

Connections

Student paper by Cindy Wei

"...NCSSSMST?!" I remember back to freshmen year when those nine letters were considered a jumbled acronym and a pain to utter. But now, two years down the line, and our conference debut in only a few months, I remember the NCSSSMST motto, "foster, support, and advance the creative efforts of those specialized schools whose primary purpose is to attract academically prepared students for leadership in mathematics, science, and technology" while preparing our conference. On October 18, 19, and 20, 2007, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology will hold a student conference attracting approximately 350 students from member schools of the National Consortium of Specialized Secondary Schools of Math, Science, and Technology. This conference will advance student interest in math, science, and technology by bridging the gap with public policy. 2007 marks an important year in Virginia history and because of that, we name our conference—2007: Yesterday Never Dies, blending espionage and history into an interactive three day session. This conference is produced by the dedication of 30-some TJHSST students with the guidance of staff and administration, and with Montgomery Blair High School and sponsorship from GMU.

The most important aspect of our conference is the fact that it is student-run and -produced. By having a student planned conference, we are able to foster creative thinking, planning, and harness leadership abilities through responsibility and teamwork. It is important to preserve the role students play in producing such large conferences because it is the true definition of a "hands-on" education. As a fellow planning member, Yang He, states, "This is a conference by the students, for the students. This is an opportunity to network with 300 of some of the most talented students across the nation in one of the most influential/powerful

cities in the world!" This conference connects students from across the country through interests in math, science, and technology. Student-planned conferences ensure that the conference is tailored to the students by presenting them what they want and what they will enjoy.

The club had humble beginnings consisting, at first, of just a handful of eager freshmen ready to tackle a challenge. Little did we know what we were going to embark on, but now, two years and many 8th period meetings past, we are able to boast our plan of the 3-day schedule and present our hard work. Taking advantage of our fortuitous location, only a few miles from the nation's Capital—we knew that our big ticket was being able to have a session in the Capitol with some of our state legislatures. This special excursion would give students the rare opportunity to discuss global warming with Members of Congress and issue experts. One of the planners for the Capitol group, Yang He, says that, "The panel debate would be a priceless experience for students, and a great opportunity for them to connect with their elected representatives." However, as we have learned, not every idea can be achieved with the stroke of a wand. The most difficult step is making the connection. "Our attempts at contacting senators and keynote speakers have certainly been difficult, though not completely fruitless," continues Yang. However, step-by-step we are beginning to make the connections that will bring to our conference full circle.

Another event that we are proud to present is the night on the Cherry Blossom. This boat will be cruising down the Potomac and present breath-taking views of the Washington, D.C. skyline, and give students a chance to unwind and interact with one another in a social setting. The ambiance of good music and food will be able to finish up Saturday night with a bang.

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As a student conference, we want to be able to showcase the work of fellow students and established professors in universities. GMU, a partner and sponsor of our conference, will be hosting a variety of events on its campus. Starting on Friday night, we will present a lively International Night show put on by students of TJHSST and other contributing schools. Then during the day, GMU will present many hands-on activities and interactive studies by their leading professors. These activities will also allow students to work with state-of-the-art equipment on the GMU campus, such as in the ITE School. As well, at TJHSST, current students and alumni will present their award-winning projects. Throughout the day, students will have opportunities to engage in stimulating conversations about higher level math and sciences. The presenters will be able to answer any questions the participants may have.

Planning a conference has been a learning process and has required the work of a cooperating team. All of us, along with a few Montgomery Blair High School representatives embarked on a journey to the Hemlock Overlook Center for Outdoor Education during the summer of 2006. This center is designed to involve individuals and organizations "through experiential team building and environmental education while fostering personal growth and leadership development." This group activity allowed every member of the group to become a link in the process. Meg Barnett, one of the student catering coordinators, describes Hemlock, "I think our Hemlock Overlook trip definitely helped to unite our group. In order to create an effective conference, we need to learn to trust each other to get all of the work done. Hemlock forced us to trust each other to complete each assignment and come together as a team. We needed each and every person to reach our final goal."

As a group, we were able to gain insight into NCSSMST-sponsored conferences. Our school, supportive of our endeavors, has financed us to attend the NCSSMST student conference in Salt Lake City, research conference in Atlanta, and policy summit in Keystone, CO. By attending these numerous conferences, we were able to research the pros and cons of specific events, the importance

of detailed scheduling and organized transportation, and also, have a great time. Master scheduler David DyTang remarks, "Our experiences at Salt Lake City provided us with the groundwork for our conference by allowing us to understand what should go into the event from a participant's point of view."

This entire journey has been a learning process for each of us. Our job requires setting a goal, establishing connections, and achieving them by constantly pushing forward. Because the job is so large, it cannot be accomplished by a one-man team. Delegation is critical to ensure that all bases are covered. "I've learned that delegating work is critical to plan something like this. Each member has to do his or her own job — if one person ends up doing it all, the workload is crushing. It has also helped me organize my own life, by setting aside time for school work and NCSSMST work," replied Meg Barnett when asked what she had learned from this experience. As well, other members, such as Steven Chen, stated, "Our group has become more polished in writing letters and selling our ideas to others. We have become more experienced in convincing others to help us plan this conference." Not only will we be able to say we had a fun time planning this conference, but also that it was an extension of our progression of leadership, planning, and character. Our main sponsor and facilitator, Mrs. Waterfall responds, "Watching this group take responsibility, courageously chart totally unknown territory of busses, Congress, the Park Service, Lab Directors and more, in addition to remaining stellar students in a demanding atmosphere, has been one of the highlights in a career of public service."

We are all excited to be able to present our conference during the fall of our senior year. This conference will be the culmination of over four years of hard work, cooperation, and dedication. Many of us, such as Tim Chen, joined this group early freshmen year because, "Sure there are many other clubs to join but this one was a planning committee, done by students; something I wouldn't find at an ordinary school." That is what this conference is—special and out of the ordinary. If you would like to check us out, our website is activities.tjhsst.edu/ncssmst. We will keep you updated!