chairs to spread the review burden and provide an initial point of reference for the creation of the TSP.
7. Before the beginning of the review process (mid-January) the PCs should communicate to the TCs their expectations regarding the specific deliverables out of the review process. At a minimum the communication should state expectations on the following dimensions:
  - a. The date for the delivery of the Thread Suggested Program (TSP).
  - b. A target rejection rate based on the number of slots available and the expected number of submissions. We've found that TCs tend not to reject enough and it is often the responsibility of the PC to review the TCs allocations. Much time and effort could be saved if the PC provides a ballpark figure for the rejection rate as well as clear criteria for rejecting a paper.
  - c. The guidelines for the TSP articulated in the previous section.
  - d. A reminder that the TC is a shared position and that the both of the co-chairs should agree on the TSP before submitting it. We've had problems with this issue so it is important to remind them.

## Reviews

1. While the main responsibility of the PC and the TCs is the creation of the conference program, there is also an expectation that all authors will receive useful reviews for their papers. While there are some of us that feel that the responsibility of providing feedback to the authors is too much to be handled by the same group of people responsible for structuring the program, this issue has not been fully resolved by the SPOC (see unresolved issues section below). For the time being, however, if there are papers without any reviews, it is the responsibility of the TC to ensure that a review for the author is generated (whether it is prepared by the TC or assigned to somebody). The idea here is that all authors deserve a review.

## Unresolved 'Issues'

### Short term issues (this upcoming conference)

1. As it currently stands, the submission system allows any thread chair to see the review and reviewers of *all* threads. This has created the problem that a TC can see who is the reviewer of a paper he has authored as well as the review. This breaks the double-blind review agreement. *As of today, the agreement is that the submission system will be modified so that the TCs will only see the reviewers' names for papers within their thread.*
2. Related to the above issue, we need to figure out how to address the potential conflict of interest, and the break on the double-blind review process, when a TC submits a paper to his or her own thread. For now, these situations are to be handled by the program chairs. Obviously, program chairs should not also select themselves as plenary speakers. *As of today, the agreement is that the submission system will be modified to block any author (regardless of their role in the Program Committee) to have access to the names of the paper's reviewers.*

### Medium term issues (for next conference or review of this document)

3. This document should also include a schedule of all the activities that need to be performed by the SPOC and the program chairs. Some information has been gathered on this issue, but has not been completed to include in this document.
4. This document should be expanded to include a bit more information on the formation of parallel sessions and the resolution of the tradeoffs between forming coherent sessions and sessions that include three papers. Perhaps a short meeting for TCs during the next conference would be enough to develop the main guidelines that experienced TCs are using to resolve this conflict.
5. There is an ongoing debate on whether the perceived quality of the conference is driven by the rejection rate and if a target rejection rate could be given to TCs. Data from participant satisfaction and rejection rates should be used to calibrate this policy.

### Major issues (probably requiring Policy Council approval)

6. There is an ongoing debate in the society on whether the review process should be open to anyone who wants to do it or whether we should trim the reviewer pool based on past performance. As of the fall of 2011 the standing policy is that any member of the society can serve as a reviewer and we are not excluding anyone from future reviews (regardless of the quality of reviews submitted to date). This has at times created conflicts when a paper is rejected (either by the Thread Chair or the Program Chair) and the author has received 'good reviews' from inexperienced reviewers. Fortunately, this only represents one or two papers per conference, so this is not a big issue from that perspective. The main issue is if we want to waste all those person-hours generating reviews that are not very useful to the authors, or more importantly, reviews that convey the wrong idea of what SD is, or is not. A potential way of handling this conflict would be for the TCs to filter the reviews so that bad reviews do not get posted.