



Preparing for Chairing? Build Some Relationships!

Programming for an AIChE conference — *i.e.*, developing the technical program — takes a lot more than the work put in by the meeting chairs; the details and ideas that go into every session and its roster of speakers take a whole force of volunteers. As a co-chair for the upcoming 2014 Spring Meeting in New Orleans who also happens to be a young professional (YP), I've realized that the best way to prepare for programming a large-scale conference is to build relationships across all levels of the organization. These five steps have helped me to build a strong network — giving me the experience and confidence to co-chair a national meeting. These basic steps can also help you prepare for other leadership roles outside of AIChE.

Step 1. Find a mentor. If you are a young professional, sign up for a mentor through the AIChE mentorship program. My mentor, Annette Johnston, has become my confidant and supporter. For the upcoming Spring Meeting, Annette and I brainstormed ways to increase the use of social media outlets such as LinkedIn and Twitter to target marketing to young professionals.

As a Director on the AIChE Board, she has a significant amount of experience and understands the ins and outs of the organization. We typically meet every other month and are sure to touch base at the conferences. We discuss our careers, current roles, and next steps, as well as graduate school (since we are both pursuing Master's degrees).

Step 2. Attend conferences. Conferences are a great way to get to know your peers, make connections with people at the same experience level, and network with industry experts and leaders. Fellows and board members of AIChE are easily accessible at the conferences and enjoy hearing new ideas from members young and old.

The first national conference that I attended was the 2011 Spring Meeting in Chicago, where Jessica Swary Schurr, former Chicago Young Professionals Committee (YPC) Chair, launched the first YP Mixer. Members from several AIChE divisions were present, to recruit interested YPs. During these events, I started to build my network at the national level.

Step 3. Volunteer for a leadership position. I became involved in YPC at the national level during the 2011 Spring Meeting. One of my original roles in YPC was to help organize the young-professional technical program for the Spring and Annual Meetings. I assisted with the programming at the 2011 Annual Meeting in Minneapolis and then took on the role of YPC Subcommittee Program Chair. In this role, I helped plan the technical and social programming for the meetings in 2012 and 2013.

We realized that to expand and offer the best programs for YPs, YPC needed to partner with AIChE's divisions. We reached out to the Process Development Div. (PDD), the Fuels and Petrochemicals Div. (F&PD), and the Management Div., among others. Through these partnerships, we built several YP tutorial sessions that bridged the gap between new graduates and experienced engineers.

During this time, I met Tim Olsen, an experienced leader in F&PD (and the National Meeting Program Chair for the 2014 Spring Meeting). He worked with us to build a basis for future YP programming. After working together on these projects, Tim reached out to me and asked if I would co-chair the 2014 Spring Meeting with him.

Step 4. Meet other AIChE leaders. Building relationships with leaders from different parts of AIChE, including session chairs and speakers, is important. Some of the most vital relationships you can build are with AIChE staff members who have seen the organization progress and know what works and what doesn't work.

Without the relationships and ideas from leaders in AIChE, we wouldn't be able to create interesting new programs. For example, for the 2014 Spring Meeting, we have formed a unique Shale Topical Conference to address how the "shale boom" has revitalized and changed the global face of energy. This topical is a collaboration of the Global Congress on Process Safety, the Ethylene Producers' Conference, and several AIChE divisions and forums.

Step 5. Step outside your comfort zone. Whether your passion is organizing K-12 outreach events or serving as treasurer of a committee, you should reach outside your comfort zone to learn something new.

YPC has grown over the years, but not too long ago we had only a small group of strong leaders. This encouraged us to attend events outside our YP bubble, such as division and forum meetings, as well as volunteer to serve as representatives at AIChE Operating Council meetings. Attending Chemical Engineering Technology Operating Council (CTOC) meetings gave me direct access to AIChE presidents and board members, which offered another outlet to build relationships with leaders.

If you asked me whether co-chairing a national meeting was in my five-year plan a few years ago, I probably would have thought you were crazy. I have always been a person who has trouble saying no to volunteer activities, but I never thought I could help lead an event so important to the AIChE community. My network has helped prepare me for this monumental task.

CEP