

Best Practices for Running a Conference

by Tushar Varma

Attending a MUN conference holds the promise of a very fluid, moldable experience—if you prepare well in advance, you'll feel confident in your debate strategy; if you don't prepare as much...you'll probably still have a good time. But *running* a conference where others can have an enjoyable experience...that's a different story entirely. With an exorbitant number of moving gears, expert planning is a must for running a conference. Having served as Secretary-General for Model United Nations at Chapel Hill XX this past winter, I'm here to provide my **top 10 best practices for running a MUN conference**. This is primarily a resource for new conference Secretariats, with additional free resources to provide a place to start with content development.

PRE-CONFERENCE

Picking your Secretariat

Your first task will be to select your Secretariat. This is arguably the most important decision that you will make, as a cohesive Secretariat is what makes a MUN conference work seamlessly. Here are some tips:

Make a timeline. Being organized is key. Keep a conference calendar to keep track of important dates that you will be setting for the conference and for planning. Pick a date you wish to send out your application, a date for when the application will close, dates for interviews, and then an announcement date for new Secretariat members. Communicate your application effectively and often. Make sure you promote the deadline and the fact that people can reach out to you with questions. *Make yourself accessible!*

Your Secretariat can be as big as you want it and the titles of the positions can be whatever you wish for them to be. This is what an example roster looks like:

- Secretary-General
- Director-General
- Director of Communications
- Chief of Operations and Logistics
- Director of Business Affairs
- Director of Sponsorships and Finance
- Chief of Staff
- Undersecretary of Crisis Committees
- Undersecretary of General Assemblies
- Undersecretary of General Assemblies PLUS

Undersecretary of GAs Plus is optional, as it is a type of committee that is not common for every MUN organization. I also encourage that your Chief of Operations and Logistics look into starting a committee that will be working under them during the weekend to help specifically with selling shirts, Candygrams, stickers, etc. Everyone else will definitely be tied up all weekend, so some extra hands would be helpful for sure.

Conduct Interviews. After the application closes and you have several applications to review, feel free to shortlist the list of candidates if there are a lot of people to consider. If people seem to have applied for the same role, keep them in mind for a different role if you feel they will fit better there and maybe bring up the question of “How would you feel about a position different from what you applied for?” Keep your options open. Make sure you’re not giving them a LONG application. Save some big questions for the interview as well. Make sure that an applicant you are considering is NOT going to have too many other commitments the following year. After this is done, you can email the Secretariat members that they were chosen for a position. Remember to email the applicants you didn’t select to encourage them to apply for being a CD or Chair.

Keeping track of your budget

In all the excitement of running a conference, it’s easy to overspend! Remember, a conference should be pulling in enough net profit so that your organization is able to host another conference the following year...with potentially more attendees! The length of your conference and the number of attendees you allow to register should depend on the manpower you possess, but also your financial capabilities. If you are part of a university-affiliated organization, look into your student government to see if they allocate money to clubs on a semesterly or yearly basis. If your organization is new to the scene and cannot acquire funding, it would be wise to create a committee focused on setting up fundraisers with local restaurants or to ask local businesses for sponsorships. To help with acquiring sponsorships, I have attached a template that you might find useful. However you end up acquiring money, you will have to keep track of it somewhere. I have also provided a smart spreadsheet with some pre-set categories that can be edited.. It’s an organizational spreadsheet that tracks money coming in from delegate registration and money going out with venue bookings and printing costs.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Good communication is the bridge between confusion and clarity. - Nat Turner

I can’t stress how important it is to be in constant communication with your stakeholders and to have at least one member of your Secretariat be accessible at all times. Three groups to keep in mind include: advisers, staff, and Secretariat. This means keeping up with people involved with internal AND external affairs. For a winter conference, such as MUNCH XX, our Director of Communications sent an email with updates about registration, committee assignments, or whatever was coming up to advisers on a schedule that we recommend you follow: an email EVERY OTHER MONTH during the summer before the conference, one email EVERY MONTH once the academic year begins, and TWO emails EVERY MONTH during the three months preceding the conference. The idea is to increase communication as you get closer to the conference. Sometimes you might feel that you’re being repetitive with the content of your emails, but this is totally fine! Important information such as registration fees and dates absolutely need to be repeated. I also recommend you keep an updated spreadsheet with contact information for schools and advisers.

I also suggest taking time to establish a rapport with your advisers that ensures that you are creating an inclusive environment. Students interested in MUN create a group of very diverse individuals. You should strive to create a conference of inclusion by asking advisers if anyone on their delegation has any dietary restrictions or any handicaps that may require them additional assistance during the conference. For example, if a delegate is visually impaired or physically disabled, offering that delegate a page that can run/write their notes for them would mean a lot to them! I have attached some templates for emails that you might find useful!

When it comes to internal communication, you might feel it prudent to assign your Chief of Staff or Undersecretaries to sending monthly/weekly updates and reminders about mandatory meetings or managing GroupMes for committees. With your Secretariat, it is vitally important that you create a group chat in which everyone keeps their notifications on (especially as you get closer to the conference). A group chat is preferable to sending emails to your Secretariat because it provides quicker communication and response time...and is generally more personal! Remember, your Secretariat can put together a great conference if they are close and on the same page.

Deadlines? It's complicated...

When it comes to creating a timeline for your Secretariat to ensure you have a conference prepared in time, it is important to know where you mark your concrete deadlines and where you mark your softer deadlines. For example, you can easily solidify dates such as “send this email out to advisers by ---” and “have a fundraiser night at Moe’s by...” These types of events aren’t contingent on a large amount of people and your likelihood of not meeting a deadline is low. I can tell you now that your deadlines for completing background guides will have to be quite flexible. Especially if you are running a large conference and expecting to have more than 10 committees, it will be difficult to get all the background guides on time because students are busy and probably have a lot of other things going on as well! Make sure you set clear expectations about when you want background guides to be completed and make sure you aren’t asking them to be working too much during exam periods. I would also recommend you have your Undersecretaries check in with committees periodically to see if they can have a certain amount of the background guide completed by certain dates. However, go into this process with some wiggle room in mind! Expect things like background guides to take at least a week longer than you originally planned, and work that delay into your schedule ahead of time.

Protection of Minors Training

If you are running a conference for high-school students as a collegiate organization, it is imperative that you train your staff on protection of minors. Not only does this help your organization look professional and more trustworthy to advisers/parents, but it gives valuable training knowledge to those that will be interacting with your delegates the weekend of the conference. If you are part of a university’s MUN organization, it is likely that your university will have an Office of Campus Safety offering this training. Try to get dates for training sorted out sooner, rather than later, as it’s something you don’t want to worry about last minute.

Here is a link to UNC-Chapel Hill's training webpage: <https://campussafety.unc.edu/protection-of-minors/>

WEEKEND OF THE CONFERENCE

Feedback Sessions

As with any project you embark on, it is important to evaluate your work. Without evaluation, you can't gauge success, and you can't have solid goals for improvement for the following year. I recommend that you have your Secretariat conduct five minute feedback sessions with each committee at the end of each day of the conference, during which the chair and co-chair of that committee leave. Honestly ask your delegates if they have been enjoying the committee. Have the chairs been properly conducting parliamentary procedure? Has the crisis team been returning notes at an appropriate pace? This feedback is important because it can allow you to give your chairs immediate feedback on things they can improve, as well as give you feedback you can use to improve conference logistics for the following day. Go over any major feedback with your Secretariat at the end of the day if possible.

Slack

Whether your conference has a staff of 50, or a staff of 150, nothing is more valuable than instant communication! Slack is an excellent platform that can be downloaded on your phone and on your desktop as an app. What's great about Slack is that during the conference, you can have all of your staff in separate channels for their respective committees, and have your Secretariat have access to all channels to monitor activity and field any questions or needs your staff may have. I would recommend getting your staff onto Slack a month before the conference to get them accustomed to the interface.

Before getting started, go ahead and download the Slack desktop app and mobile app. Your account will be synced to all devices and you can receive notifications whenever a new message is sent. Create a workspace! To have others join the workspace you created, they need to accept the email invitation they should have received if you invited them to join your workspace. Set up your profile by clicking the drop-down menu next to the workspace icon in the top left corner on the desktop app and then by clicking on View Profile and Edit Profile. The best way to get familiar with the workspace is to look around for yourself and explore. On the left-side, you will find the workspace icon, which is how you will access this workspace in particular (if you have any other workspaces with other organizations). Moving to the right, the purple column will let you access channels that you're in, access Direct Messages, and create new channels for groups such as committees or Secretariat. Everyone who is added to the workspace automatically enters the #general and #random Slack channel. In the main space that covers most of the right-side, you can enter messages in the selected channel and interact with members. These are the basics! Here is a useful website if you want to learn more about Slack: <https://slack.com/help>

Selling Merchandise

If your conference plans on making money by selling merchandise such as shirts and stickers, then there are some precautions to take into account before you proceed. Listen to this, and listen very carefully: you will need a dedicated person to be in charge of merch sales during your conference. I cannot stress this enough. It is likely that your Secretariat will be all over the place during the conference putting out metaphorical fires. If you want to make sure you maximize sales, having a Secretariat member or other staff member fully dedicated to selling merchandise, keeping track of inventory and finances will help you tremendously. Remember to keep a spreadsheet on which you can track sales and inventory as well.

Running a conference is definitely a gargantuan task--but it's also very doable! My main takeaway from this experience was that there is absolutely **no way to produce an enjoyable MUN experience without a cohesive team, and a realistic timeline.** If you would like to reach out to me with questions about running a conference, feel free to email me at tusharvarma00@gmail.com. Until then, keep up the moMUNtum.

SUPPLEMENTARY FILES

- **Budget Template:**
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ZUBkBcWwjNmhjr_J9E2eg9FWI67tiQ4hhjwTf5iJljk/edit?usp=sharing
- **Timeline/Template for Emailing Advisers:**
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fzSahqPOtHNfRUK3-yk3yf3Xe4wKMLeb1tOOaImBtEg/edit?usp=sharing>
- **Sponsorship Template:**
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BxzZulAswpnYoSFSnx-xeEiAomjmncQB/view?usp=sharing>