Tips for Organizing a GK-12 Conference

Compiled by Doug Levey after the first Southeastern
Regional GK-12 Conference in Gainesville, FL (October, 2004)

- First, get buy-in from PIs and/or Program Coordinators of GK-12 sites. Talk to them at least six months in advance of the planned conference date and gauge their interest. We found that almost everyone was enthusiastic, so it was not difficult to get an informal commitment from them to attend.
- Ask PIs and Program Coordinators for input on the structure and content of the conference. What do they most want to get out of it? Likewise, talk to your own Teachers and Fellows. What do they want?
- Make your conference different from the annual one organized by NSF. Ours focused on Teachers and Fellows, rather than program administrators. Most of the GK-12 sites that attended were within driving distance of Gainesville, FL which made it cost effective for PIs to bring relatively large groups of Teachers and Fellows.
- Seek input on conference timing – which day(s) of the week and which month? We avoided NSF's spring GK-12 summit by having our conference in the fall. Most PIs felt that the fall was good because it allowed plenty of time over the remaining school year for Teachers and Fellows to apply what they learned at the regional conference. In polling potential attendees, we found much disagreement over preferred days. Weekends tend to be more difficult for teachers because they like to reserve Saturdays and Sundays for their families and because some feel that a weekend conference would be an extension of their workweek. Weekdays tend to be more difficult for Fellows because they have to miss classes and postpone research activities. To address both of these concerns, we had our conference on Friday. Something to remember about a fall conference: be sure to avoid dates that overlap with football home games. This will cause havoc with finding hotel rooms and meeting rooms. Decide on the date as early as possible. It can be difficult to find acceptable meeting rooms at cost that will not break the budget.
- The evening before the conference began, we had a social (5-7pm), followed by a PI dinner (7-9pm). A pre-conference social is important because it allowed folks to get to know each other ahead of time, rather than meeting for the first time in the discussion groups. The purpose of the PI dinner was to provide some "quiet time" before the conference for PIs and program administrators (1 per institution) to talk about what they and their groups hoped to accomplish the next day and to lay a foundation for later discussions of programmatic issues.
- We followed the organizational scheme of NSF's GK-12 summits, grouping Teachers and Fellows in different combinations to discuss a range of issues. Homogeneous groups consisted solely of Fellows or Teachers, whereas heterogeneous groups had both Fellows and Teachers (in approximately equal proportions).
- We allowed 90 minutes per discussion and held three over the course of the day. Most groups used the entire 90 minutes; some did not. All groups had a list of 5-7 questions and were asked to focus on 2-3, selected by the group at the outset of

the discussion. Each group had a whiteboard. A scribe took notes on a laptop and provided an electronic file (on a memory stick or CD) to the organizers immediately afterwards. These notes have been made available to everyone via the web. We felt this was more effective than having someone from each group orally report to the entire body of participants.

- All Teachers and Fellows were assigned to discussion groups. We tried to maximize the diversity of GK-12 programs represented in each. (Hint: Use different shadings and fonts in Excel to differentiate participants from each program and to distinguish Teachers from Fellows.) It was emphasized that no discussion groups were "closed" (i.e., everyone was invited to all discussion groups) and that Teachers and Fellows should be the most active participants in the discussions.

- Discussion leaders were either Teachers or Fellows. PIs were phoned the week before the conference and asked who they thought would be most effective as moderators. Invitations were extended to each person recommended; no one turned us down! Several days before the conference, all were provided with discussion questions and suggestions for how to lead discussions. It is a good idea to have backup leaders in case someone does not show up.

- We had a poster session. This was important because we had no other opportunity for presentations. The poster session was far more effective in disseminating information and fostering discussion than a series of Powerpoint presentations would have been. (Several PIs requested: "No Powerpoint!")

- When planning for a poster session, keep in mind that posters come in many shapes and sizes. Tell participants what size you can accommodate. Be clear about whether you expect participants to bring tacks or if the conference will provide them.

- Mimi McClure, an assistant program director in the NSF GK-12 office, attended and spoke to all attendees on the role of GK-12 programs. NSF presence was extremely important, both to PIs (who had lots of specific questions) and to Teachers and Fellows (who need to be made aware that they are a key part of an impressive, nationwide program).

- Expenses mounted quickly and included room rental and setup, food and drink, registration materials, and postage. The budget had to be determined well in advance, but depended heavily on how many people would register, which was unknown until several weeks before the conference. This "Catch-22" is unavoidable. It was estimated that a registration fee of $30 would cover expenses; it did, and no one complained that it was too high. Our request to NSF for a budget supplement to cover conference expenses was declined.

- We learned interesting/frustrating lessons about exclusive contracts, liability insurance, university regulations, and catering. They are too complex to list here, but we would be happy to talk about them and/or share our budget with anyone interested in organizing a GK-12 regional conference. They are not unique to GK-12 conferences, however. (Prospective organizers might do better to consult with organizers of previous conferences at their own institution.)