

Local Arrangements Committee report (2013-2015) for ISHPSSB 2015



MONTREAL 2015
JULY 5 - JULY 10

By Christophe Malaterre (UQAM) and Frédéric Bouchard (UdeM)

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Members of the 2013-2015 Local Arrangements Committee: Christophe Malaterre (co-chair), Frédéric Bouchard (co-chair), Mathieu Charbonneau, Pierre-Olivier Méthot, Eric Muszynski, Martine Foisy (administrative assistant).

1. General overview of the tasks of the Local Arrangements Committee

The Local Arrangements Committee is in charge of planning, overseeing and implementing all local arrangements needed for the ISHPSSB meeting. More specifically, the 2013-2015 Local Arrangements Committee took care of the following items:

1. Budget, planning and reporting
2. Facilities
3. Catering and social events
4. Caring for special needs
5. Accommodation
6. Information dissemination
7. Program related tasks (in coordination with the Program Committee)
8. Registrations
9. Coordination with the other relevant ISHPSSB committees

2. The 2015 ISHPSSB meeting in Montréal

The 2015 meeting of the International Society for the History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Biology was held in Montréal on the campus of Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) from July 5th to July 10th, 2015. All of the sessions were held in a single building (building DS) except for the plenaries held in an adjacent building. The conference venue was within easy walking distance from most hotels and within easy access to public transport.

Attendance

This was the largest meeting yet with over 640 delegates from 35 countries. About 40% of attendees were students. Over the 6 days, some 530 papers were presented on a broad range of topics related to the philosophy, history and social studies of biology. In addition, two plenary sessions were organized (Sandra Harding and Ford Doolittle). See the report by the Program Committee for more details.

Budget, planning and reporting

Two years ahead of the meeting, we elaborated a preliminary budget that we kept working on and fine-tuned up to the very event. This helped keeping expenses under control while being realistic in terms of revenues. We successfully applied to the Canadian Research Council for event support grants, and were extremely lucky to find numerous and generous partners for the meeting. UQAM (with its Centre interuniversitaire de recherche sur la science et la technologie) was an exemplar host, and many institutions and departments provided the support that made the success of the meeting possible. Notably, most Canadian philosophy departments with a philosophy of biology component provided financial support for the meeting. A full list of our partners can be found [here](#). Tracking real costs and revenues as soon as they were confirmed proved to be very useful, and helped prepare a specific financial report for the Society's council shortly after the meeting. We also oversaw contractual and legal requirements (in particular between UQAM and ISHPSSB with regards to financial risk and liabilities, but also with suppliers such as caterers). The overall 2-year planning that we had put together for the event proved to be of great help in coordinating the different stakeholders and ensuring that the key tasks be realized on-time. Note that the tasks of the Local Arrangements Committee do not stop when the meeting is over but also include reports to funding agencies and to ISHPSSB.

Facilities

The Local Arrangements Committee oversaw the booking of the required number of conference rooms and auditoriums for the different parallel sessions (approx. 10 rooms with a capacity of 50, 4 rooms with a capacity of 70, and 4 auditoriums with capacities ranging from 90 to 220), the plenaries (2x, large auditorium with a capacity of 730), the council meetings (1 conference room), different committee meetings (incl. Membership diversity meeting, Student general meeting, Early career scholar mentoring lunch), and the Welcome event and the Society's General assembly (both in the large auditorium). We also organized a book display attended by 5 editors and UQAM bookshop. In addition, we coordinated with UQAM audiovisual and IT services to insure the availability of proper audiovisual equipment in all conference rooms and the availability of wifi for all participants. Taking care of the facilities also included insuring on-site security (with UQAM police), implementing signage across campus, and offering guidance and support throughout the event thanks to our "blue-T-shirt" team.

Catering and social events

In addition to the academic meetings, we specifically organized four evening social events. Three of them were free for all participants (the "Welcome cocktail", the "Poster session and cocktail" as well as the "Pub Night" during which was awarded the "Montréal best poster prize"). One evening social event demanded purchased tickets (the Dining Buffet/Banquet at the Salon Urbain, Place des Arts). All attempts were made to keep the price of the Dining Buffet as low as possible: we are happy to report that this increased student participation to this event (145 students out of a total of 325 banquet participants, i.e. 45%). Photo albums of these events can be found on Facebook [here](#),

[here](#) and [here](#). Other catering arrangements were made to facilitate Council Meetings as well as the student meetings during the lunch breaks. We also provided coffee breaks throughout the meeting. Excursions (some of them open to the public in both English and French, some of them free of charge) were also provided (see [here](#) on the ISHPSSB 2015 website)

Caring for special needs

A certain number of participants require special attention. This is the case for mothers with young infants (technically, this could be the case for fathers as well, though none happened to come to us with any specific request this time). We thus offered a quiet room (in particular for breast-feeding) that was easily accessible during the meeting. We also provided information for daycare/babysitting options (relevant for approx. 12 participants). Another important point is to insure that the site is accessible for disabled persons and in particular wheelchairs. Finally, during the registration process, we asked whether participants add any specific dietary requirements, and we checked for allergies as well. This has helped us insure the availability of vegan plates at all social events (approx. 25) and of vegetarian meals (about 25% of total attendees).

Accommodation

Well ahead of time, we mapped the hotel offering nearby the conference venue, visited them and selected a few with which we negotiated early discount rates. We also insured the availability of affordable rooms in UQAM student residencies. We channeled accommodation information to participants very early on through the conference website (see [here](#)) and let participants directly book for themselves.

Information dissemination

One of the most important tasks of the Local Arrangements Committee is channeling information to participants. In this respect, putting together a well-functioning website is key. We defined the visual identity and coordinated the development of the conference website, as well as its regular evolutions and updates, with UQAM audiovisual services (the website started online some 20 months before the event). This enabled us to offer information about travel, customs, local transportation, restaurants etc. very early on, as well as during the event itself. Therefore all of the information for the meeting (from submission to updates during the meeting) was provided on our main website <http://ishpssb2015.uqam.ca/> (with mobile version). In addition, we oversaw the development of a specific newsletter platform that enabled us to send specific information and updates to participants (in addition to the regular ISHPSSB newsletters). We also worked with UQAM press services to elaborate press releases and implemented communication through social media ([Facebook](#) page and [Twitter](#) account).

Program related tasks (in coordination with the Program Committee)

The duties of the Local Arrangements Committee are, in many respects, very closely related to those of the Program Committee, and precise coordination is needed on a number of key matters. In particular, we carried out the following tasks: defining the overall schedule of the event (see [here](#)); sending the call-for-abstracts worldwide; overseeing the development -by UQAM audiovisual services- of the online submission platform, abstracts evaluation platform and of the programming platform (used by the Program Committee to assign talks to sessions and prepare the raw data for the meeting program); overseeing the development -by UQAM audiovisual services- of the final online program interface (both for regular web browsers and mobile browsers, with search features – see [here](#)); coordinating the assignment of rooms for sessions; designing,

preparing and printing the program booklet (including proof-reading and formatting the data entered by participants on the online platform) as well as the book of abstracts (which we chose to charge at a cost of \$10 so as to reduce paper consumption – 160 such books were ordered in total); insuring the availability of these documents online in pdf versions; tracking last minute changes (printing a last-minute-change addendum to the program; communicating last minute changes at the registration desk and via the social media).

Registrations

It is a specific task of the Local Arrangements Committee to handle registrations. This includes defining the registration fees (students/regular/non-member, early-bird/late, to which we added a reduced “visitor” fee to encourage local participation to the event), as well as overseeing the development -by UQAM audiovisual services- of the online registration and payment platform. We were careful to track registrations regularly as well as payments. One tricking point is to check ISH membership status by comparing registrations with the list of ISH members (provided by the Society's Secretary). The Local Arrangements Committee also has the responsibility of organizing the registration desk during the event and of preparing the conference package/bag (including name-tags, pens, program booklet, book of abstracts, T-shirts for those who had pre-ordered such items, and give-aways).

Coordination with the other relevant ISHPSSB committees

While preparing for the event, we regularly communicated with the different ISH committees, in particular: with the Executive Committee for budget and legal aspects, for the organizing of the Welcome event and of the society's General Meeting; with the Student Committee for the organization of the Graduate Student General Meeting and the Early Scholar Mentoring Lunch; with the Travel Support Committee for channeling information about student travel grants; with the David Hull Prize Committee, the Marjorie Grene Prize Committee and the Werner Callebaut Prize Committee for channeling information about the prizes and collecting donations (through the online registration platform).

3. Challenges and recommendations

a. Organizing such an event is a very heavy time commitment. It is important to make sure that proper resources are identified very early on (in our case a post-doc fellow, a doctoral student, and an administrative assistant, in addition to the two co-chairs). It is also important to agree on an equitable sharing of tasks very early on in the process, though it is unavoidable that a lot of the workload will in the end fall on the shoulders of the host, in particular due to the need to coordinate the different on-site stakeholders (IT, audiovisual, communication, catering, facilities, security, accounting, legal etc.). In any case, we can only encourage thorough planning activities, regular team meetings, and regular involvement of the different ISH committees.

b. The expectations of most conference goers for flexible and powerful submission and program platforms, and from program committees for a powerful scheduling platform have increased markedly in the last few years. In our case, all the platforms were developed by UQAM audiovisual services, under our direct supervision. A LOT of time and attention were spent with the platform developers for the submission platform (visible

for conference attendees) and the program backend (visible to the program committee). In addition to the development of a scheduling module, searchable online program was developed, as well as an online version. We cannot emphasize enough how much effort and consideration needs to be taken with regard to the development of the digital platforms. There are no easy cheap fix for these issues: one way or another someone will have to spend a lot of time (and money) handling the information involved in over 500 submissions, over 600 attendees (e.g. who bought a T-Shirt? What size? Are they presenting? What information should be included on the nametag? Etc), in a complex multiple-concurrent sessions schedule with last minutes cancelations and room changes... We advise all future local organizers and council to think about the IT needs as quickly as possible.

c. Related to this challenge is the division of labor between Local Arrangements Committee and Program Committee. In our case the Local Arrangements Committee took it upon itself to work on the development of the submission platform (this simplified the elaboration of the final printed program and its online accessibility). And yet the submission platform interacts with Program Committee's responsibilities (e.g. what categories/themes should the submission be filed under? which information should be requested from the participants?). Even with the best intentions and the most professional and cordial working relationship, the division of labor between the Program Committee and Local Arrangements Committee (or whoever is in charge of the IT development) is not always clear cut. In our case, we were working over skype conferences over 2 or 3 timezones, non-overlapping schedule availabilities, and with tight development deadlines. The council or the organizing committees should think about how to better coordinate or divide tasks in an efficient manner. We wish to thank the Program Committee for their time and effort: in the end we all came up with a great program on an easy-to-use platform. However, we do think some optimization is possible here (e.g. would it be a good idea for local and program committee to work from the same city?).

d. The council must be very clear about its budgetary expectations with local organizers. The Montréal Local Arrangements Committee achieved high revenue, many free social events, low registration fees, thanks to the very generous support of our numerous partners and the grants we managed to get. We worked hard to find these revenue streams, but we were also lucky that our partners were able to provide such generous support. The council needs to both provide guidance on its priorities (is it higher revenue or lower registration fees?) and allow for leeway for the local organizers to organize a pleasant meeting under the (very) local constraints they will work under.

4. Conclusion

The feedback survey that we had organized -as well as personal communications, tweets and Facebook comments- indicated an overall great satisfaction rate with regards to the local organization and hosting of the event. We are obviously very pleased with such outcome and wish to thank all the members of our team, the council, and our partners for their help and support.

