

Where did all the money go?

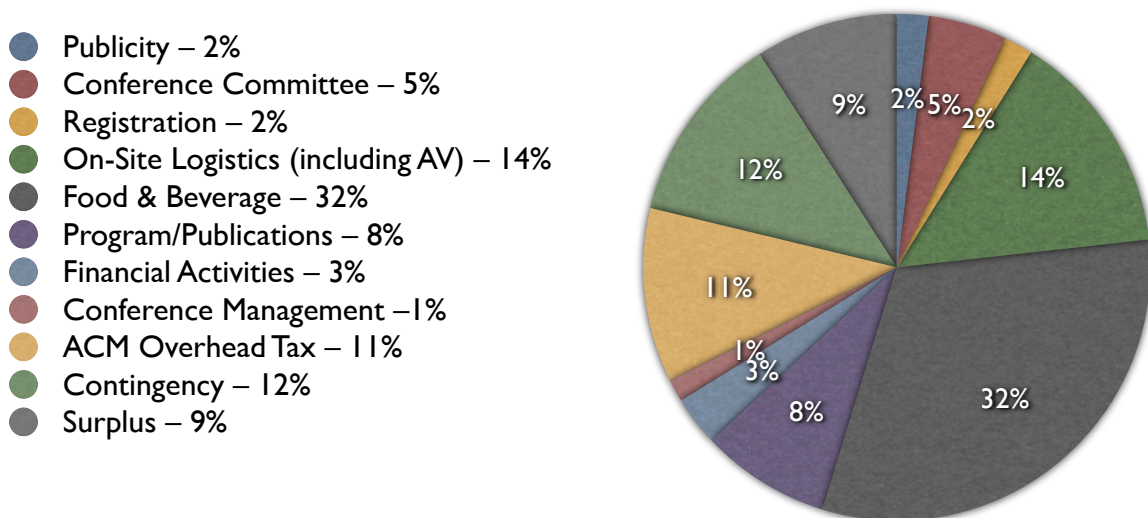
SIGPLAN conference finances for beginners

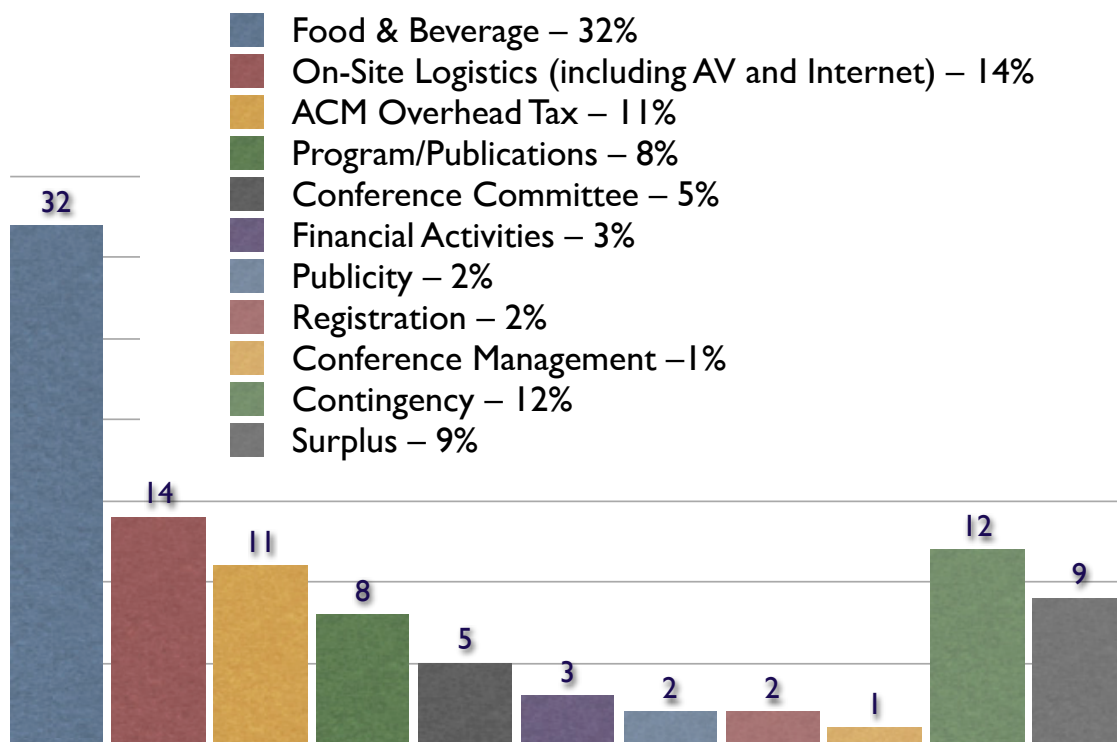
Attendees at conferences sometimes ask why registration fees are so high, whether the organization sponsoring the conference is making lots of money at their expense, and if so, where it is going. I've just finished a stint as General Chair of SPLASH, a major conference sponsored by ACM SIGPLAN. I'm going to attempt to answer these questions and give you some insight into conference finances.

What is SPLASH? It's an umbrella conference on programming and programming languages that incorporates OOPSLA, Onward!, the Dynamic Languages Symposium, often several co-located events like PLoP and GPCE, and a large handful of workshops — this year, fourteen.

SPLASH is now a medium-sized conference — about 500 attendees — which means that it will fit in the conference facilities of a large US hotel. In the past, OOPSLA (the oldest of the SPLASH core conferences) has been much larger, requiring the renting of a convention center; other conferences are smaller. Why does this matter? Overall size, and the number of parallel tracks limit the number of possible venues, which in turn limits the ability of the conference organizers to negotiate favorable terms. The hotel we used for SPLASH was one of only two in downtown Portland able to accommodate it.

Even though medium-sized, SPLASH has a sizable budget. Total income was \$253k — of which \$166k was from conference registrations, \$59k from workshop registrations, and \$28k in the form of support from 7 corporations. Sometimes conferences obtain grants from agencies





like the NSF; if this happens, these funds are typically used to support student travel or some other special event, and do not form part of the conference general fund.

But I promised to tell you where the money goes. The figure at the bottom of the previous page, and the bar chart in this page, show the big picture. (Both charts show the same data.)

The largest item is food and beverage — 32 per cent of the total. Remember that at most US conferences, we pay more than the going rate for food and beverages in order to get the “free” meeting rooms. SPLASH didn’t provide lunches because they would have cost \$50 per day or more, and being located in downtown Portland, attendees could get an excellent sit-down lunch outside the hotel for less than \$20, or a very good food-cart lunch for \$6. We did provide breakfast and coffee and tea breaks, two receptions where attendees could mingle and talk to the poster presenters, and a conference dinner.

What ACM calls “on-site logistics” eats up 14 per cent of the total. This is mostly the cost of AV services. SPLASH has many parallel sessions, each of which needs its own AV, so this is always a major item. We did not pay to video record the sessions; if we had, this number would have been even larger.

The “Contingency” is a budgeting artifact. ACM requires that the conference budget has a contingency of 15 percent of budgeted expenses, in case things don’t go as planned. For SPLASH, that was \$30k. This may sound a lot, but it’s actually quite easy for things not to go as planned. For example, four weeks before SLASH started we had not met our minimum room block at the hotel, and were looking at a large penalty, which would have consumed this

contingency and more. (We took action to encourage attendees to stay at the hotel, and were able to avoid the penalty.)

Once the conference is over, the “Contingency” (12% of income) could be added into “Surplus” (9% of income), so you might say that in 2014 SPLASH had a surplus of 21%, or about \$50k. I’ve left them separate because it’s important that conferences *don’t* plan to spend their contingency! The unspent contingency and the surplus both go into the SIGPLAN general fund, which is mostly used to support conferences, but also supports the running of the SIG and our publications. This year, SIGPLAN supported SPLASH directly to the tune of roughly \$45k: \$25k from the Professional Activities Committee (PAC) for professional travel for those who could not otherwise attend (mostly students with accepted papers), and \$20k for a student mentoring event designed to encourage students to consider going into programming language research. SIGPLAN also supported SPLASH *indirectly* by buying “umbrella” contracts for Researchr (the conference website), the HotCRP paper submission & reviewing system, registration services from Carole Mann at Regmaster, and the conference manager Anabel Satin. This means that only part of the true cost of these services hit the conference budget; the remainder is paid by SIGPLAN. Thus, it turns out that the benefits that SPLASH received from SIGPLAN were roughly equal to our surplus. SIGPLAN could not support conferences in this way if the conferences did not generate surpluses most of the time.

The next largest item, at 11 percent of income, is the ACM Overhead fee. This is the price of doing business as part of ACM; it’s calculated as a tax (16%) of total conference *expenses*. It pays for the direct services that the conference gets from ACM — negotiating contracts and paying bills — but also, I believe, supports the general activities of ACM.

The program of the conference is relatively inexpensive, at 8 percent of income. More than a third of this is attributable to Sheridan Printing for the cost of preparing the proceedings for the conference download and for the ACM DL. Also included under this heading are the fees we paid to use HotCRP, accommodation for the keynote speakers, expenses for the SPLASH PC Meeting, and the John Vlissides Award..

Conference Committee support amounted to 5 percent. This is mostly stipends and accommodation for student volunteers. Almost all of the senior committee members actually pay their own way to the conference, and pay the conference registration fee too, as did I as General Chair.

The remaining items are fairly small. “Financial Activities” at 3 percent includes Credit Card fees. Registration, at 2 percent, pays the conference’s part of Regmaster’s fee; this also includes the registration website. Publicity was also only 2 percent, since it excluded the cost of the conference website. (This was paid directly by SIGPLAN, and was a research project for the site’s designers.)

The great thing about running a conference for SIGPLAN is that the SIG has financial reserves. As General Chair, while I knew that I had a responsibility to oversee the budget, I did not have to drive myself into a tizzy over every unexpected expense. This let me focus on making sure that the conference was a good experience for the attendees. Which I believe it was.

