

Curbs, Not Tickets: Conference Planning for Equity

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When Seattle, Washington, set out to reduce traffic-related fatalities by 2030, officials identified speeding as a top priority issue. Rather than crack down hard on offenders, the city used “traffic calming,” a proactive multipronged strategy including steps like reductions in road width and the repositioning of speed limit signs, all to make the overall conditions safer. In other words, instead of issuing speeding tickets, the city created a setting where drivers naturally drove more slowly. These interventions were highly successful, decreasing the number of crashes where speed was a factor and reducing pedestrian fatalities by 55% in one year.¹

While Seattle may never have a year of zero traffic-related incidents or injuries, the city’s actions demonstrate that careful forethought and the identification of potential hazards can lead to substantial improvement for the safety of all. We call this strategy, “curbs, not tickets.”

In March 2023, the American Institute of Mathematics hosted the workshop, “Gender Equity in the Mathematical Study (GEMS) of Combinatorics.” During the problem session of that workshop, which focused on both mathematical problems and problems of gender equity and community, there arose a “meta” question about how to safeguard equity in conference organization. The initial discussions were rooted in questions of gender equity, but issues affecting gender minorities cannot be separated from issues affecting other marginalized identities. As concerns were voiced and experiences shared, a list developed. Checkboxes, if you will, that represent choices for confer-

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1090/noti3092>

https://hria.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/SeattleCaseStudy_120313.pdf

ence organizers to make, or concerns they may need to address. Every decision that goes into the planning of a conference has an impact, even (especially) the decision not to address a certain issue. Many times, when organizers decide not to address an issue, the participants are then forced to do so.

Just as Seattle might still have traffic-related accidents, we recognize that there is no “perfect” conference plan. There will inevitably be choices where each available option presents a difficulty for some constituents. For example, a conference that is scheduled during an academic break might be ideal for some participants because they are not teaching, but it poses a challenge for those participants with children who are out of school. We do not pretend that there is a unicorn conference plan that will be perfect for everyone and to which everyone should aspire. Instead, we hope that conference organizers will consider the impacts of the decisions that they make, and prepare proactively for the needs of their participants: *Curbs, not tickets.*

Inspired by many discussions among participants at GEMS of Combinatorics, we have assembled a dynamic and nonexhaustive list of ways to apply a “curbs, not tickets” strategy to conference organization. Namely, we encourage all organizers to consider, for all aspects of planning a conference, how to create initial conditions under which conference participants are treated equitably, rather than responding to situations as (or after!) they arise.

We challenge the reader with the following questions: If you are organizing a conference, have you considered the issues outlined below? Have you, as an organizer, been deliberate in your choices? As either a participant or an organizer, can you identify any issues we have missed? If so, can you get those ideas into the hands and planning sessions of our broader community so that, together, we can ensure that conferences are what they should be: **positive mathematical gatherings of ideas, perspectives, and people.**

Each topic below includes context, examples to demonstrate its relevance, and a collection of questions meant to aid and guide your planning related to this topic.

Adequate and safe lodging. Conference-provided housing, when it exists, can assume single-gendered room-sharing. Such a setup fails to recognize anything other than cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied participants. This means, for example, that:

- Participants might be placed in rooms together based on erroneous assumptions of gender and comfort.
- A graduate student undergoing chemotherapy and wearing a wig could be forced to expose personal medical information.

Can you provide or recommend housing options that allow for different configurations and needs? Can an organizer be

designated (and publicized as such) to be the point of contact for housing questions and requests?

Local practices, health, and safety. Visitors from other regions might not be familiar with the customs and culture of the conference venue. Similarly, they might not know whom to contact in case of an emergency. This means, for example, that:

- Participants arriving at the conference location could get scammed by a nefarious taxi driver.
- A participant experiencing or witnessing a health crisis might not be able to contact emergency services.

Can you communicate local practices and safety resources to participants in advance of the conference? Can the conference website include information about emergency numbers, financial institutions, pharmacies and walk-in clinics, local transportation services, and other key information? Are you alerting participants to any local health concerns, such as air quality concerns or required/recommended immunizations? Can you supply participants with information about safety resources in addition to law enforcement?

Finances and logistics. High registration fees, high banquet or excursion fees, delayed reimbursements, and locations that are expensive to reach or to spend time in can all be prohibitive to the participation of students, mathematicians from the Global South, and mathematicians from less-funded institutions. Moreover, the timing of a conference invitation or paper acceptance can determine whether or not visa-needing participants can attend. This means, for example, that:

- The conference banquet could be a gathering of faculty from wealthy institutions, rather than a venue for fostering interaction and conversation between mathematicians who might otherwise not have a chance to meet on equal footing.
- Potential participants might not have sufficient time, or funds, to obtain visas.

Can registration fees be adjustable along more dimensions than seniority and timing of registration? Can reimbursements be distributed promptly? Can you book participants' flights or accommodations directly, so that individuals do not hold the debt while awaiting reimbursement? Can the conference banquet and excursion be chosen with accessibility (of cost, food options, and physical access) in mind? Can an organizer be designated (and publicized as such) to be the point of contact for visa support? Can that person be prepared to advocate, perhaps calling embassies, on behalf of participants in need of visas?

Caregiving responsibilities. Conferences that do not offer support for needs like childcare, multi-bed accommodations, and private space to nurse a baby, can force some potential participants to choose between their careers and the needs of those in their care. This means, for example, that:

- A participant could be forced to pump breast milk while hovering over the toilet in a public bathroom.
- A participant who must travel with their children (for example, some single parents) might decline to participate in the conference if they are unaware of any childcare resources at the event location.

Can local caregivers be provided or recommended to participants? Can multiple housing configurations be available? Can family-friendly activities be included in the conference's "local information?" Can a private space be made available for participants who are nursing or pumping breast milk?

Accessibility. The accessibility of the conference for all participants can depend on the nature of the physical space, as well as on attributes like sound projection and visibility. Decisions made about what food options to include and exclude at a conference can entirely or partially preclude participation at a conference by individuals with allergies or dietary restrictions. This means, for example, that:

- A color-blind participant might not see details of slides that had not been reviewed using a color-blindness simulator.
- A participant with celiac disease, or following a kosher or halal diet, may not be able to eat breakfast or lunch if they wish to attend talks during a conference.

Can you encourage all presenters to consider the accessibility of their content? Can you ensure that the physical spaces utilized during the conference are accessible to all participants? Do your conference flyers have Alt Text? Can you provide a mechanism by which participants can alert organizers to accommodations that they might require? Can you ask participants if there are accommodations that would make it easier for them to participate? Can you accommodate people with dietary restrictions in spaces where you are serving food? Can you make food options and water easily accessible to participants throughout the conference?

This issue is not isolated to in-person conferences. The registration form for an online "arXiv Accessibility Forum" hosted in April 2023 included an attempt to address this issue: "We are working to make this Zoom-based forum as inclusive as we can. So far we plan to have ASL interpreters, clear facilitation, and share forum materials in advance. Would anything else help you participate fully? Please let us know."

Personal safety. There are locations where it is dangerous to be a noncisgender or nonheterosexual individual. Similarly, there are locations where women do not have full rights and autonomy. This means, for example, that

- If a pregnant participant were to miscarry and require an abortion, they could be arrested.
- A participant of color might be at risk of harassment in certain locations, or be unwelcome in places outside the conference venue.

Have you considered hosting the conference elsewhere? If that is not possible, or if there are good reasons not to do so, do you have a plan to provide safety information to participants before and during the conference? Are you aware of the resources available in case of an emergency so that participants are safe and free?

A recent example is MathFest, which was held in Tampa, Florida, in August 2023. The complexities of this location choice were frankly discussed in multiple essays in the June/July 2023 MAA Focus.

Bathroom accessibility. There are some locations where a person is legally required to use a bathroom matching the sex assigned to them at birth. Additionally, some participants are not comfortable using restrooms that are designated specifically for “men” or for “women.” Moreover, the accessibility and proximity of bathroom facilities can preclude mathematicians with disabilities from participating in your conference. This means, for example, that:

- For trans participants, going to the bathroom could require a choice that risks their safety or violates local laws.
- A participant with Crohn’s disease might be forced to miss extensive segments of the conference.

Can you ensure that bathrooms are suitable, equally accessible, and convenient to all participants, during all conference activities? Can bathroom locations and accessibility be clearly announced to participants?

Constructive and respectful sessions. The content sessions of a conference should be productive and valuable, but individual behavior can harm this environment. It then falls on the authority figures in the room to protect the climate of the event. Session chairs are often casually invited to serve in their roles and given only basic instructions of what to do—usually limited to informing them to introduce the speaker, watch the clock, and guide the question period. It is rare for session chairs to be advised about how to handle inappropriate interruptions or abusive behavior. Moreover, there are potential power dynamics at play, like situations when the speaker is a senior researcher or when the session chair is a woman or a researcher of color. This means, for example, that:

- A session chair might have no resources for handling a situation in which a particular speaker is interrupted repeatedly and aggressively.
- Resisting a session chair’s hints, a speaker could overrun their allotted time, impacting the time afforded to later speakers.

Can presenters and session chairs be advised about how to address disruptions and harassment, and be supported in doing so? Can you consider power dynamics when choosing session chairs? Can session chairs be instructed to verify the pronunciation of names and the pronouns of the speakers they are introducing?

Welcoming environment. Without clear guidelines about the environment that a conference wants to foster, there is no protection for the most vulnerable in the community. This means, for example, that:

- A participant could be sexually harassed, subjected to derogatory jokes or comments, excluded from discussions, or otherwise discriminated against during the conference, with no resources for support or remedy.
- At a large meeting where job interviews are conducted without any enforced guidelines, an early-career mathematician could be placed in uncomfortable and dangerous situations.

Can the conference include a community agreement, to which all participants commit? Can you set the tone of the conference by focusing on the atmosphere, and not just logistics, in the Welcome Address? Is there historical information related to the location of the conference that should be acknowledged?

Examples include community agreements,² guidelines for respectful group discussions,³ and Indigenous land acknowledgements.⁴

Keeping your promises. Many conferences proudly proclaim, both to the mathematical community and to their funding agencies, that they are a setting for healthy collaboration and the flourishing of mathematical achievements and ideas. This means, for example, that:

- If a participant is unsafe, or if participants are not treated with equal respect, and these situations are tolerated by the conference organizers, then these promises have not been met.

Can a group of organizers be designated (and publicized as such) to be the points of contact for any breaches of the community agreement? Can the conference planning include a procedure for addressing any breaches of this agreement? Can that procedure be followed, if necessary?

Consider appointing “captains” who, much like a captain steers a ship, will steer various efforts, and whose names, contact details, and responsibilities are listed boldly on the conference website and announcements. There might be, for example, a captain for managing visa issues, a captain for addressing housing needs and questions, a captain for handling disability accommodations, etc. It could also be useful to have another team to act as Ombudspeople both before and during the conference. Consider, also, having an anonymous form for submitting concerns that people may not feel comfortable discussing in person; be clear about when these submissions will be reviewed and by whom.

²https://drive.google.com/file/d/1S2mSNcrfLJyqdx4o0aDdP166CB-xTUws/view?usp=share_link

³https://www.emergingsf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/EBMC_Multicultural_Interaction_Agreements_15.09.13-copy.pdf

⁴<https://nativegov.org/news/a-guide-to-indigenous-land-acknowledgment/>

It is our sincere hope that you will assess how your event measures up against these questions, and what, if anything, you will attempt to change as you think about them. There may be situations where compromise will occur, but all choices are decisions that you make—even the ones that feel like inaction.

We urge you to maintain the integrity of these decisions throughout your conference. Empty commitments to equity, diversity, and anti-harassment do only harm. Reflect on what the organizers will do to respond to complaints of harassment if they occur, and make sure that requests for accommodations and support are addressed.

Maintaining a positive environment may seem daunting, but it is much easier if the infrastructure for respectful interactions is established from the start: curbs, not tickets. Begin the conference with a heartfelt Welcome Address where participants are reminded of why they are there: **to develop beautiful mathematics and to make fruitful connections**. Take some time to establish guidelines for respectful interactions and inform participants of avenues for reporting harassment. This can cost ten to fifteen minutes of conference time that could otherwise be used for mathematics, but that investment will be worth it. Participants are free to focus on doing more and better mathematics when they do not have to focus on their safety and well-being.

We acknowledge that this is a living document. There are things that we will have missed, and there are needs that will change. This document has been written at a specific moment in time and reflects the experiences of its authors and the people they have spoken to. In particular, a different list of issues might be relevant five years from now. We hope that the concerns we present now will become as natural to the planning of a conference as checking that there is enough coffee.

Finally, we note that this document does not address the composition of a conference's organizing committee, program committee, or speaker list. We have focused this document on the experience of the full community of participants at a conference, but we certainly believe that these other personnel items require deliberation and assessment. The names on a conference poster are a loud indication of the community that the organizers imagine for their field, and the decisions made there will impact every subsequent aspect of the conference.

Let us all remember what conferences *should* be: **positive mathematical gatherings of a variety of ideas, perspectives, and people**.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. The authors would like to thank Selvi Kara, Dagan Karp, Anastasia Nathanson, Sophie Rehberg, Isabelle Shankar, and many other GEMS participants, as well as Padi Fuster for their thoughtful discussions and input on the issues addressed in this document.

We would also like to thank the organizers of GEMS of Combinatorics, Juliette Bruce, Pamela E. Harris, Isabelle Shankar, Kris Shaw, and Mariel Supina, for providing the space to have these important discussions.



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