

Report of the Task Force to Recommend Changes to Convention
That Would Appeal to Scientists

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Why the Task Force was formed

Members of the APA Council of Representatives introduced a new business item requesting support to establish a Task Force that would look at how the APA Convention can be better organized to attract scientists to attend the Convention and become members of APA. The Council new business item stated that many of the executive committees of core science divisions raised serious questions about convention programming during their meetings in August 2005. Even though science members rate convention as their primary reason for joining organizations, they have substantial dissatisfaction with the APA convention due to timing, type, and overlap of important sessions even though the science content is excellent. The Board of Scientific Affairs (BSA) oversaw the formation of the Task Force.

The Task Force consisted of 12 members who were past program chairs for their divisions. The divisions selected to be represented on the Task Force included core science divisions as well as divisions that overlap science and applied areas. Representatives from the Board of Convention Affairs (BCA) and the Board of Scientific Affairs (BSA) were also members of the Task Force. BSA also invited divisions not officially represented on the Task Force to send a representative to the meeting at their own expense. Divisions officially represented on the Task Force included: 3, 5, 6, 7, 28, 38, 45. BSA did include divisions 8 and 21 but their representatives were unable to attend the meeting. Division who sent unofficial representatives to attend the Task Force meeting included: 14, 17, 22, 25, 37, 40, 41, and 44. Everyone present at the meeting participated in the discussion.

Background

The Task Force to Recommend Changes to Convention that would Appeal to Scientists met at APA in Washington DC on September 15 and 16, 2007. Although APA convention works well as a primary annual meeting for a handful of divisions, most scientists have many forums for presenting and hearing about latest findings in their own area. APA Convention simply cannot compete with these other more focused meetings for those scientists. The proliferation of technology facilitating interaction with close colleagues and the number of good, small conferences has made it difficult for APA Convention to meet the goals for which people

typically attend scientific meetings for those scientists who have other good meetings (some sponsored by divisions of APA) that more effectively meet those needs. The large number of divisions that no longer utilize their Convention program as their primary outlet for new findings places pressure on APA to adapt by providing a different kind of programming, and such programming may require a shift away from division sponsored programming to centralized programming for those divisions in order to satisfy their members.

The Task Force reviewed the evidence of attempts to increase participation by scientists at APA Convention. This evidence consisted primarily of notes from meetings of the BSA as well as reports from the previous Task Force. This evidence lead to the conclusion that over at least the past 20 years a number of initiatives to make Convention attractive to scientists have been implemented and abandoned. Although programs such as Science Week-end and Focus on Science did maintain, and possibly increased, scientists' satisfaction with APA convention, factors caused these programs to be abandoned. More recent efforts at cross-cutting programming were not popular and were difficult to coordinate among the divisions. As a result, many scientists do not routinely attend Convention. It is worth noting that these factors were not clearly identified to the Task Force, and it was not clear what evidence was used to make the decision to abandon those programs. The Task Force strongly urges APA to collect clear data on scientists' participation and satisfaction in APA convention to evaluate future changes made to the programming and format. Only if such data are collected can the effectiveness of changes such as those proposed be evaluated.

Perhaps not coincidentally, next year marks the 20th birthday of the Association for Psychological Science (APS). Good things have come of its birth, and APS and APA share many members and on occasion cooperate. However, the creation of APS both reflects and perpetuates a schism in the psychological science community that contributes to perceived shortcomings with APA, including Convention. Given the proliferation of specialized meetings over the last 20 years, the Task Force questioned whether two general meetings serve the research community or the two organizations optimally. Mindful that doing so will be difficult, the Task Force recommends that long term planning include seeking an opportunity to explore with APS ways of reducing competition between the meetings, either by holding them jointly or by distinguishing their overall or annual objectives in a way that divides a single constituency to a smaller degree.

Mission

The immediate mission of the Task Force was to recommend changes to APA Convention that would appeal to scientists in the near-term. APA serves a broad group of scientists: many identify themselves as basic scientists, studying aspects of psychology that do not directly address issues related to mental health, others ask basic science questions in the context of work that directly aids to our understanding of mental and physical health (i.e., "translational" science), and still others integrate science and practice, answering questions, for example, about the efficacy of treatment. The challenge is to create programming that appeals to *all* scientists, and that reflects the position that all science is valued, whether the goal is basic science, applying basic science to practice, or if it is applied in nature.

As a first step, the Task Force identified exactly what role Convention can play in furthering psychological science. Next, the Task Force developed recommendations to changes to Convention.

The role of APA Convention in 21st Century Psychological Science

Modern Psychological Science is decidedly multi-disciplinary, with many researchers collaborating with scientists in other fields (e.g., medicine, biology, sociology) as well as other subdisciplines of psychology (as evidenced by the number of APA members affiliated with more than one division). Thus, the historical approach of divisions creating independent programs—even with cross-listing and co-sponsoring events—is no longer the most effective means of allowing attendees at convention to take full advantage of the opportunity to develop across as well as within disciplines. The current system of allowing Divisions to independently (and collaboratively, if they choose) create programs may be outmoded and it may be that most scientists will never find Convention programming developed under this system satisfying. Specifically, increased satisfaction with Convention for scientists who have turned to other outlets for sharing current research findings may require a shift away from individual presentations toward attending Convention as a forum for interaction and developing the tools to do modern psychological science. However, the Task Force is sensitive to the fact that this should be accomplished without depriving divisions that do rely on Convention as their main outlet for individual papers and sharing current research the opportunity to continue their division sponsored programming. Indeed, APA may wish to turn to such divisions to provide such programming in the tools of psychological science.

Convention is in the unique position to facilitate scientists' learning of and developing the tools of 21st century Psychological Science. Because Convention has the potential to attract scientists from every corner of the discipline, it can create opportunities that encourage and facilitate interaction across areas, help scientists develop new skills and knowledge, and support and highlight scientists early in their careers and that represent broad and diverse backgrounds.

We believe that increased satisfaction with Convention requires that scientists shift their perception away from Convention as primarily a means for individual presentations of the latest findings, to Convention as a forum for interactions and developing the tools necessary for modern Psychological Science. We further believe that Convention is the best forum for this because of its broad representation of psychology. Scientists also must recognize that Convention provides opportunities to scientists—particularly those early in their careers and from diverse backgrounds—to promote their careers, receive mentoring, and acquire skills and knowledge important for furthering their careers. In sum, the Task Force identified four things Convention is in a unique position to offer to scientists: 1) exposure to research and people in other areas of psychology, 2) professional development as 21st century psychologists, 3) opportunities for professional stewardship, and 4) dialog with the greater community.

Recommended changes

To achieve the overarching goal of changing scientists' perception of Convention as a forum for interaction and scientific development, the Task Force recommends changes in all aspects of

Convention—from the nuts and bolts of planning the program to changing the structure of convention to increasing the diversity of the kinds of programming available. The Task Force had two priorities for changes to Convention: 1) to increase opportunities for interesting dialog among scientists, and 2) to create and enhance programming that includes and highlights early career scientists and scientists from diverse populations. These proposed changes take advantage of the four unique opportunities Convention can provide to scientists outlined above, and, if successful, will change what convention *is* for scientists.

Proposal 1. Provide opportunities for professional development as a 21st century psychologists.

APA Convention is in the unique position to provide professional development at all levels. The Task Force recommends emphasizing this aspect of Convention. For example, programming relevant to the *practice* of science—such as best practice for working with Institutional Review Boards, specialized statistical analysis, strategies for multidisciplinary work—would be attractive to scientists. Such programming might be in the form of symposia followed by discussion or break out groups sponsored by several divisions, ½- or full-day workshops provided for CEU credit, or a plenary speaker followed by a roundtable discussion.

Special emphasis should be placed on programming to enhance opportunities to mentor and be mentored. Such programming might be in the form of student paper presentations, “data blitz” sessions highlighting early career scientists, or workshops on professional issues (like those sponsored by the Science Directorate as *Academic Career Workshops* given by Dr. Emmanuel Donchin, of the University of Illinois, in previous years).

Finally, programming that provides opportunities for professional development as scientists also provide opportunities to build a more diverse science community. One of the advantages to a general meeting like APA is that scientists are exposed to new areas of science or areas that they do not ordinarily have contact with (indeed, in our informal survey of scientists, this was one of the main benefits scientists see for Convention).

Proposal 2. Implement innovative programming formats

The priorities described here will not be well served by traditional symposia and panels of talks. Instead, these priorities will best be met with innovative programming formats. An important goal is to increase opportunities for *dialog* among scientists. The Task Force discussed several possibilities. For example, scheduled lectures or symposia can be immediately followed by break out groups or discussion sessions. Multiple workshops on a topic can be scheduled back-to-back, for example, an introduction to a statistical method in the morning immediately followed by a more advanced tutorial in the afternoon, which would allow scientists to attend some portion or all of the workshop. Many topics could be the focus of discussion and conversation hours, perhaps following a plenary talk.

The Task Force was particularly concerned in changing the Poster Sessions to make them attractive and to increase their status. The current format does not allow for the kind of dialog that is typical of poster sessions at most scientific meetings—the perception is that they are low-quality and presented by graduate students. Moreover, because the deadline for submission is

early December for an August meeting, scientists do not have the opportunity to present their latest, most exciting findings at APA Convention.

The Task Force had several recommendations for how Poster Sessions could be more attractive and innovative. One recommendation by the Task Force is to have a special poster session (or two) for “late-breaking” findings. Poster sessions would be more attractive to scientists if they highlighted the latest, most exciting findings from labs. These poster sessions would have very late deadlines, ideally within the last weeks before Convention (this may require a separate program for these presentations). This poster session should be scheduled when no other programming was scheduled, e.g., after the regular programming of the day for an hour (with refreshments). The impression was that such poster sessions would be seen as higher status, of broader interest, and would be better attended than poster sessions currently are. Other possibilities are (1) grant some honorary title to a proportion of posters that present significant research by senior scholars (perhaps have a poster session highlighting these “distinguished” posters), (2) publish electronic conference proceedings of short reports (e.g., 6 pages—the Cognitive Science Society has a good model) of posters presented at Convention (only peer-reviewed posters would be eligible), or (3) including poster symposia or invited poster sessions that would signal greater attention and value bestowed upon poster presentations. The point is that changes to some (or all) poster sessions must be made to make them showcases of science of interest to other scientists.

Proposal 3: Organize programming around integrative topics

In order to facilitate dialog across subdisciplines of psychological science, the Task Force recommends that programming across divisions, directorates, etc., be organized around integrative topics—these topics may be directly relevant to several different non-practice subgroups of APA, the translation of basic science to practice, or to different aspects of practice. Because the Task Force believes that these topics will be most effective if they are identified and communicated early in the planning of the program, we recommend that the Division Presidents-elect develop the integrative topics that will be the focus of Convention programming during their Division Leadership Conference meeting in January for the meeting to be held when they are president (i.e., 18 months later). At this meeting, Presidents-elect also should talk about co-sponsoring events, which then would be communicated to division program chairs. These themes would be part of the call for papers in July, communicated to the central programming group and the divisions. The integrative topics should be informed by the APA President Elect’s initiatives, if they are sufficiently developed.

Involving the Presidents-elect of the divisions at this stage of programming is important because it gets them “on board” for the goals of the program. The involvement of the Presidents-elect will help to eliminate tension between the Division Program Chairs’ efforts to coordinate programming around integrative themes and the Division President’s desires for certain kinds of programming. By having the Presidents-elect discuss and choose the themes, these two sources of input for the Division Program Chairs will be in alignment.

Importantly, the Task Force is not suggesting that using these integrative themes be mandatory for Program Chairs and Presidents. Divisions should retain the freedom to select the level of

involvement in integrative topic programming that works best for their division. This includes the option to completely opt out if the integrative topics do not appeal to the division and would detract from the division's programming. However, by involving divisional presidents in the decisions about the integrative themes, making the themes known early in the process, and providing support for programming around those themes (see Proposal 4), the Task Force hopes that most divisions will find that the integrative themes help them develop exciting programming most years.

Proposal 4. Revise the “nuts and bolts” of APA Convention program planning to facilitate collaborative programming

The Task Force identified significant barriers to collaborative programming in the current system. The perception of the Task Force was that these barriers make it difficult for Divisional Program Chairs to develop exciting programs that appeals to scientists. In addition, when program chairs are planning their programming, currently they have little information about other aspects of Convention that might help them attract high quality speakers of broad interest. The Task Force recommends changes to the structure of programming. Regardless of other changes made to Convention, these changes in how the program is planned should increase the amount of good programming that is coordinated across divisions. The Task Force's (non-exhaustive) list of recommended changes are:

- a) Use the Program Chair meeting at Convention to more effectively plan convention. This meeting should be required of all chairs. During this meeting, program chairs should be given time to discuss possible co-sponsoring and coordinated programming.
- b) Provide better technical support for coordination among program chairs.
 - A Wiki could serve to facilitate coordination among program chairs. The advantage to a Wiki over a listserve is that it is flexible—there can be different areas for different aspects of the programming, blogs, message posting, etc.
 - A real-time calendaring system would allow program chairs to post proposed programming so that other program chairs could see it and identify conflicts and coordinate programming. For example, many calendaring programs allow for several calendars to be viewed at once—program chairs could select a subset of the divisions to view at one time to coordinate and identify overlap or conflict. This would also help APA staff in planning the program because conflicts would be identified and eliminated in advance.
- c) Make information about the plenary speakers available well in advance of program deadline. One or more of the following suggestions would help:
 - Give program chairs later deadline. It is difficult to plan Convention in December because many people are not yet thinking about August.
 - The central programming group of BCA should meet earlier. Program chairs could then know about the plenary speakers before they started planning their programming. Plenary speakers could be used to solicit submissions.
 - Stop printing program book. Printed copies could be available at Convention for those who want it. Most would use the on-line program. Eliminating the printed program would push back when the program is needed by 4 to 6 weeks, allowing the deadlines for programming to be later.

- Increase technical support for APA staff to create the program. For example, APA staff should be given technology that would automatically check whether people had more submissions than allowed—perhaps even during the submission process. This change would not only reduce labor-intensive work by staff, but would mean that the program could be generated in less time, thus pushing deadlines back.
 - Allow Divisions to share programming in units less than a full hour. This would allow two divisions to co-sponsor a 50-minute session, or four divisions to co-sponsor a 110-minute session. The rule against sharing units less than a full hour presents a major obstacle to collaboration between divisions. The changes proposed that would facilitate coordinating of programming and conflicts in submissions would facilitate this option.
 - Review and revise the program topic codes. Updating and revising program topic codes would make the program more effective for scientists. Currently, it is difficult for people to identify the programming that does exist that is of interest to them.
- d) Scientific offerings should be located together in time and space.

It is important to point out that many of these proposals would provide better support for APA staff—thus reducing their burden. For example, providing program chairs with an on-line calendaring system for coordinating programming would eliminate many of the conflicts that APA staff would need to resolve.

Proposal 5. Increase the dialog with the greater community

Because APA is focused on the broad science of psychology, it is uniquely positioned to facilitate dialog with the greater community. Convention can serve this goal in several ways. Task Force developed two suggestions. First, as part of Convention, a “psychological science camp” for children could be offered. This would involve the children of scientists in convention and it would serve the purpose of educating young people about the science of psychology. Second, community outreach programs could be implemented as part of Convention. Each of these recommendations would make Convention generally more appealing, and may attract scientists and their families to attend Convention.

In summary, the Task Force identified several unique contributions that Convention can make to Psychological Science. The problems with Convention may stem primarily from competition with other meetings—both specialized meetings and the other general meeting held in the summer, APS. Ultimately, coordination between APA and APS may be necessary to solve scientists’ dissatisfaction with large general meetings. In the meantime, the Task Force believes that by making changes that highlight and encourage dialog across subareas of psychology, across career stages, and from the science to the broader community, Convention can be more attractive to scientists.