

From the President

Stan Dosso



Acoustical Society of America Conferences: Thoughts and Plans

Shortly after I became Acoustical Society of America (ASA) president at the end of the Chicago ASA meeting, *Acoustics Today* (AT) Editor Arthur Popper invited me to continue the presidential tradition of writing a “From the President” column for each issue of AT during my term as a way of communicating regularly with the ASA membership on topics of choice. I’m pleased to do so! For my first column, I’d like to consider one of the ASA’s most important activities: our twice yearly conferences, including their value and benefits to members, challenges we face, and ongoing/future plans. But first, let me briefly introduce myself because I personally know only a fraction of the ASA membership, although I hope to get to know many more members during my term.

I was born and raised in beautiful Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, and attended the University of Victoria and University of British Columbia for undergraduate and graduate degrees in physics, applied mathematics, and geophysics. During my BSc degree, I spent a summer work term in underwater acoustics at the Defence Research Establishment Pacific (DREP) working with Ross Chapman, who went on to be a mentor to me throughout my career. Because of this experience, when I completed my PhD in geoelectromagnetic induction, I was offered a research position at DREP in Arctic Ocean acoustics, including yearly multiweek fieldwork based in tent camps on the polar ice pack, adventures that I loved. After five years at DREP, I moved to an Ocean Acoustics Research Chair in the School of Earth and Ocean Sciences, University of Victoria, where I’ve remained to the present, including a six-year term as director of the School. I teach geophysics-related courses at the undergraduate level and ocean acoustics and inverse theory at the graduate level and run an active research program in geophysical inversion, with primary applications in ocean acoustics, geoacoustics, and seismology.

I’ve been an ASA member for almost 30 years and a Fellow since 2001. I’m a member of the Acoustical Oceanography

and Underwater Acoustics Technical Committees (TCs), with strong interests also in Signal Processing, Computational Acoustics, and Animal Bioacoustics. I’ve been a longtime associate editor (underwater sound) for *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, served on/chaired several ASA committees, and been one of three co-organizers for the biennial ASA School (interacting with keen acoustics students there is a particular joy). I chaired the fall 2018 ASA Conference in Victoria and enjoyed welcoming the Society to my hometown. I served as ASA vice president (VP-elect, VP, past VP) from 2019 to 2022 and was then elected president, with my year in office starting in May 2023. I’ve also been a longtime member of the Canadian Acoustical Association (CAA), served as CAA president, and chaired three CAA conferences (two in Victoria, one in Banff).

My wife Shelley and I have three sons, two of whom live in Victoria. We enjoy traveling when time allows, often associated with national/international conferences. A highlight for us last year was walking the 800-km historic Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in northern Spain.

Getting back to the main subject of this column, a first question could be, Why are ASA conferences important to members? Perhaps most obviously, conferences provide a prime opportunity to share your work with an audience of peers and represent an effective way to get both your work and you known more broadly in your field. And questions and feedback at your presentation can help make your work stronger, more relevant, and more accessible. This is, of course, a two-way street, as attending others’ presentations exposes you to concepts and applications that can generate new ideas for your own work and also help you to keep up-to-date with general advances and evolving trends in your field.

Outside the technical sessions, conferences provide the opportunity to meet with colleagues, old and new, to engage in deeper discussions and exchange of ideas, and to develop your scientific networks. The social aspects of making new acquaintances, staying in touch with colleagues, and developing collaborations and friendships

are invaluable and often deeply satisfying. Conferences can also provide opportunities to meet in person with sponsors, industry/business contacts, and potential graduate students, academic supervisors, or employers whom you might not otherwise see.

I remember being told early in my career that although the value of attending a single, specific conference could be debatable, relative to the cost and effort involved, the value of regular conference attendance over a career is profound, and I fully agree.

Conference attendance can be particularly important for students and early-career researchers in terms of developing communication and social skills, meeting other researchers, and gaining visibility in their field. However, attending a conference for the first time can be intimidating! The ASA tries to provide a positive, welcoming conference experience with a variety of programs, including Student and First-Time Attendee Orientation Sessions on the first conference day, Student Meet and Greet Receptions, and the Fellows Meet Students for Lunch program. Furthermore, the ASA School, a 2+ day event for students and early-career acousticians held in conjunction with spring ASA meetings in even-numbered years, is designed not only for academic content but also to introduce participants to ASA meetings and to help create a sense of community and belonging among young attendees. Many TCs offer Student and/or Young Investigator Presentation Awards to encourage and recognize high-quality work (and provide a valuable distinction on CVs). Recognizing that financial cost can be a barrier for attendance, the ASA offers Student Transportation Subsidies and Young Investigator Travel Grants and helps organize room-sharing arrangements.

However, it is important to recognize that, besides students, there are many other ASA members for whom attending conferences is difficult or impossible for a variety of reasons, including costs, family care, or other commitments that don't allow travel and that these often disproportionately affect already disadvantaged groups. Broadly speaking, the ASA has about 6,000 members, but only 1,000 or so attend each meeting. Although a precise breakdown is not available, from experience it's apparent that there is a subset of ASA members who attend conferences regularly, whereas many others attend rarely or not at all. Whether this is due to costs, inability to travel, or lack of interest, we would like

to reduce barriers to attendance and increase the perceived value of our meetings, increasing participation and diversity.

A particular challenge here is that costs associated with all aspects of conference attendance have increased substantially compared with prepandemic times. In particular, average business-class hotel rates are reported to have increased by roughly 20% in North America and 30% in Europe, and airfares have increased by a similar amount, with the environmental cost (carbon footprint) of conference air travel also of increasing concern. (I recently heard from a European colleague whose university no longer allows conference travel outside their continent due to environmental cost.) Furthermore, the costs associated with running a conference (e.g., meeting room rental, food and beverage expenses, A/V contracts) increased by about 30% in 2022 relative to prepandemic times, with another 7% increase predicted for 2023. Although the ASA has gradually increased meeting registration fees in recent years, these fees have not kept pace with rising meeting costs, such that the ASA has run substantial deficits in putting on meetings for a number of years. While these deficits are presently supported through reserves, this cannot continue indefinitely, and approaches to decrease conference costs and increase revenues are being actively investigated and implemented.

To address many of the points above, the Meetings Reimagined Committee chaired by Scott Sommerfeldt was convened in April 2021 and met biweekly until June 2022. It was tasked to review all aspects of ASA meetings and provide recommendations to the Executive Council. In approaching this task, the Committee considered the following guidelines and goals:

- (1) Recommended changes should not detract from the positive "feel" (sense of community) that exists at ASA meetings.
- (2) To identify possible new ways of doing things to increase enthusiasm and/or lead to improved efficiencies in holding meetings.
- (3) To reduce the "clutter" (overprogramming) often associated with meetings, in particular, to free up evenings and lunch hours where possible to provide attendees more discretionary/social time.
- (4) To structure meetings to be as accessible as possible to a broad and diverse constituency of members.
- (5) To work toward eliminating, or at least greatly reducing, the financial deficits associated with

meetings. However, in addressing this, items 1-4 must remain at the forefront of all considerations.

The Meetings Reimagined Committee made many recommendations, big and small, that are under consideration. Some that are planned to be implemented within the next few meetings include moving from Tuesday and Thursday evening social (buffet) events to a single social to be held on Wednesday, the peak conference attendance day. In this plan, Wednesday afternoon would become the ASA's signature "celebration" event, starting with a keynote speaker, followed by the ASA Plenary/Awards Session, the social, and, later in the evening, the ASA Jam. The majority of TC meetings that are held on Tuesday and Wednesday could then be scheduled in the late afternoon, immediately after the last session of the day, rather than reconvening midevening; this would provide attendees with a free evening to make dinner or other plans with colleagues after the TC meeting.

Many academic/professional societies are considering how to best approach conferences in the post-Covid world, given experience gained and technologies developed during the pandemic. In such considerations, the Meetings Reimagined Committee recommended against holding hybrid ASA meetings (meetings that combine in-person and virtual participation), because of much higher costs, complexity, and potential for technical problems. But the Committee did recommend considering occasionally holding virtual (fully online) meetings. Of course, the ASA ran two virtual meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, those were emergency replacements for in-person meetings cancelled at late stages. The idea here is to evaluate the pros and cons of a virtual meeting planned well in advance to take best advantage of the rapidly developing virtual format. In fact, the ASA is planning a trial virtual meeting for fall 2024 (three years after the last Covid-related virtual meeting). The goals of this meeting are to:

- Improve accessibility for the many members who are unable to attend in-person meetings;
- Prioritize opportunities for students and early-career acousticians to showcase their work;
- Expand our reach broadly to nonmembers who may be interested in acoustics;
- Design innovative sessions and social interactions that take best advantage of the virtual format, such as lightning rounds, panel discussions, tutorials, games/

contests, and virtual lab tours as well as more-traditional presentations with live Q&A; and

- Decrease travel/conference costs and environmental impact (for both attendees and the ASA).

The actual composition of sessions at the virtual meeting will be up to the TCs, so please get involved and be imaginative!

But before this virtual meeting, we have two exciting "regular" ASA conferences.

- December 2023, in Sydney, Australia (joint with the Australian Acoustical Society), to be held in the state-of-the-art International Convention Centre on spectacular Sydney Harbour (with 100 special \$1,000 grants for student travel).
- May 2024, in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada (joint with the Canadian Acoustical Association), to be held during the Ottawa Tulip Festival, the world's largest such event (a post-World War II thank you gift from the Netherlands to Canada).

These are a few of the benefits and ongoing issues, challenges, and plans associated with ASA conferences, a vitally important component of the Society's mission. I'd welcome any ideas or feedback. Send them to sdosso@uvic.ca.

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