Conference Goals and Site Selection Criteria
Preliminary Report of the Committee on Conference Location Issues

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Conference Program and Siting Issues

At the policy council meeting in March 2003, a discussion of the program structure and location of future conferences was initiated.   A preliminary list of possible conference goals was developed, and two committees formed to explore the issues and report back to the policy council – George Richardson's committee on conference goals and site selection criteria, and Bob Eberlein's committee (of one?) on program structure.

This document summarizes the progress of George Richardson's committee. Time and distance constraints precluded the committee from meeting in person. Hence this document reflects the results of an exchange of emails among some committee members and the polling of a number of younger SD faculty by John Sterman (thank you!). The first section of the document builds from the discussion at the March 2003 Policy Council meeting – it organizes and expands the list of possible conference goals. The next step is for the Policy Council to review, revise, and prioritize the list of conference goals. With that, the Council can evaluate changes in program structure and conference location. Bob Eberlein has provided a separate report on program structure. A later section of this document summarizes the committee's progress on conference location issues.

Possible Conference Goals

Possible goals for the annual conference are organized into four categories: growing the volume of high quality practice; attracting new system dynamicists; enhancing the acceptance and reputation of the field; and strengthening the society.

1. Develop/grow the volume of high quality practice in the field

    - ? Attract best people to come and present
    - ? Give examples of high quality work
    - ? Give examples of work that has had an impact
    - ? Encourage bonds and networking
    - ? Offer opportunities for constructive criticism
    - ? See new or emerging areas of activity

    [*Issue*: what should be the relative emphasis on academic research, applications, and teaching (college and K-12) in conference presentations?]

[*Comments*: achieving this goal seems mostly a program design issue, except perhaps as influenced by getting the top (or up-and-coming?) academics to attend, and attracting the desired presentations on applications and teaching; while conference papers are not generally accepted for tenure, conferences allow junior faculty to interact with the senior faculty who may later be asked to evaluate them; we have not researched the factors that encourage practitioners and teachers to come and present; in most cases, accessibility and cost are important factors in attendance.]

2. Grow the number of beginners and new practitioners (need a steady and growing inflow of new people, not only to increase size and awareness, but to instill new ideas)

    ?   Encourage attendance (via special sessions for working papers, or by connecting with other conferences)
    ?   Publish proceedings
    ?   Rotate sites to allow easy access to local people, to foster international society

[Comments: Attendance is primarily influenced by accessible sites and reasonable price, and for academics getting a paper presented so schools will reimburse attendance costs.]

3. Enhance the recognition and acceptance of System Dynamics in academics, business, and government

    ?   Be seen among the collection of accepted management methodologies
    ?   Encourage cross-fertilization, co-presentation, and networking with those practicing other methodologies
    ?   Improve each other's methods

    [Comments: this might be best achieved by linking with the conference of another society such as INFORMS, see below.]

4. Strengthen Society

    ?   Provide opportunities for volunteer work and future society leadership
    ?   Raise money to cover Society operations

[Comments: A number of members of the committee felt that this goal was too narrow by itself, and would automatically occur if goals one and two were achieved.]

The committee has not done any type of survey to prioritize the goals. Goal One seems to be the most important, but the relative emphasis on academic research (academicians), applications (industry and consultants), and teaching (K-12) has not been established; some members of the committee felt that Goal Two was not important for the annual conference, but should be achieved in other ways. It seems also that we have not discussed a desirable size for the conference. How does attendance affect ability to achieve the goals? Do we want a small, tightly-knit group, or a larger, more expansive offering?

Conference Location Options

At this point, we seem to have three general options, with the possibility of some mixing of the options.

1. Rotating, non-fixed sites with a local host and conference chair (current system)
2. Rotating, fixed sites without a local host/conference chair (with perhaps variations such as a non-fixed site every third or fourth year)
3. Link with another conference, such as INFORMS

If we accept the three options, our primary task is assessing the pros and cons of the conference locations in terms of how they allow us to achieve the goals. In particular, we are interested in:

1. Accessibility (i.e., time to get there and cost of getting there; as affected by location, linking to other conferences, …)
2. Cost (determined by location, linking, discounts, home office workload, …)
3. Professional attractiveness to experienced SDers (academics, practitioners, and teachers)
4. Professional attractiveness to new/potential SDers
5. Professional attractiveness to practitioners of other methodologies

The committee has made a preliminary list of advantages and disadvantages of each option along these lines. We encourage input and comment from others.

Rotating, Non-fixed Sites:

Advantages –
- ? Encourages development of system dynamics in specific countries and regions of the world (but data indicates that the SD Society membership increase in the region or country is only temporary suggesting this is a weak effect)
- ? Local organizer takes on a part of the workload and the cost, e.g., by obtaining sponsorship for banquet (but past experience suggests that the Society still bears the risk if the local organizer is unable to completely fill this role, and this has created big problems in the past)
- ? Can provide student help from different local institutions
- ? Encourages a more international society (especially if the agreed fixed-site rotation does not include a Pacific Rim/Asian site)
- ? Interesting new locations to visit
- ? Novel locations can be combined with vacations and allow people to travel more than they otherwise would.
- ? Has often been seen as an honor to be chosen to host the conference.
- ? …..
- ? …..
- ? …..

Disadvantages –
- ? Generally high cost (both at conference venue and for home office staff), although there are attempts to develop a more frugal conference format

- ? Often difficult to get to location
- ? Attracts some participants who come for the travel and are only modestly interested in the academic program
- ? Hard to find people willing to put in the effort to provide both a low cost to attendees and a good return to the Society
- ? Often hard to find a place that seems like it will work.
- ? Easy to get in situations where the home office has to compensate for incomplete negotiations.
- ? ….
- ? ….
- ? ….

Rotating, "Fixed" Sites:

Advantages –
- ? Familiarity with site and hotel personnel could result in time and cost savings (but, this is very dependent on the staff at the hotel, who may change over time; or, the Society's needs may change, thereby requiring a new location)
- ? Locations would be chosen to minimize travel difficulties, and hence cost (but because Boston and London are expensive, the conferences themselves might need to be held somewhere outside of the cities)
- ? Single point of contact for contract negotiations; predictable progress in resolving conference design issues (this is no longer believed to be true -- at one time it was thought that we could negotiate with national (global) hotel chain personnel for all hotel sites, but it now appears that each hotel location deals with its own conference issues)
- ? ….
- ? ….
- ? ….

Disadvantages –
- ? Decreases the geographic diversity of the conference
- ? Probably no local host to rely on
- ? Novel local sponsorship opportunities will be more limited
- ? ….
- ? ….
- ? ….

Link Up With Another Group:

Advantages –
- ? Likely to be the lowest cost alternative (this needs to be confirmed and quantified)
- ? Locations generally accessible
- ? Would encourage attendance and presentations by SDers trying to get tenure at top-notch schools, and by others in related disciplines who are doing interesting work

- ? Increases cross fertilization with people working in other areas.
- ? Increases SD Society respectability and legitimacy and begins to erode the image that many outsiders have that we are marginal, insular, cultish, and not open to other approaches
- ? ….
- ? ….
- ? ….

Disadvantages –
- ? No control over site selection
- ? No control over dates (INFORMS conference generally in fall rather than summer).
- ? Length of two conferences would be almost one week, unless SD was a track in the other conference
- ? Some loss of identity, which would increase if SD were made a track in the other conference
- ? Our conference is now big enough that it might cause logistical problems.
- ? May be seen as an admission of lack of a sustainable core.
- ? Could lead to some divisiveness as conflicting worldviews clash.
- ? ….
- ? ….

Summary and Next Steps

Again, the committee has not done a formal survey to assess Society members' views regarding site location. We believe that there is a general consensus that the current system of annual, rotating, non-fixed sites is not in the best interests of the Society because of a diminishing number of potential local hosts, relative inaccessibility of many potential sites, and resultant high home office costs to select and manage a conference at a new location every year. However, it is not yet clear whether rotation among three fixed sites (with occasional "local-host" locations) or linking with INFORMS would best achieve Society goals.

As mentioned earlier, John Sterman did a survey of 5 younger SD faculty. The results were mixed, with 3 favoring linking to an existing conference and 2 rotating among fixed sites. It was clear, however, that if linking were the option, INFORMS is the society of choice (5 to 0). To make linking practical, however, we would need to address the issues of timing (fall, during academic year), length (nearly a week if conferences do not overlap), and how to link with a European conference (and what about the Pacific Rim/Asia), as well as the problems of loss of identity, etc. Moreover, it is not clear how other members of the Society, and in particular practitioners and K-12 teachers, would rank the options (assuming we desire to serve this audience with our annual conference).

So this returns us to the question of goals for the conference. What are the Society's goals? Once we establish these, we will have a firmer basis on which to select between the conference siting options. Perhaps a logical next step would be to survey members of the Society regarding goals and views on the conference location options.