Getting Your Student Chapter to the Annual Meeting: The Michigan Experience

By Paul Green, UM-HFES Student Chapter Faculty Adviser, Rosemarie Figueroa, UM-HFES Student Chapter President, and Alicia Napoleon, UM-HFES Student Chapter Secretary

Getting students who are not presenters to attend the HFES Annual Meeting is always a financial challenge. Presenters are typically funded by their adviser's research projects, which are sometimes supplemented by university travel funds, but these funds can be restricted to graduate students. Depending on the location and the number of days of the meeting, the cost of registration, airfare, hotel, and food is typically about $1,500 per person.

Because the Annual Meeting was in Chicago this year, students from several Midwest universities were not burdened with airfare costs, significantly reducing the total cost to attend. Because the Annual Meeting has not been within driving distance of Ann Arbor in 15 years, the University of Michigan HFES Student Chapter (UM-HFES) launched an initiative to get students to this year's meeting. Some useful lessons follow.

Establish a Leader, a Committee, and Subcommittees to Begin Planning at Least Nine Months in Advance

The leader was the current UM-HFES president, and the committee identified one to three people to lead subcommittees for transportation, lodging, meeting registration, the dinner sponsored by the UM-Greater Chicago Alumni Club, and the annual University of Michigan Dinner. Google Drive and Dropbox folders were created to share information, collect receipts, and prepare documents (including a proposal sent to companies), e-mail drafts, and sponsorship and reimbursement agreements distributed to the sponsored students.

Although increasing UM student attendance at the meeting was discussed almost a year in advance, activities were minimal until the summer of 2014, which was a bit late. The late start was due to an initial lack of students to...
support this initiative as well as an underestimate of the time needed to complete all the necessary work. Beginning preliminary planning at least nine months in advance would provide time to recruit initiative organizers, some of whom will be off campus and not available during the summer.

Set an Attendance Goal and Talk It Up
The original goal was to convince every member of UM-HFES and require every member of Paul Green's Automotive Human Factors (IOE 437) class to attend the meeting. Attendance could be required only if it were free. To meet the attendance goal, we set the estimated budget at around $26,000—a significant amount, given that the highest typical annual budget for a student chapter is $500. Because fundraising started late (in August), funds were not sufficiently available in advance, so the course requirement was dropped. However, an impressive $17,500 was raised in less than one month, and a total of 25 students attended, far more than the seven to ten who typically attend.

To provide perspective, most of the students in the IOE 437 class are undergraduates, and convincing them of the importance of professional involvement and conferences is a challenge. They often do not appreciate the value until after they attend. During and after the Annual Meeting, students who did attend remarked on how helpful it was in learning more about their fields of interests and completing course assignments.

Plan a Fundraising Effort
The fundraising effort relied on several well-edited documents that described UM-HFES and asked for support, explained why support was being requested, provided a detailed budget, stated how this activity was organized (e.g., committees and their roles). It also listed what UM-HFES could provide in return (putting company logos on UM-HFES T-Shirts, hosting sponsor-specific activities, providing student recruitment opportunities, etc.). Funds were obtained from the College of Engineering, the IOE Department, faculty discretionary funds, alumnus Richard Jagacinski, and members at two companies (Paul Franz and Tim Rhoades at Applied Safety and Ergonomics, and Stan Caplan at Usability Associates).

Develop Plans to Keep Costs Low
One could travel between Chicago and Ann Arbor by train for $62 thanks to Amtrak's special HFES Annual Meeting rate; however, some students decided to go by bus or carpool. Carpoolers found parking rates as low as $20/night, far below the $60/night rate near the meeting venue. To simplify accounting, all students received up to $62 for transportation, no matter what method of transportation was used.

Coordinate with the Local Alumni Club
Coordination began by contacting the president of the local university alumni club guided by the University Alumni Association staff, an underutilized resource. A plan to have some of the 22,000 UM alumni living in the Chicago area provide housing did not pan out, but if there had been a UM-HFES subcommittee coordinating with them and the alumni association staff, the outcome could have been different. The Chicago Metropolitan Chapter did sponsor a pizza dinner following the student reception. It was attended by 20 students from UM, some students from the University of Puerto Rico HFES student chapter, and seven UM alumni. In addition, a member of UM-HFES volunteered to plan a social at a nearby pub immediately after the pizza dinner. Approximately 70 students from different student chapters attended. These were great networking events.
Establish Some Minimal Attendance Requirements
There was some faculty resistance to sending undergraduates for free to the Annual Meeting without any requirements. Therefore, to be reimbursed, undergrads had to attend at least two days of the meeting. All students were required to attend a mass meeting a week prior the Annual Meeting, specific meeting events such as the student reception, and a specified number of sessions. After the Annual Meeting, students completed a short survey and attended a follow-up meeting where they all shared pictures, videos, and their meeting experiences.

Plan A Special Dinner
Most universities have dinners for students, faculty, staff, and alumni at the Annual Meeting. For decades, the University of Michigan Dinner has been on Wednesday night of the meeting week at 7:30 p.m., and this year was no exception. For the first time, students made an extra effort to get sponsorship for this dinner, which was provided by the IOE Department. Instead of the typical 30–40 attendees, there were 56 this year, and departmental funding—along with the number of attendees—allowed us to obtain a complimentary private room. Even though e-mailed RSVPs were requested (40 responded), a sign-up sheet at the meeting generated buzz and encouraged others to attend.

Other differences this year included a shift from one large table to smaller tables of eight and nine, and a buffet format, all of which promoted interaction among attendees. Organizers mixed students and alumni when attendees gathered at the meeting hotel and when people sat down for dinner.

After 20 minutes of informal interactions at the beginning of dinner, everyone introduced themselves and shared an interesting and unique fact about their lives. Students also described their fields of study. Alumni reconnected with professors for whom they had worked and studied, and opportunities in both academia and industry were shared with students. Everyone enjoyed getting to know one another so much that after dessert, most attendees went to other tables to chat. It was not until 10:30 p.m. that most people left.

Utilize University Administrative Resources
UM-HFES registered this initiative as a University of Michigan sponsored event so that students were covered by the university's insurance and sponsors could receive a gift receipt for tax purposes. This led to very beneficial communication and advice from the College of Engineering staff, who helped UM-HFES identify potential sources of support inside the university and promoted the initiative among IOE alumni.

Closing Thoughts
Our experience shows that it is possible to substantially increase the number of students attending the HFES Annual Meeting, especially if transportation costs can be reduced (by carpool, bus, or train) or housing costs can be lowered (by having four students per hotel room) or eliminated (by staying with alumni). We wanted students to learn about HF/E and to experience a professional conference. There is no doubt that for many it was an incredible experience. However, even if they do not pursue a career in HF/E, those who attended the Annual Meeting now can make compelling arguments for why they need to join professional societies and attend conferences, from which everyone benefits.

With help from many people, UM-HFES was able raise 35 times its normal budget in less than a month, consequently increasing attendance at the HFES Annual Meeting by a factor of 2.5. We encourage other student chapters to pursue similar initiatives and aim high.
Paul Green is a research professor at the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute in the Driver Interface Group and a faculty member in industrial and operations engineering. He is an HFES Fellow and a past president, as well as a BCPE Certified Human Factors Professional. Rosemarie Figueroa is a PhD candidate in industrial and operations engineering at the University of Michigan. Rose holds a BS in industrial engineering from the University of Puerto Rico and an MS in industrial and operations engineering from the University of Michigan. Alicia Napoleon is an MSI candidate in the School of Information at the University of Michigan specializing in human-computer interaction.

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