SIGCSE SPOTLIGHT

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SIGCSE Trend Tracker

Hello, and welcome to *SIGCSE Spotlight*, an ongoing column that highlights and reflects on the current trends within computing education and the SIGCSE community. In this quarter's issue we are going to go behind the scenes at the premier SIGCSE conference – the SIGCSE Technical Symposium. The Technical Symposium was held from February 29th to March 3rd in Raleigh, North Carolina. While it was reported that 1286 members were in attendance, few, if any, comprehend the amount of work that takes place behind the scenes. To gain a better appreciation, let's take a look at "A Week in the Life of the SIGCSE Technical Symposium".

It is Monday, February 27th, and the co-Symposium Chairs Laurie Smith King and David Musicant's plane has landed in Raleigh.

Even though they have just arrived on site, work for them really began three years earlier in March of 2009 when they were selected as Program Chairs for the SIGCSE 2011 event. (For the last dozen years or so, it has been the SIGCSE tradition to ask the Symposium Chairs to first serve as Program Chairs in the previous conference. While lengthening one's service, this tradition provides a level of continuity that did not exist in the earlier days.) The early work of 2009 for Laurie and David involved mostly site visits to determine a location for the 2012 conference and contacting keynote speakers. Then in 2010 their work as Program Chairs for 2011 began in earnest. Soliciting reviewers, assigning papers to reviewers, collecting the reviews, soliciting meta-reviews, and making final decisions as to which papers are accepted are all part of the Program Chair's responsibilities. But just as SIGCSE 2011 in Dallas was winding down, their work as Symposium Chairs was kicking into high gear. From that point on, it was non-stop meetings, emails, and decision making until the inevitable moment. Now, having finally arrived in Raleigh, it was show time. Monday evening is spent looking over the slides for the upcoming sessions, rehearsing the introductions that they would give to other speakers, and taking one more look at the dreaded budget.

Laurie Smith King and David Musicant,
Conference Co-chairs, in front of the SIGCSE
2012 registration booth

Cary Laxer during a quiet moment at
SIGCSE 2012

Also arriving on Monday afternoon is Cary Laxer. Cary is in charge of conference registrations, and has been doing so for approximately sixteen years, when he and Frank Young took over the duties from Dick Austing at the 1996 SIGCSE event, which was chaired by our *ACM Inroads* Editor-in-Chief, John Impagliazzo. (Frank retired a few years back, but Cary keeps the fires alive with *much* help from Larry Merkle and Lynn Degler.) Similar to Laurie and David's work, Cary, Lynn and Larry have been working on registrations for this conference since the day after SIGCSE 2011. Then in late summer/early fall, work began on the 2012 registration form (both paper and online). There was an on-site planning meeting in October, registration materials were finalized in November, and online registration went live December 1st. While a steady stream of registrations came in, the biggest surge of registrations was a day or two before the late-registration fee was imposed. Cary has decided to relax and take it easy for the remainder of Monday. Tomorrow, the registration packet stuffing begins.

It is Tuesday morning and Laurie and Dave are having breakfast with the conference support team – IT, A/V, hotel staffs, exhibit hall staff, and exhibits manager. It is time to finalize food orders and to make sure there are enough comp rooms for the symposium committee. The big issue – how many meals to serve at the SIGCSE Luncheon Saturday afternoon? It is known how many have pre-registered, but how many additional will register on site? And for those registered, how many will not stick around for the Saturday lunch? Too few lunch orders and someone may go hungry. Too many lunches, and the food is wasted; a costly decision either way.

As it turns out that is not the biggest issue. Laurie and David are informed less than 48 hours from the opening keynote that first lady Michelle Obama will be appearing at a luncheon at the Marriott Hotel directly across the street from the convention center. They are informed that roads will be closed, doors taped off, window blinds closed, underground walkways closed, the R-Line bus system rerouted, and parts of the Marriott hotel shut down to SIGCSE attendees.

Did anyone say that Laurie and David had nothing else to do?

I didn't think so.

Tuesday afternoon and the stuffing begins. Stuffing registration packets, that is. Anyone that is available is drafted. Over 1200 envelopes have to be stuffed with 25-35 items, such as name tags, programs, lanyards, CD-ROMs, and event tickets.

- Did attendee John Smith sign up for a workshop? *Ticket*
- Which lunch choice – beef, chicken, or vegetarian? *Ticket*
- Conference reception? *Ticket*
- Drink coupon? *Ticket*
- Etc.

The stuffing continues on through the afternoon, into the evening, and resumes the next morning. Meanwhile, Laurie and David take the 2012 committee (those not stuffing envelopes) out to dinner for one last chance to discuss details. Finally, on Tuesday night Laurie and David take another look at the events occurring on Wednesday.

Wednesday morning and the pre-conference events begin – CRA-mentoring, SIGCAS, Alice tutorials, and the SIGCSE board meeting. The SIGCSE board consists of approximately ten to twelve individuals and meets in person twice a year, one of those meetings being the day before the annual Technical Symposium. The board meets from 8:00am to 5:00pm and handles typical board issues such as the consideration of a SIGCSE conference outside of the current venues of the U.S., Europe and Australia locations, ongoing budget issues, and consideration of new and ongoing SIGCSE projects. The afternoon portion of the meeting is typically dedicated to in-depth discussions of the three SIGCSE conferences – the Technical Symposium, ICER, and ITiCSE.

Wednesday afternoon and conference registration opens at 3:00pm. Envelopes are stuffed and Cary is in his seat at the registration booth, a chair he will occupy until Saturday afternoon. Wednesday evening and the pre-conference workshops begin. Despite a few small glitches, all proceed well. (Overheard by the conference staff: “We put out mixed nuts for the workshop breaks, and they ate all the nuts. Nobody ever eats the nuts!”)

Thursday morning, and it is the official beginning of SIGCSE 2012. After a few opening introductions and remarks, Laurie and David introduce the keynote speaker, Frederick P. Brooks, author of *Mythical Man-Month*, who presents the captivating talk “The Teacher’s Job is to Design Learning Experiences; not Primarily to Impart Information”. Some of Professor Brook’s more memorable quotes: “Despite all the technology, we still lecture. Learn by induction, teach by deduction. A teacher’s job is to design learning experiences.”

Later that morning, the exhibit hall opens. Numerous book vendors and hardware/software vendors display their products in the hopes that conference attendees will adopt their materials. Also in attendance, near the back of the exhibit hall in a non-imposing booth, is Tracy Camp and Paul Tymann, co-Symposium Chairs for SIGCSE 2013 which will be held in Denver. Like Laurie and David, their work has been in progress for over two years. Tracy states that besides the usual SIGCSE events, the 2013 committee is considering a down-hill skiing event, some form of a conference reception game, and an online-participant list displaying who is at the conference.

Thursday noon and it is time for the First-Timers Lunch. All first-time SIGCSE-attendees are invited. Seating is arranged such that an “old-timer” (such as a board or committee member) is placed at each table with the first-timers. The keynote speech is given by Jane Prey, the recipient of this year’s SIGCSE Lifetime Award. Appropriately, it was Jane who started the first first-

Jane Prey, recipient of the SIGCSE Lifetime Award at SIGCSE 2012

timers lunch at the SIGCSE Technical Symposium she chaired in 1999. Jane had taught in higher education for almost thirty years when she left academia for a two-year stint with the National Science Foundation running the CCLI and CSEMS grant programs. After NSF, she worked with Microsoft Research for eight years. She retired in September 2011 and now resides in Florida. Jane related how her first exposure to computer programming was at DePaul University, where students wrote programs using punch cards and some kid drove the decks from DePaul's Lincoln Park campus to the Chicago campus of University of Illinois (about five miles away) for computation. As Jane is proud to note, "Service is the by-product of community engagement".

It is Thursday afternoon and Laurie and David are busy solving more problems with comp room allocations. David is also wondering if anyone is noticing the flat-panel screens outside each meeting room. David spent an untold number of hours programming the screens. In the beginning, someone simply used a magic marker to write the details on a large piece of easel-board paper; much quicker, but not as cool-tech.

Thursday night and it is time for the conference reception. In the early days of the SIGCSE Technical Symposium, committee members would gather drinks and bags of chips into the Symposium Chair's hotel room. Now, we enjoy a catered event with hot appetizers and a cash bar. The problem with this year's reception: it was held in an open space which did not allow for controlled access. Some were concerned that anyone on the street could walk in and enjoy the food. But it appears that this is not the case, and SIGCSE members quickly eat the hors d'oeuvres and enjoy the first annual performance of the *SIGCSE Singers*, a barbershop-styled choral group.

It is Friday morning and another outstanding keynote speaker – Hal Abelson, the winner of the 2012 SIGCSE Award for Outstanding Contribution to Computer Science Education. Professor Abelson's presentation gives an impassioned speech for open source software, education, and research. Later that morning, Laurie spots two guys near a set of windows opposite the Marriott Hotel, which was hosting Michelle Obama's luncheon. Being the ever-vigilant Symposium Chair, she walks over to the two loitering gentlemen to tell them that no one is supposed to be near the windows or doors. They both turn, flash their Secret Service badges, and one of them speaks: "Thanks for the dedication."

It is now Friday afternoon and time for the annual SIGCSE Business Meeting. During this meeting the SIGCSE board members are introduced, along with the SIGCSE budget and reports of the three SIGCSE conferences. While attendance at the SIGCSE Business Meeting is usually modest, the room was packed this year. One wonders if it had anything to do with a raffle to give away a free registration to next year's Technical Symposium.

Saturday morning arrives and it is the last chance to check out those new text books in the exhibits area. The final keynote address of the conference is given during the conference luncheon. Fernanda Viégas and Martin Wattenberg from Google's "Big Picture" visualization research group in Cambridge, Massachusetts, present "Through the Looking Glass: Talking about the World with Visualization". After the luncheon is the last set of conference workshops. Laurie and David are pleased that not a single Saturday workshop was cancelled due to low enrollment. This is a great sign that attendees appreciate the workshops and are willing to stick around for one more day. Now it is Saturday night and it is time for the hand-off dinner from the 2012 committee to the 2013 committee; one last meal together before saying goodbye. Friendships have been made that will last an amazingly long time.

Finally, almost one week after arriving in Raleigh and after three long years of planning and work, it is Sunday afternoon and time for Laurie and David to head home. A great feeling of accomplishment, mixed with a feeling of emptiness sweeps over them. All those emails and phone calls? The never-ending meetings? The thousand and one decisions made? Is it really over? Not quite. They still have to write the final conference report. One has to imagine the 2013 conference committee might be sending an email or two their way in the coming year. One of those emails might even ask, "Did they really eat all the nuts?"

As always, if you have any interesting/unusual/exciting/profound computing education-based ideas or results that you would like to share with the ACM community, send me an email at cwhite@cs.depaul.edu.