

Paying for Section meeting space?

Results of a survey of MAA Section Chairs, Fall 2015

At the Section Officers Meeting at MathFest 2015, a member brought up the issue of the increasingly common practice of academic institutions' charging Sections for meetings held on their campuses. We promised to collect some data and ask Section officers for advice in dealing with this problem.

13 of the 29 Sections responded to a survey sent to Section Chairs in late fall 2015.

Roughly half of those responding (6 of those 13 Sections) indicated that they had paid fees or reimbursed institutions for expenses:

- Use of facility charges for a conference center at a university
- Room rental fees, custodial fees, a police officer (because cash was exchanged at registration)
- Room rental, technology
- Usually it is the public institutions that charge a fee, for room usage and sometimes a registration fee
- Parking, safety, signage

The amounts varied widely:

- In most cases a nominal charge, about \$100.
- At one college, a hefty fee, about \$15 per person attending (with no advance notice)
- About \$3500 (catering and facility fees)
- \$2350
- \$1000
- 7% of registration fees
- \$1200
- The amount it costs an institution to host a meeting, and the amount they are willing to absorb, varies. Our Section reimburses the host institution for expenses, as necessary.

Several Sections reported that institutions had charged fees, but the Section ended up not paying them:

- My institution attempted to charge a \$1000 fee to use our convention facilities. I worked with my Provost to have the fee removed.
- We received a proposal for over \$22,000 for hosting a meeting – so we are not going there!
- We've had to negotiate fees down to zero; it was not easy to do. The institution originally wanted \$2000 in room rental fees. We got it waived because a past chair of our Section works in the Academic Affairs office of the institution.
- My dean paid the fees for us out of some internal budget, so the Section did not have to pay.
- The local organizer was able to convince the university that it was a very uncommon practice to charge for classroom use. The university eventually dropped the request for fees.

There are some good strategies listed in those comments, and also in the advice Sections offered to others:

- Convincing institutions that MAA Sections don't have much money to spend on such fees is often beneficial.
- Let the Math Department say they are reserving the room for themselves (rather than for an outside organization).
- Make it clear to institutions hosting the meeting that you are indeed non-profit and your membership will cover any reasonable fees, but to ask the Section to help with the college's financial situation is beyond the call of duty.
- Often if the subject comes up, someone in the host's Dean's office will work to waive or at least reduce the charges.
- We ask for a letter of recommendation from the institution before agreeing to let them host, and ask them to discuss what funding they will offer and what they will offer in terms of space, technology, etc. Many have offered over \$5000 (sometimes by way of a Speaker's Fund they have, some from the Dean's office). One community college gave \$9000!
- We have tried to negotiate fees to negotiate away such fees **before** we actually scheduled the dates and locations of meetings. That strategy has worked pretty well. Many administrators like the visibility that comes from hosting such meetings, so they are willing to negotiate. *But you have to talk to the right person.* On our campus, negotiating with conference services is hopeless – they want to make money from every group that meets on campus. But my dean saw the value in hosting the meeting and was annoyed that conference services would charge room fees on a weekend for an academic conference, so she made it work.
- Try to get local minigrants to defray the cost.
- Ensure that fees are discussed with the college when the initial meeting day is set. Often, we have faculty willing to host the meeting, and they agree, but they haven't thought about the many ways we can be charged fees.
- Meet using classroom space whenever possible. Keep refreshments offered to a minimum.
- In our Section, the host institution incurs the expenses of the meeting. Those can be offset somewhat by offering exhibitor space and choosing the price of meals appropriately. Some smaller institutions have had trouble finding space for our large banquet and lectures. We have used an off-campus university-affiliated venue, but the host institution paid for it.
- We have some clearly stated policies for our host institutions about what we will do and what we expect them to do. It is possible that some of those institutions have made arrangements with the departments hosting us, but the Section has not been asked to pay.