

MAKING A MEETING OF MINDS: REFLECTIONS ON THE ORGANIZATION OF THE 2005 GOLDSCHMIDT CONFERENCE

The 15th Annual V.M. Goldschmidt Conference is now in the history books. Enough people have told us that it was a successful conference that we are starting to believe it! Now that the excitement has waned, we have had an opportunity to reflect on the entire four-year process, from conception of the idea during the Hot Springs meeting, to making a proposal to the Geochemical Society at the Davos meeting, to finalizing a \$1.2 million budget after the conference. We would like to share some of our thoughts with the readers of *Elements*.

The most profound question that we face is this: what are the most appropriate criteria for evaluating the success of a Goldschmidt Conference? Is a successful meeting one that draws large numbers of attendees (especially compared to Goldschmidts past) and makes a lot of money (or at least does not lose money)? Is it most important that the quality of the science be excellent, or that the meeting be well organized? Without anticipating much debate on this point, we argue that scientific quality and organization must remain the main objectives of any Goldschmidt Conference. Of course, it is important not to *lose* money, but we do not believe that the conferences should be major money-making operations. Instead, their main contribution to the sponsoring societies should be increasing visibility, prestige, and membership.

One trend that disturbs us is the increasing tendency to measure Goldschmidt success primarily by the number of attendees. We succumbed to this perceived pressure and made strong efforts towards breaking attendance records at the Moscow meeting. There is, however, a price to pay for ever-growing increases in the number of participants. First, it becomes more and more difficult to hold large conferences at universities or in quaint tourist spots. Consequently, increased size may constrain future conferences to be held in large convention centers in big cities. Some Goldschmidt Conferences should certainly be held in urban areas, and we applaud the selection of Melbourne for Goldschmidt in 2006. However, much of the charm of past meetings owes to their location in small, but interesting, corners of the globe, such as Davos, Hot Springs, Tucson, and Toulouse, and we were happy to add Moscow to this list.

Large numbers of participants also reduce the intimacy and collegiality that once was the hallmark of the Goldschmidt Conference. It is more difficult to find old friends both during the day and, more importantly, at dinner and social events in the evening. Many of the attendees at the Moscow meeting commented that having meals under one roof was one of the most appealing elements of the conference. This allowed for much greater interaction than typically is possible in other venues. It would be a shame if the Goldschmidt Conference were to evolve into just another large-scale meeting comparable to those sponsored by EGU, GSA, or AGU, and yet this appears to be the trend. We don't pretend to know what the optimal size is for Goldschmidt Conferences, since this may vary as a function of the site. We do feel strongly that increasingly greater attendance should not be the dominant criterion by which Goldschmidt Conferences are judged, and that the boards of the Geochemical Society and the European Association for Geochemistry should make the size of future conferences a topic of continued discussion.

Secondly, we argue that the successes of recent Goldschmidt Conferences in Hot Springs, Kurashiki, Copenhagen, and Idaho demonstrate that the main ingredient to ensure a successful conference is not the locale or perceived prestige of the hosting institution. What really matters is the selection of conveners who are willing to put in an almost unimaginable amount of work. When conveners have the right level of dedication, even locales that are off the beaten track can be quite well attended. Although many Europeans and North Americans did not make it to Kurashiki in 2003, that conference brought in a large number

EDITOR'S NOTE: In light of the fantastic success of the recent Goldschmidt Conference in Idaho, I invited the organizers of the meeting, Scott Wood and Mickey Gunter, to offer their perspective on the difficulties and triumphs of their experience.—Peter J. Heaney



Mickey Gunter (left) and Scott Wood, basking in the glow of the praise they received.

“...When conveners have the right level of dedication, even locales that are off the beaten track can be quite well attended.”

of Asian delegates who had never previously attended a Goldschmidt Conference. Similarly, the Idaho meeting drew proportionately fewer Europeans and Asians, but attracted large numbers of North Americans. Since the only prior Goldschmidt Conference held in the western US was located in Tucson in 1997, there was a lot of pent-up demand. If one of the goals of Goldschmidt Conferences is to increase membership in the societies and the visibility of geochemistry, then the meeting should continue to be held in places outside of “mainstream” Europe and North America.

Finally, we offer some advice to all the would-be conference organizers out there. Some of you may have considered putting in a bid for a conference but have hesitated, wondering if the work involved is worth it. For us, it truly was worth it, and quite possibly was the highlight of our academic careers! The satisfaction of watching hundreds of people recognize the quality of one's university and community is impossible to put into words. As people started to file into the conference the first day, and their enjoyment became apparent, our anxiety melted into excitement and elation. This was reward enough for all our hard work and worry over the previous four years! An important outcome of our efforts was a deeper appreciation of working scientists who volunteer to organize meetings and provide voluntary services to our societies. Just as the peer-review system would fail if all did not participate, service to societies, including the organization of meetings, is the duty of those who reap the benefits.

In closing, we would like to thank the Geochemical Society and the European Association of Geochemistry for the opportunity to organize a Goldschmidt Conference in Idaho. We are also grateful to Dennis Geist, our department chair, for his support as we organized the meeting, and for his comments on this piece, which improved it considerably.

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