

# Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Learning, Volume 27, 2000

## A PROFILE OF ABSEL CONFERENCE ATTENDEES

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### ABSTRACT

A profile of attendees at the 1999 ABSEL Conference held in Philadelphia is presented. The typical attendee is an active participant in the conference (usually a paper presenter) and is quite satisfied with the ABSEL Conference. Respondents indicated a desire for a greater number of simulation presentations and workshops. Location appears to be an important determinant of attendance with a surprising number of people showing interest in cool weather locations.

### INTRODUCTION

A questionnaire was administered to attendees at the 1999 ABSEL Conference in an effort to determine what attracts individuals to ABSEL meetings and to help direct future activities of the organization. In the past, conventional wisdom has driven the decision making of the ABSEL Board of Directors and program leaders as they designed the annual conference. The purpose of this paper is to provide objective data on which to base future decisions.

The questionnaire was disseminated at the business luncheon on the first day of the conference. A total of 60 responses were received from the approximately 100 conference attendees.

### Reason For Attending Conference

Table 1 shows the reasons given for attending the conference. The responses were separated into two categories, “active” and “passive”. The active category consisted of activities where the individual was part of the conference program in some way – presenting a paper, leading a panel discussion, etc. Passive involvement included activities that did not constitute direct participation in the program (e.g., networking).

Paper presentations were easily the most common form of active participation involving 62% of the respondents. This was more than five times the next most frequently mentioned form of active involvement, presentation of an experiential exercise. It is interesting to note that nearly twice as many respondents reported attending to present an experiential exercise (11.7%) than to present a simulation (6.7%).

**TABLE 1  
REASON FOR ATTENDING CONFERENCE**

<u>“Active” Involvement</u>			<u>“Passive” Involvement</u>		
▪ Present a paper	37	61.7%	▪ Learn new teaching processes	40	66.7%
▪ Present an experiential exercise	7	11.7%	▪ Network with colleagues	40	66.7%
▪ Lead a panel discussion	6	10.0%	▪ Learn new pedagogical research ideas	33	55.0%
▪ Present a simulation	4	6.7%	▪ Network with others interested in simulations and gaming	33	55.0%
▪ Direct a workshop	4	6.7%	▪ Network with others interested in experiential exercises	28	46.7%
			▪ Learn new research ideas	26	43.3%

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Two-thirds of attendees that reported “passive” reasons for being at the conference mentioned “learning new teaching processes” and “networking with colleagues”. About one-half of the respondents reported more specific networking reasons related to simulations and experiential exercises. Sixteen of the respondents (26.7%) reported taking part *only* in passive activities. Of this group, 11 (69%) attended to learn new teaching processes, and 10 (62%) came to network with associates at the conference.

### Desired Changes

Conference attendees were also asked which type of conference activities they would like to see more of at future conferences. Table 2 shows that nearly 50% of the respondents reported a desire for more simulation presentations. Nearly as many respondents (43%) would like to see more workshops, while one-third would like additional presentations of experiential exercises. A much smaller percentage of the respondents would like to see an increase in the number of panel discussions and paper presentations. To the extent that respondents to the questionnaire reflect the ABSEL general membership, these results provide direction for the program organizers of future conferences.

**TABLE 2  
DESIRES FOR FUTURE CONFERENCES**

▪ Simulation presentations	29	48.3%
▪ Workshops	26	43.3
▪ Experiential exercise presentations	20	33.3
▪ Panel discussions	14	23.3
▪ Paper presentations	9	15.0
n =	60	

### AbseL Mission

Conference attendees were asked to express their perception of what ABSEL’s mission currently is and what it should be. Only about one-half (53%) of the questionnaire respondents replied to this question. Whether this reflects lack of knowledge of the mission, or simply choosing to not render an opinion, is unknown. Table 3 shows that of those responding, approximately one-half believe ABSEL’s mission is and should be to promote the use of simulations and experiential exercises. Another 20 – 25% believe the mission is to promote research using simulations and experiential exercises. The remaining 25 – 35% see as ABSEL’s mission as relating to networking, improving teaching, or just having “fun”. It is reassuring that the perception of what is and what should be is highly consistent.

**TABLE 3  
ABSEL’S MISSION**

<u>Mission</u>	<u>Is</u>		<u>Should Be</u>	
Promote use of simulations	16	50.0%	15	51.7%
Promote use of experiential learning	14	43.8	13	44.8
Promote research using simulations	8	25.0	5	17.2
Promote research using experiential exercises	7	21.9	5	17.2
Networking	4	15.6	6	20.7
Improve teaching	5	12.5	5	17.2
	n = 32		n = 29	

### Satisfaction

As noted earlier, the questionnaire was administered on the first day of the program, so respondents had limited opportunity to participate in conference activities. Given this limitation, the

study results must be viewed with caution. Table 4 shows the respondents’ satisfaction with various conference activities. The table indicates that the respondents were generally satisfied with the activities they had participated in up to the time they filled out the questionnaire.

**TABLE 4**  
**SATISFACTION WITH CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES**

<u>Conference Activity</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Disappointed</u>			<u>Very Satisfied</u>		<u>Ave.</u>
		<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	
▪ Experiential exercise presentations	23	0.0%	0.0%	17.4%	34.8%	47.8%	4.30
▪ Paper presentations	40	0.0	2.5	20.0	42.5	35.0	4.10
▪ Papers in proceedings	38	0.0	2.6	26.3	31.6	39.5	4.08
▪ Simulation presentations	19	0.0	0.0	31.6	31.6	36.8	4.05
▪ Panel discussions	24	4.2	8.3	16.7	29.2	41.7	3.96
▪ Workshops	20	5.0	5.0	30.0	30.0	30.0	3.75

Table 5 shows the respondents' overall satisfaction with the 1999 conference as well as with ABSEL conferences over the last three years. Of course, not all respondents were able to comment on conferences going back three years. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that in both cases,

respondents indicated a high level of satisfaction. The averages of 4.29 and 4.23 clearly indicate that respondents feel that ABSEL conferences have met their needs and desires.

**TABLE 5**  
**OVERALL SATISFACTION**

<u>Overall Satisfaction</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Disappointed</u>			<u>Very Satisfied</u>		<u>Ave</u>
		<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	
▪ Overall satisfaction with this conference	52	0.0%	1.9%	9.6%	46.2%	42.3%	4.29
▪ Overall satisfaction with last 3 conferences	34	0.0%	2.9%	8.8%	50.0%	38.2%	4.23

### Conference Attendance

Table 6 shows respondents' intentions to attend ABSEL's conference in 2000. While a solid base of respondents (60%) plan to be present in 2000, a sizeable proportion (38%) indicated that their attendance is dependent upon the location of the conference. Given the fixed cost structure of any conference, ignoring location sensitive participants could be detrimental to the financial success of a conference.

**TABLE 6**  
**PLAN TO ATTEND NEXT YEAR'S CONFERENCE**

▪ Yes	33	60.0%
▪ Depends on location	21	38.2%
▪ No	1	1.8%
	n =	55

Table 7 adds emphasis to the importance of conference location. When asked what it would take to make the ABSEL conference their number one choice, location was the most frequently mentioned item. While the precise magnitude of

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the importance of location is questionable due to the small sample size, it is clear that location is a significant determinant of conference attendance.

ABSEL conferences should not be restricted to warm weather cities.

**TABLE 7**  
**ABSEL IS MY #1 CONFERENCE**  
**DEPENDING ON**

▪ Already is #1	11	34.4%
▪ Location	6	18.8
▪ Paper accepted	4	12.5
▪ More corporate participants	2	6.2
▪ Other	9	28.1
n =	32	

Table 8 shows other conferences that respondents attend. The large number and diversity of responses shows that ABSEL draws people with a wide range of interests and affiliations.

**TABLE 8**  
**OTHER CONFERENCES ATTENDED**

▪ No response	27	45.0%
▪ Other (Single responses, only)	18	30.0
▪ Academy of Management	8	13.3
▪ Decision Sciences	4	6.7
▪ American Marketing Association	3	5.0
n =	60	

Twenty-nine respondents suggested a total of sixty-four possible sites for future ABSEL meetings. Table 9 shows the respondents' preferences for conference locations. Responses to this question pose an interesting quandary. While several respondents wrote comments like, "anyplace warm", two of the top three choices are *northern* US locations; and the fourth choice is a "cold" city, Denver. It is possible that results are biased because the survey was conducted with those attending the conference in Philadelphia. Some members averse to cool weather locations may not have been present. Nevertheless, these responses, if confirmed in future research, indicate that the selection of future cities for

**TABLE 9**  
**PREFERRED FUTURE LOCATIONS**

▪ NYC	5	7.8%
▪ San Diego	5	7.8
▪ Seattle	5	7.8
▪ Denver	4	6.3
▪ Boston	3	4.7
▪ Charleston	3	4.7
▪ Hawaii	3	4.7
▪ Las Vegas	3	4.7
▪ Reno	3	4.7
▪ Other (2 or fewer mentions)	30	46.9
n =	64	

## CONCLUSIONS

No real surprises were found with this study, apart from the interest in holding conferences in northern cities. However, there are three caveats that must be kept in mind when reviewing the results. The sample size is small; data were collected very early in the conference; and only conference attendees had an opportunity to respond. The combination of these concerns means that caution must be exercised when making decisions based on these results. At the same time, this does not mean that the results have nothing to offer the membership and the Board of Directors of ABSEL. Some assurance can be drawn from the similarity between conventional, but untested, wisdom regarding ABSEL member preferences and the findings presented here. The next step should be to explore members' attitudes regarding ABSEL conferences *after* program activities are completed, instead of at the beginning of the conference.