

Planning a Conference: Strategies for Success

Creating a Specialized Teaching and Learning Conference: What We Learned

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1. Prepare a Grant or Ethics Application

In the initial stages of conference planning, we anticipated applying for funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for a “Connection Grant.” This grant provides funding for collaborative projects/events in the Social Sciences and Humanities and has a rolling deadline. (Note: this program is currently on hold due to high demand; contact us if you wish to see a copy of the application.) [Teaching and Learning Canada](#) (STLHE’s charitable arm) may also be able to provide seed funding in the future.

While we eventually decided not to submit a SSHRC application, principally because we secured the budget we required from internal sources, the process of preparing the application provided an invaluable opportunity to articulate our conference goals, to prepare a preliminary budget and to draft a conference program – including format, speakers and submission guidelines.

Take away message: PREPARE A CONFERENCE GRANT or ETHICS APPLICATION even if you don’t submit it.

2. Funding

As we prepared the SSHRC application we also began to gather funding sources. We first gauged potential interest from organizations/individuals and then following up with a more detailed proposal. We approached the teaching and learning centres at both of our home institutions – University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University – as well as the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Our home institutions required a project proposal, which we could provide because we had completed the SSHRC application. We could also rely on our institutional communities to form a base of participation and registration at the conference, which allowed us to project revenue.

Take away message: ASK FOR MONEY and be prepared to explain how you’ll spend it.

3. Collaborate

Any conference requires a team to organize and deliver. Collaborate with staff at your institution. We could not have delivered the conference without the logistical and organizational expertise of others. This support also helped with our budget as we received “in kind” expertise from our home institutions that would be otherwise expensive.

Collaborate, too, with colleagues from different disciplinary backgrounds. Our differences in discipline, but also in roles in the institution (staff and faculty), enriched both the process of preparing and in the products themselves. In addition, our collaboration sparked fresh ideas about the traditional conference format (come to our Roundtable Discussion tomorrow for more information about our innovative format).

Take away message: WORK WITH OTHERS and others who aren't exactly like you.

4. Clarity in Instructions

Because we were an organizing committee of two we both knew our vision for all aspects of the conference. This shared awareness meant that on occasion we failed to provide clear instructions/information to other collaborators and to conference delegates. By making implicit ideas and intentions *explicit* we could have sent fewer emails, confused fewer people and been more confident ourselves that our intentions were going to be realized as we hoped. Knowing how difficult it can be to be aware of what you didn't know once you know it, keep detailed notes of decisions you make and why you made that decision. Be prepared to communicate the decisions and the rationale for these decisions to others. When you have a specific vision for how something should be run, be ready to ask for exactly that.

Take away message: COMMUNICATE CLEARLY and explain both the “what” and the “why”.

5. Data

One of our principles in organizing and delivering this conference was to be evidence-informed. This principle meant that our conference goals included the sharing and dissemination of scholarship; this principle also meant that we consciously and thoughtfully approached how to collect data on whether we met the goals of our conference. We collected feedback from 89% of conference participants and analyzed these data to show the impact of the conference. These data can now be used to report to our funders, for our own professional development and for the development of future events. Come to our Roundtable Session tomorrow to hear our results!

Take away message: COLLECT DATA and make use of it.