

Behind the Stage: Interview with Leah Solla, Former Program Chair of the Chemical Information Division

By Svetla Baykoucheva



Leah Solla is the Programmatic Coordinator for the Edna McConnell Clark Physical Sciences Library and the Chemistry Librarian at Cornell University. Her background is in biochemistry and library science and she is responsible for library resources and specialized services supporting chemistry in all fields and science and technology studies at Cornell. She has contributed to and served in advisory capacity for a number of information resources including the ACS Style Guide, the ACS CPT Guidelines for Bachelor's Degree Programs, Cornell's VIVO, and CAS' SciFinder. She is an active member of the Chemical Information Division of the American Chemical Society, most recently as Program Chair, addressing a wide range of topical interests from open access to advanced training and education to intellectual property and licensing to data- and text-mining. She is also a member of the ACS Joint Board-Council Committee on Publications, the adjoining Subcommittee on Copyright, the Chemical & Engineering News Editorial Board and the Chemical Abstracts Service Academic Advisory Board.

Svetla Baykoucheva: The perspective that a program chair of the Chemical Information Division (CINF) has of the ACS national meetings is different than the perspective of those who present at these meetings or just attend them. I am sure many attendees don't even realize what an enormous effort it is to put together the technical programs and run them successfully. What made you volunteer to do what looks to me to be the most difficult job in CINF?

Leah Solla: I think it was more a matter of being volunteered ☺ The assistant program chair at the time was tapped to be division chair, and so I was asked to step in. I think my name arose because I was an academic librarian who had previously organized some sessions, and it had been some years since an academic librarian was program chair. CINF is a small and diverse community, and it can be challenging to fill all the important positions we need while representing the breadth of interests in the division. I almost found myself in the same position when the assistant program chair retired, but happily Rajarshi stepped forward. He has been a very able assistant and well on his way to becoming an excellent chair. He has ties to the COMP Division, as well, which will help strengthen cooperative efforts in areas of mutual interest.

SB: What is the process of planning the technical program for an ACS national meeting? Who decides what the topics of the individual sessions will be? Who selects the organizers of these sessions?

LS: Most of the planning process happens with the program committee. We try to balance looking several meetings out with being flexible to accommodate the most current topics of interest. Many issues in chemical information evolve over time and we try to revisit these ideas in the program every few meetings with a mix of new areas. We also strive for a representation across interests in cheminformatics, information professionals, academic librarianship, scholarly communication, intellectual property, and education. We gather ideas informally through the individual networks of the program committee members, and as program chair I talked with many people at the meetings who have interest in program ideas. These ideas are fed into a meeting planning spreadsheet and assigned to different meetings depending on the mix and timeliness of the topics and the locations of the meetings. Confirming session organizers can be challenging because of the significant time commitment and many intriguing ideas continue to ripen in the spreadsheet without champions. However, there is rarely a shortage of sessions that come together and we usually end up with a good mix of program committee members and non-members as organizers. Rajarshi is working on proactively soliciting more ideas and volunteers for program sessions from the broader community through the CHMINF, COMP, CHED and other lists.

SB: Once the topics and the organizers have been determined, what happens next?

LS: The timeline for putting together a meeting program is about nine months. First step is to re-confirm with session organizers and clarify the topics. Once the sessions have generally been identified for the program, they can be entered into the OASYS system, where they are captured for a call for papers in *Chemical & Engineering News*. OASYS for authors opens about 8 weeks before the submission deadline, but session organizers are generally busy much before that time putting out their own more specific calls for papers and directly contacting potential speakers. Organizers are really the life-blood of the program and the success of the symposia is a mark of their creativity and effort.

SB: How does the program chair communicate with the organizers of the individual sessions? How are the sessions coordinated with other divisions, when they are cosponsoring a session?

LS: Communication happens in every way and at every time possible—through email, phone, OASYS, GoogleDocs, SharePoint, WebEx, in person at meetings, even by international post. Divisions tend to plan mostly on their own and co-sponsorship has generally been on the level of co-listing and some scheduling coordination between potentially similar symposia. CINF has been more active in reaching out as chemical information is an integral part of other chemical interests and many of our members are active in other divisions as well. There is some opportunity for joint networking at the annual Planning for Program Chairs Conference (P2C2) held by ACS, and the Multidisciplinary Program Planning Group (MPPG) develops programmatic themes for the meetings. These efforts have encouraged some collaboration, but generally divisions still plan their own sessions related to the theme. CINF has also been fairly active in sponsoring sessions at other venues including regional meetings, BCCE, the CSA Trust, International Conference on Chemical Structures in Noordwijerhout, SLA and ASIST, among others. I think this is a priority for the new program chair as well and the program committee will be working more closely with other divisions including COMP, CHED, CHAL, MEDI, ORGN, PHYS, and others. The ideas and the interest are there; the greatest limitation is time to cultivate relations with other divisions, both at the division business level as well as the program.

SB: From your own experience—what is the most complex and difficult part of organizing and executing the technical program?

LS: Aside from the time commitment, which is never quite predictable and often difficult to juggle with other work, connecting all of the dozens of entities and arrangements that need to be accounted for in the program is very complex. There is no single ACS office where it all comes together, which leaves this to the responsibility of the program chair. The technical program itself is governed by various scheduling and format rules that are very much along the lines of one size fits all divisions. The even programming rule is particularly challenging—in order to schedule two concurrent sessions, we need to schedule at least one session per half day all the way through Thursday. This can be a stretch for a relatively small division like CINF that really needs two tracks to cover our diverse agenda but has to rely on a small pool of volunteers who can participate the whole week from the division business meetings on Saturday through the following Thursday programs. We also have very little input into the final program facilities, and, again, being a smaller division, we are often fit in around the edges of larger programs. Layering over the program structure dictated by ACS are the numerous division social and business events; other ACS events such as the joint Publications Division and Chemical Abstracts Division Open Meeting, the Council meetings, the EXPO, SciMix; requirements for speakers, refreshments and technical solutions; sponsorship (nothing extra is free); and some level of awareness of other divisions' programs and activities. At the crux of each meeting, the buck stops with the program chair and all of this requires extensive communication, often with people one has never met in person or only briefly at the national meetings. The time and effort required to navigate this complex milieu can leave little time for extra creative efforts and innovation, and this was really the most difficult thing for me. I am very happy to be getting back to organizing sessions and being able to focus my full attention and energy on the topics and speakers.

SB: What support does ACS provide to program chairs? How does the chair interact with ACS and at what level? Is ACS somehow involved in making decisions about programming and in what way?

LS: The ACS Office of Divisional Affairs provides the primary support for program chairs, including information about deadlines, program requirements, OASYS training, and bending over backwards to accommodate last minute changes. This office supports the annual P2C2 meeting usually attended by the assistant program chair for training and networking. The ACS Operations Office coordinates the local program venues, food, technical requirements, billing and on the ground support at each meeting. Policy decisions happen at the committee level—the Divisional Activities Committee is involved with the MPPG group working on thematic programming and the Meetings & Expositions Committee considers top level issues with

the national meeting, such as even programming, meeting locations, EXPO schedule, etc. The divisions have input into these decisions through a DAC representative, MPPG member, and council. The Divisional Affairs and Operations Offices also pass along experiences of the programs to the committees.

SB: What kind of issues do you see as important or becoming a problem in the future in the area of programming?

LS: I can see a number of challenges, most of them good. I've referred several times to the diverse interests of the CINF membership, of broad concern to all division efforts, and I believe the program represents a possible place of strengthening collaboration across interests. Along the same lines, increased collaboration among divisions and related groups beyond ACS will be more critical, even as (and especially because) tough economic times force interests to narrow. And that tough economy will (hopefully) change the nature of the national meetings. I say "hopefully" because I think there is a lot more room for other meeting venues—regional, Gordon type, virtual, project based, etc. Downsizing the national meetings (shorter? fewer?) might enable more resources and creativity to flow into other venues. In the more immediate sense, the current economic situation will certainly impact the ability of CINF volunteers to commit to demanding jobs such as program chair in its current form.

SB: Could you tell us about yourself—about your career path, professional interests, and your involvement with CINF?

LS: Because my involvement and interest with CINF revolves around relations with its active members, I want to take this opportunity to recognize the commitment of so many that made the past four programs possible—the CINF division chairs and Executive Committee, the Program Committee, the ACS Divisional Activities and Operations Offices, the sponsors, the speakers and especially the symposium organizers.

SB: The new program chair is Rajarshi Guha. What was the most important advice, from your point of view, that you have given him or want to give him now?

LS: Rajarshi has already invested months listening to my advice and preparing the program for the upcoming meeting in Salt Lake City. The line-up looks as inspiring as ever and I encourage the CINF membership and attendees to congratulate him and contribute their ideas and commitment to the future programs of the Division.