

August 8, 2012

Marie Davidian
William Neal Reynolds Professor
Department of Statistics, Box 8203
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, NC 27695-8203
davidian@stat.ncsu.edu

Dear ASA President-Elect Marie Davidian,

Given your upcoming initiative as ASA President to improve the Joint Statistical Meetings (JSM), we have created the Informal Committee of Junior Statisticians to jointly sign the following suggestions and recommendations.

Decrease the number of contributed sessions. The sheer volume of contributed sessions creates several issues. 1) The large number of contributed sessions reduces attendance in the invited and topic-contributed sessions, which are generally of higher quality. 2) The contributed sessions are often lightly attended since disparate topics are frequently presented in the same session and presentation quality varies. 3) Speakers in contributed sessions generally encounter fewer questions and little discussion given the heterogeneous topics and sparse attendance. 4) The crowded program is a barrier to meaningful discussions between researchers as they rush from session to session. These interactions are especially crucial for junior statisticians, as they need time to cultivate new research opportunities.

For example, at JSM 2012 on Monday, July 30 during the 8:30–10:20am block, attendees had the following session choices:

- 1 Introductory Overview Lecture
- 9 Invited Sessions
- 2 Invited Panels
- 14 Topic-Contributed Sessions
- 1 Topic-Contributed Panel
- 18 Contributed Sessions

This provided 45 unique sessions to select from for that period. Reducing the contributed sessions by 75% still leaves 31 choices, and reducing the contributed sessions by half yields 36 sessions.

Concerns:

1. Will decreasing the number of contributed sessions lead to decreased attendance?
 - We suggest (see next recommendation) the substitution of poster presentations for those contributed sessions no longer included. Statisticians may not be permitted by their place of employment to attend JSM unless they

are presenting their work, and the same is true of many students at universities. Presenting a poster should allow this segment to attend.

- Some statisticians opt not to attend JSM due to the size of the program and the impersonal nature of such a large conference. Improving the *quality* of the program and increasing *interaction* may bring these statisticians back to JSM over time. For example, decreasing the volume of contributed sessions will draw more attention to existing session formats that are better opportunities for learning, discussion, and sharing of ideas, such as the in-depth introductory overview lectures, and the discussion-based expert panels. (Additionally, see next recommendation regarding poster sessions for further commentary about interaction.)

2. If we decrease the number of contributed sessions, how will we review abstracts?

- One possibility is to follow the journal model, and ask statistician peers to review a certain number of abstracts (e.g., 10) in place of one journal article. This service to the profession could be listed on their CV in the same fashion as journal reviewing. To expedite the review process, “abstract tags” could be introduced:
 - Currently, when an abstract is entered, the author has an open text box to list keywords.
 - We propose a priori specified abstract tags (e.g., causal inference, imaging, longitudinal data, etc.), and the author can select a certain number of abstract tags.
 - These tags will help in the selection of reviewers and in forming more cohesive contributed sessions.
 - Additionally, the abstract tags could be used for navigating the program. As it stands, when searching for talks on causal inference, one must try “causal inference,” “causality,” etc. (Therefore, abstract tags would be useful for all abstracts in the program, not just contributed talks.)
 - We also suggest these abstract tags are used to reduce session overlap as much as possible. There have been repeated complaints this year that related sessions were scheduled at the same time.

“Whoever does the scheduling needs to have better knowledge of the subject matter...to avoid direct conflicts. Parallel invited sessions on similar topics should be avoided.”

–Philip Stark, PhD, Professor, UC Berkeley Dept. of Statistics

“Far too many concurrent sessions (up to 50) that were not optimized into tracks, or based on the type of audience it would draw. There were times where there were 5 or 6 related talks I wanted to see...and others where nothing sounded interesting.”

–Ryan Rosario, Data Scientist at GumGum and PhD Candidate, UCLA Dept. of Statistics

- An alternative is to establish an abstract review committee that would serve the same function, except each reviewer would be responsible for a larger number of abstracts. The “abstract tags” could be used here as well, to make sure the committee contains enough members with expertise in certain areas.
- The abstract submission process could include check boxes for “student or postdoctoral fellow” and “first-time presenter” in order to ensure a reasonable number of junior statisticians and new attendees are able to give oral presentations at JSM. Preference could be given to junior statisticians and new attendees with quality submissions in the same way the NIH does for investigators who have never received an R01.

Increase the presence and importance of poster presentations. Presenting a poster in lieu of a contributed talk could provide multiple opportunities for researchers to truly engage those people most interested in their work. 1) Due to the less restrictive format of poster sessions, researchers in their subfield, and particularly senior researchers, may be more likely to spend free time in the poster session versus attending a contributed session that conflicts with invited sessions they would rather attend. 2) The interactions between the poster presenter and the most engaged readers of their poster may also be of higher quality since attendees can be very selective about which posters they view, and when. 3) The session attendees have a chance to ask multiple questions and tailor their poster experience to their background, whereas a contributed talk geared toward a general audience may leave them questioning the relevance of the material to their work. 4) Poster presenters experience a less intimidating environment and more relaxed atmosphere, which may be desirable for junior statisticians and first-time presenters.

We note that it is important individual posters are available for one complete day, or for multiple half-days (e.g., Monday and Tuesday from 2–8pm), in order for the “drop-in” nature of poster sessions to be truly useful. We also propose at least one labeled break in the program (e.g., “Poster Exhibition” Monday from 6-8pm) where little else is scheduled, and attendees are directed to visit the poster hall. (Depending on the volume of posters, more than one time may be required.)

How can we convince attendees to present posters instead of contributed talks?

- Contact leaders in major subfields, department chairs, and other senior statisticians and ask them to present a poster, explaining the new model. Participation of senior researchers in the field will increase buy-in.
- Ask these leaders to also encourage their students or junior personnel to submit a poster, perhaps offering to defray cost of attendance and poster printing charges if funds are available from their grants or departmental sources.
- Organize a poster station at the convention center where posters can be mailed in advance, to avoid the hassle of checked baggage and extra carry-on items for presenters.
- Establish a small grants program for students and junior researchers without

the funds to cover the cost of poster printing and shipping (e.g., with a cap of \$150).

- Create subfield-specific hybrid “lightning” sessions for select posters to draw attention to the poster hall. Using the abstract tags discussed earlier, a review committee/peer reviewers could select a certain number of posters (e.g., 10) for 5 minute presentations in special sessions (e.g., Genomics Lightning Round Poster Session Presentations, Air Pollution Lightning Round Poster Session Presentations, and so on). Presenters are limited to 5 minutes and 5 slides. Attendees at these sessions will be encouraged to go to the poster hall for the remainder of the session to engage with the presenters and view additional posters in the subfield.
- Group posters by abstract tags or subfields in the exhibit hall. Searching by poster number is not effective and a substantial deterrent to casual poster viewing.
- Create best poster awards with monetary prizes from ASA Sections.
- Make the “Poster Exhibition” a reception with food (and alcohol if permitted).
- There are already JSM attendees who think highly of poster sessions.

“I love the poster sessions. You can see the research of a dozen people who interest you in an hour.”

–AnnMaria De Mars, PhD, President of The Julia Group

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the statistics profession, and thank you for reading our suggestions regarding JSM.

Signed,
The Informal Committee of Junior Statisticians

Laura Balzer, PhD Student
University of California, Berkeley

Annie Green Howard, Postdoctoral Fellow
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Ivan Diaz, PhD Candidate
University of California, Berkeley

Elizabeth Ogburn, Postdoctoral Fellow
Harvard University

Ani Eloyan, Postdoctoral Fellow
Johns Hopkins University

Sherri Rose,[†] Postdoctoral Fellow
Johns Hopkins University

Jeff Goldsmith, Assistant Professor
Columbia University

David Vock, PhD Candidate
North Carolina State University

Benjamin A. Goldstein, Instructor
Stanford University

Cory Zigler, Postdoctoral Fellow
Harvard University

[†] For follow-up inquiries, contact Sherri Rose: srose@jhsph.edu.