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Invisible Labor in the Academy

Invaluable, but Invisible

Conference Hosting as Vital but Undervalued Intellectual Labor

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We hosted our first conference in 2019. That same year we also made a solemn promise it would be our last. The conference was a success by many accounts: great attendance, lots of engaging and important presentations, and valuable time spent with a community of people we admire and love. But nothing really prepares you for the workload, the time lost, or the emotional investment that all too often goes un- or under-recognized by both conference attendees and existing university reward structures.

Much research exists to show the inequality of gender evident at many academic conferences, including the fact that women are less often invited to speak at major U.S. universities (Yong, 2017) and that women often choose to speak for shorter periods of times than male cohorts at conferences (Jump, 2014). Paul Jump, in *Inside Higher Ed*, discusses the results of an Australian study (Jones, et al., 2014), explaining that “overall, only 41 percent of female student presenters and 54 percent of presenting female academics gave a long talk, compared with 75 and 79 percent, respectively, for men.” While many conferences continue to have fewer women standing at the microphones, it seems most conferences have women running things behind the scenes. Though no research exists on gender differences among those hosting or organizing academic conferences – a telling phenomenon in itself – our own experiences at conferences in composition and rhetoric suggest that these conferences are often organized by women. This perception is not surprising as research shows us that “women shoulder a disproportionate amount of the service workload at many institutions” (Gee & Norton, 2009, p. 166), with women of color shouldering even greater loads of generally undervalued service (Moore, 2017; Duncan, 2014). Cassandra Guarino and Victory Borden (2017) confirm these perceptions with a study of annual performance reporting and a survey of hundreds of American universities that revealed that “women faculty perform significantly more service than men, controlling for rank, race/ethnicity, and field or department” (p. 672). The gendered nature of the division of service to and for the university (Denker, 2009; Hollenshead, 2003) is particularly troubling when we consider how service is valued and rewarded in most academic settings. Guarino and Borden explain:

Service is typically a time-consuming feature of the job of an academic and typically factors into faculty performance evaluations, alongside research and teaching. However, service is generally rated as less important than either research or teaching and is less likely to lead to career advancement within an institution. (p. 673)

This gendered disparity in faculty workloads often stems from sexist notions of women as particularly suited, based on gender, to certain kinds of work. Heather Maldonado and John Draeger, in their chapter in the 2017 *Surviving Sexism in Academia* collection, explain “behavior can be sexist without seeing women in a negative light. Indeed, the benevolent sexist views women as more nurturing, more virtuous, and more refined than men” (p. 8-9). Such ideas are often not the province of a single person or even organization, but instead are systemic and gradually accumulating notions that quickly become taken as truths about those who identify as specific genders. Maldonado and Dreager explain:

Sexism is perpetuated by both individual ‘bad actors’ and institutional ‘bad structures.’ Structures, such as institutions of higher education, cannot be analyzed without recognizing that the academic structure is (re)produced by the actions of the people in those structures. (p. 5)

The structures governing academic conferences, too, must be understood as subject to sexist notions of who is capable and best suited to plan, organize, and carry out complex events as well as how that work will, or will not, be valued and rewarded.

This article argues that conference hosting is another example of invisible labor that is disproportionately aligned with gender. We argue, too, that conference hosting—as a time-consuming and financially risky endeavor for an individual academic and her home department or college—is largely ignored in the literature, save a smattering of publications focusing mainly on the logistics of hosting (Rogers, 2013; Allen, 2009; Bice-Stephens, 2001; Lawrence & McCabe, 2001; McAleer, 1997). While such research offers practical advice and sample documents, they largely ignore the issues at stake for such work and make no move to elevate conference organizing from mere service to actual intellectual labor. With reference to our own experience as well as related research, we make the case for academic conference organizing as invaluable, though invisible, intellectual labor and outline five often-overlooked dangers of such work, suggesting strategies for individuals and academic institutions to mitigate those dangers.

Our Conference

Our local hosting committee began meeting 18 months before the conference began—and well before we had any idea of what it really entailed to host a conference. The committee of 12 included just one tenured male faculty member, with a significant number of the remaining women located in more vulnerable academic positions including three graduate students, one undergraduate student, one faculty member on a non-tenure line and one pre-tenure faculty member.

Much about the invisible labor of conference organizing did not surprise us: the endless string of emails from those submitting abstracts, questions from our generous reviewers, queries about technology set up at our venue, room arrangements, and any number of logistical details as well as pleas for lower registration rates, reconsideration of rejections, and requests for resources for presentations; all of these seemed burdensome, but understandable and necessary.

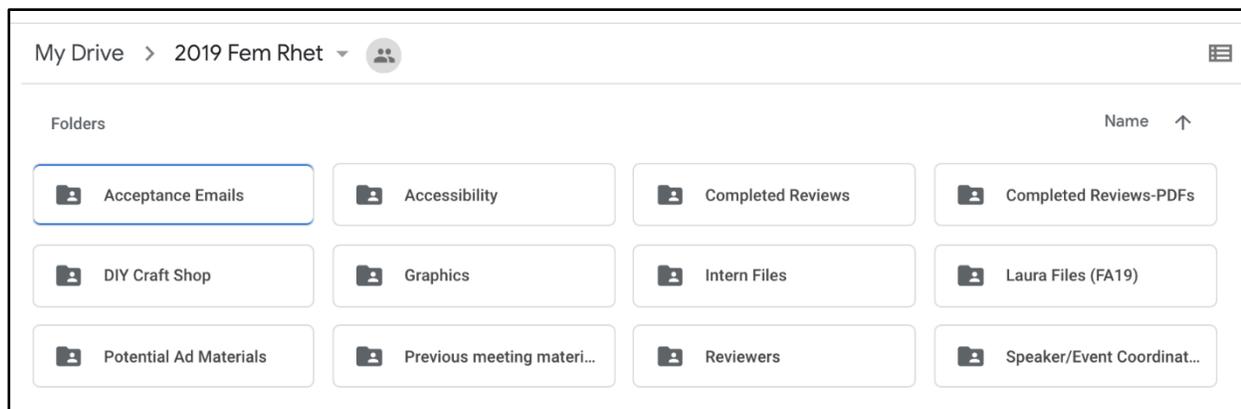


Figure 1: Different folders in the Google Drive.

However, as co-chairs we were surprised by the amount of uncompensated summer and evening work required (see [Summer Tasks document](#) from committee), the numerous and complex forms required for most budgeting and purchasing actions, the need not only to publicize the event via social media, but also the amount of “monitoring” generally needed to answer questions and to guard the reputation of our institution, and the incredible challenge of providing even a portion of the accessibility needs for our attendees.

Conference Organizing as Intellectual Labor

Another surprise was how intellectually challenging much of this work was. We might be tempted to think of academic conference organizing as event planning, a list of tasks to be ticked off in order to move large-ish groups of people from activity to activity over a series of days. However, we found two often-unrecognized tasks necessary for conference planning (writing the CFP and organizing panels) were surprisingly linked to traditional notions of disciplinary knowledge production and required a thorough understanding of scholarship and research practices in our field as well as a nuanced awareness of trends and themes in the literature. This disciplinary knowledge was also needed when assigning reviewers to conference abstracts.

We asked each of our 40+ reviewers to self-identify three areas of scholarly or research expertise (see Fig. 3) and then used that list to assign proposals. Building a call for papers

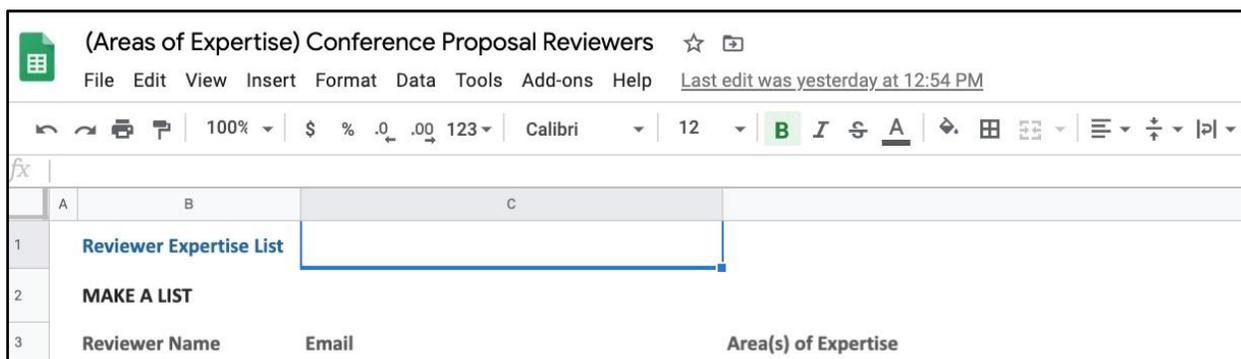


Figure 2: Reviewers' areas of expertise.

Area(s) of Expertise
Ecofeminism/Ecorhetorics; Religion; Historiography/Archival
Historiography/Archival; Pedagogy; Technical Communication
Transnational Feminism; Materiality; Political Rhetoric
Queer Rhetorics; Religion; Transnational
Political Rhetoric; Activism; Rhetorical Theory
Historiography/Archival; Religion; Methods/Methodologies
Methods/Methodologies; Political Rhetorics; Literacy Studies
Pedagogy; Rhetorical Theory; Narrative
Cultural Rhetorics; Embodiment; Rhetorical Theory
Activism; Digital Rhetorics; Popular Culture
Religion; Materiality; Digital Rhetorics
Embodiment; Technical Communication; Materiality
Embodiment; Materiality; Digital Rhetorics
Pedagogy; Rhetorical Theory; Ecofeminism

Figure 3: *Many different subfields within Rhetoric.*

situated in related disciplines and with appropriate citations and generative questions to serve as a heuristic for the new knowledge that would be created for the conference and valued in this professional space was just the first step. Similarly, the process of organizing the 305 individual and group proposals that were accepted into our conference into 147 cohesive panels required creativity, an awareness of foundational literature in the field(s) and an ability to put scholars and scholarship in conversation with one another. The skills needed to complete these tasks are similar to those required for crafting successful publications.

Taken a step further, librarians Lawrence Treadwell IV and Christianne Casper (2008), promote conference organizing as a way to develop “leadership skills” (p. 136) in library faculty and staff and suggest conference organizers begin with a short survey as “a needs assessment ... to identify the interests of the constituent libraries and their librarians” (p. 139-140). Surveys and needs assessments are recognized scholarly tools

employed by many in rhetoric and writing for first-hand research for traditional journal articles and so may help to strengthen the view of conference organizing as intellectual labor.

Previous research has explored the value of conferences for building individual field-specific knowledge (Tomaszewskit & MacDonald, 2009) or as sites for growing the entire academic field (Gross & Fleming, 2011; Wang, et al., 2017). Wei Wang, et al. (2017), for example, suggest that academic conferences are fertile grounds for future research and acknowledge a new research collaboration mechanism known as “conference closure” wherein “scholars involved in a common conference may collaborate with each other in the future” (p. 177). Additionally, Judith Mair and Elspeth Frew (2018) cite research explaining that “at a conference, discussions around a topic of shared interest can lead to new ways of thinking about a problem or issues, may lead to future collaboration with other delegates, and can even be inspirational and motivating for delegates” (p. 2153). This essay, and our own experience, goes a step further to suggest academic conferences not only benefit attendees, but also are valuable intellectual spaces for conference organizers themselves and their larger disciplines.

It is important, then, that conference organizing be recognized not only as incredibly taxing invisible labor, but also as viable intellectual work, something that the academy marks, values and rewards. Continuing to undertheorize and undervalue such work may damage not only individuals, particularly those marginalized by gender, race, and other identity markers, but also may have a negative impact on individual universities and disciplines that will likely continue struggling to find hosts willing to take on such demanding and often-discounted scholarly work. Below we identify five things that are at stake, for individuals and groups, if we continue to

ignore such work as a form of scholarship (in our promotion and tenure policies or in our end of year reviews). We also offer some strategies that might be considered in addressing these issues.

What's at Stake

Time and Emotional Health. Work-life balance has become a fashionable topic of popular articles, on-campus meetings, and scholarship in recent years. Thinking critically about the amount of time we expend at and in our jobs is important, and there are many things we take on in the academy that are time consuming and emotionally taxing: advising, mentoring undergraduate and graduate students, serving as organization advisors, and all the other “care taking” that often goes along with teaching. The propensity to serve in these important roles in an academic community is what likely drew many of us to teaching, but conference organizing calls upon these skills in concentrated and prolonged ways that are often unsustainable, resulting in significant decreases to our professional and personal stores of time and energy. As co-chairs, finding time to communicate with conference attendees and service providers; create and revise budgets; review food contracts, technology contracts, space contracts and ASL interpreter contracts; coordinate with internal stakeholders and student groups; organize reviewers; design, edit and publish the program; and deal with the contingencies associated with conference hosting meant numerous hours of uncompensated (and unmarked) evening and weekend work. While this is not a new phenomenon for anyone working in higher education, the intensity of this work and the high financial and scholarly stakes creates new stressors for organizers while simultaneously diminishing time needed to adequately address them.

Unit / Departmental Energy and Productivity. Conference hosting not only draws significantly on the time and energies of individuals, but also demands quite a bit from hosts' home departments. Contributing to our disciplines is important, but so too is the work of our individual academic units and much of this work – assessment, strategic planning, recruitment – is already largely invisible labor. Taking on a national or international conference will further deplete organizations that are likely already overtaxed. There are, to be sure, many benefits to working as a group on visioning and carrying out an academic conference, including an increased sense of community, intellectual invigoration, opportunity to leverage individual strengths and interests, and increased depth to professional relationships to name just a few. But these benefits come at a cost and mean that, by necessity, some things will and must go undone or perhaps under-done in an academic unit in order to successfully complete the Herculean task of hosting a conference.

Scholarly Inactivity and Advancement. Although service, teaching, and scholarship responsibilities bear different weight at different academic institutions, it seems widely accepted that all are needed for individuals to survive and advance in the academy. While conference hosting certainly checks off the service box in a big way, it may also negatively impact teaching and scholarly production. As an associate professor, Jen was three years from applying for full professor at the time of our conference and as such was paying particular

attention to producing the required scholarly texts for that promotion. After only a few months of conference organizing duties, she accepted that these 18 months would not include any traditional scholarship production. Carving out research and writing time is already a challenge for most of us, and this activity is most often the area that is sacrificed when space must be created for other immediate projects. Conference hosting for pre-tenure faculty or those not yet promoted is therefore a considerable risk. Since the conference's completion, Jen has been able to re-establish her previous writing and production pace, but this is largely due to the fact that she had earned a competitive, semester-long research leave that happened to be scheduled immediately following the conference. Privileging conference organization over more readily valued scholarly activities and texts is a risk, particularly for pre-tenure faculty. We believe it is important for conference hosts to be aware of such challenges and to plan accordingly for their own career trajectory.

Teaching Efficacy. While scholarly production is likely the area most impacted by conference hosting duties, teaching is often also affected. There will always be the same hours in a day and things like class prep, grading, student conferences, and curriculum design will not magically diminish during a host's conference tenure, unless organizers are able to secure course reassignment. Being realistic about intellectual, emotional, and physical strains that often accompany major projects may help organizers mitigate this issue, but in all likelihood a conference organizer's teaching will suffer or at least be significantly impacted.

Personal and University Reputation. Academic conferences are important high-profile platforms for individual scholars and for organizations and disciplines. The chance to raise the visibility of specific issues and speakers is important work, perhaps particularly in regard to certain members of a given organization. Stephanie Sardelis and Joshua Drew (2016) explain that the scientific community, for example, "faces numerous challenges in achieving gender equality among its participants. One method of highlighting the contributions made by female scientists is through their selection as featured speakers in symposia held at the conferences of professional societies" (p. 1). Increased visibility, though, comes with the risk of increased criticism. So while attendees will always have valid concerns or are simply be "unpleased" with decisions relating to the conference – like registration costs, resources available, or physical locations chosen – these reactions carry real weight for individual scholars and academic programs when broadcast on social media channels. Fleeting observations and complaints, as well as praise, are now permanently recorded in public places and may have consequences for conference organizers.

Strategies for Doing Better

Be transparent. Explaining the complexity of budgeting and accessibility efforts, as well as setting realistic expectations for timelines and time commitments, for chairing even small academic conferences might help potential hosts plan, professionally and personally. Such transparency might also better educate university administrators and others about the commitment and resources needed. Individual academic organizations, then, should consider providing robust hosting materials and mentoring. We were lucky to be gifted several Google

folders with advice on advertising, obtaining sponsorship, compensating speakers, creating transportation routes and schedules, tracking proposals (see image below) and a million other tasks you don't realize you need to know how to do until you need to do them.

Treadwell and Casper (2008) describe a “framework for ... a successful model of conference planning” (p. 137) used in their field. “What developed,” the authors explained, “was a ‘conference in a box’ framework that enabled someone from the Reference Committee who has little conference planning experience to successfully lead the planning of a conference or event” (p. 137). While each venue and local host committee will and should differ, having some best practices and concrete guidelines and materials passed from host to host may save time and create networks of support for conferences.

Accept that some things “have to give”. As conference co-chairs and administrators—serving as academic unit head (Traci) and director of grad studies for our unit (Jen)—we had to accept that some of our usual activities might not get done or might be done differently or on a different scale. As academic unit head, Traci implemented some important procedures including establishing a conference committee (see [Sample Committee Agenda](#)), chaired by Jen, that counted as regular department service work for committee members and took the place of another committee appointment. Creating a standing committee that meets regularly for months or even years before a conference can not only help with workflow and distributing labor, but also helps to mark this labor on annual performance reports and tenure applications. Beyond the immediate academic unit or department, communicating the impact that conference hosting will have on individual faculty and academic units purposely and often to deans and other administrators avoids the temptation that this major, high-profile event—which will likely positively impact the host's students, university, and discipline—will go unnoticed or simply be swept into the overly-full service category.

Make conference hosting equivalent to a major publication. Although some universities, like our own, recognize and reward hosting major conferences as one way to earn an “exemplary”

10.8 Committee Meeting Agenda	
1.	Re-visit CFP (see “Feedback on CFP” attachment)
2.	Finalize timeline for committee (see draft of timeline attachment)
3.	Update on abstract review
4.	Identify major subcommittees and assign chairs
	Suggested subcommittees:
	-Technology (Website, Online Registration)
	-CFP/Abstract Acceptance Team
	-Conference Program (partner with a class)
	-Partner/Sponsor Team
	-Speaker/Event Coordination
	-Registration Table
	-Visitor's Packet
	-Transportation (from airports, around Harrisonburg)
	-Swag purchasing
	-Accessibility Committee
	-Conference email updates (Jen has a couple saved in her inbox from last year)
	-Post-conference survey team
5.	Other business – more frequent meetings?
	Next meeting: Nov 5

Figure 4: An example of a committee meeting agenda.

Proposal Tracker						
File Edit View Insert Format Data Tools Add-ons Help Last edit was on October 29, 2019						
Presenter Name						
1	Presenter Name	Proposal Title	Proposal Type	Reviewer Assigned	Accept/Reject	Email Assn Email Sent

Figure 5: Keeping track of conference proposals.

rating in service, tenure and promotion cases are rarely decided based on service. Scholarship and teaching are nearly always valued and weighted more significantly. Shifting conference hosting to scholarship status, then, may allow for more substantial and appropriate recognition of this intellectually rigorous and vital work and make conference hosting more manageable and attractive. Isis Settles and Rachel O'Connor (2014) explain that not only are "conferences ... important places for networking and mentoring" but they are "also places where attendees learn about the value placed on certain types of scholarship" (p. 74). Such research suggests that academic conferences, then, not only create space for knowledge demonstration, but actually set and preserve standards of intellectual rigor and scholarly conventions for knowledge making for specific disciplines. The conference we hosted, for example, required a formal application and proposal that was vetted by members of the parent organization executive committee before we were selected to host. This sort of oversight and peer review might surely locate conference hosting as scholarship or at least scholarly work. Such work is clearly important to our disciplines and suggests that a well-attended conference may have a more significant impact on a given field than a single article. As such, conference hosting should be viewed not as event planning, but instead as a critical contribution to scholarly conversations with a reach that most articles will never realize. Another strategy to make visible the value of this intellectual work is to publicize the event with university media relations offices (see [Redefining Feminist Activism](#)) and local news to help others see the impact beyond conference attendees.

Tie conference work to teaching. Teaching accounts for the lion's share of many faculty appointments and so finding ways to connect the conference planning workload, as well as intellectual energy and excitement, with existing classes or by creating "special topics" courses may help hosts streamline efforts and energies and will likely result in unique engaged learning experiences for students (see [Brennan Article](#)). In preparation for our conference, we arranged for Jen to teach a cross listed course, which was focused on the subject area of the conference, and for which we share instructional responsibilities with two other departments. Although creating projects and finding readings to make explicit the connections between the course and the conference was time consuming at the start, the opportunity to have Jen and her students in the same "headspace" immediately before and during the conference was invaluable. Students in the class attended talks, archived materials from the conference (see [Digital Archive](#)), and reflected on the nature of knowledge making in our field. As undergraduates, they enjoyed unusual access to a major academic conference and were also able to write for a real audience and contribute to the scholarly conversation. Another committee member engaged students in her Professional Editing and Document Design courses to produce and edit texts for the conference resulting in valuable documents for conference goers and experience working with clients for her students. These sorts of efforts not only enrich classroom experiences for students and faculty, but also allow for conference organizing to be highlighted as important intellectual labor in teaching sections of annual performance reports and tenure and promotion materials.

Be kind to conference hosts. We had so many lovely interactions with conference attendees—folks participated generously in events and activities, stopped by to offer thanks and

complements and registration, and offered lots of love and shout-outs on social media. There were also a number of criticisms shared about everything from venue, to food, to cost, to representation, and while not unexpected, much of this criticism took place online. As conference attendees, most of us have found ourselves complaining—sometimes vehemently—about late shuttles, boring or bad food, lackluster speakers, or terrible technology. But what was once ephemeral and temporal feedback now lives forever via tweets and posts and shares and has a real impact on those doing this sort of invisible labor for little or no compensation. Settles and O’Connor (2014) remind us that academic conferences are “understudied yet consequential extension[s] of the academic/ professional workplace” (p. 72) and so it seems important to observe similar conventions of civility and constructive rather than antagonistic criticism in conversations at and around professional conferences. Certainly, we don’t recommend ignoring major issues at conferences or not suggesting ways things might change or be addressed differently, but such criticism might be offered with a constructive and kind-spirited intent. We suggest only offering grace to hosts, who are likely learning as they go, trying to be careful stewards of a budget made up of fees paid by attendees, and dealing with numerous challenges that they were never formally trained for. Parent organizations for conferences should offer support and even “cover” when necessary, like our organization did, but perhaps conference goers can also endeavor to remember the human beings behind the always-already flawed event they are experiencing.

Conclusion

When we began researching for this article, one of the first—and only—article we found specifically addressing conference hosting was a 30-year-old piece from Barbara Baker. The personal reflection focuses on the author’s experiences chairing a four-day conference, a process she began 24 months before the actual event:

Conference planning is time-consuming, hard work. It is physically and mentally tiring. But when the conference is over, you realize it is one of the most rewarding and prideful experiences you will ever have. The team spirit from working with a group to put what has to be ‘the biggest and the best’ is exhilarating. The feeling of accomplishment almost overshadows the exhaustion. (p. 247)

The 1989 article sounds hokey now, but the message of it all being worth it is not that different than what we tell prospective conference hosts now. Instead, we propose shifting the focus from conference hosting as feel-good and passion-motivated service to intellectual labor that directly benefits both hosts and the larger academy. Besides taking a small step in countering gender inequality around service in the academy, elevating conference hosting and organizing to scholarship may invigorate this intellectual labor and result in even stronger conferences and conventions. No matter the larger implications, it is important to stop undervaluing the intellectual work of women in the academy and allow the multi-year commitment of conference hosting to be more accurately valued in our academic economy.

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