

# Psychology Educators of Tennessee (PET): A regional learning community for psychology teachers

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*This paper describes the development of a regional psychology teaching organisation, Psychology Educators of Tennessee (PET). PET is designed to enhance collaboration among teachers from local colleges, universities, and high schools. We discuss the history of PET, the themes and pragmatics associated with our annual conference, plans for expanding the organisation, and challenges we have experienced with developing and maintaining PET. We also provide evaluation data from recent participants and suggestions for institutions of higher education interested in creating a similar kind of organisation.*

**Keywords:** *Regional teaching organisation; faculty support; institutional collaboration; high school teachers; teaching conference.*

THERE IS A WIDE RANGE of national and international opportunities for networking, learning, and research for psychology teachers. For example, the annual meetings of the American Psychological Association (APA), the British Psychological Society (BPS), the Association for Psychological Science (APS), and the European Congress of Psychology frequently include track presentations, workshops, and studies devoted to the teaching of psychology. Some organisations also provide extensive resources devoted to high school teaching, such as the APA's Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools group (<http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/topss/index.aspx>) and APS's Online Resources for the Classroom site (<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/members/teaching>). In the UK, support for high school teachers is also provided through the BPS, with the Division of Academics, Researchers and Teachers in Psychology, and through the Association for the Teaching of Psychology (<http://theatp.org/>).

In addition to the activities and resources of the major psychology organisations, the discipline offers several conferences devoted exclusively to the teaching of psychology

(e.g. Dastur et al., 2014; Davis & Smith, 1992; Wylie & Fuller, 1985). These options include a variety of international, national, and regional conferences such as the Vancouver International Conference on the Teaching of Psychology; the International Conference on Psychology Education; the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology; the European Psychology Learning and Teaching Conference; and the Society for Teaching of Psychology's (STP) Annual Conference on Teaching.

Whereas these psychology teaching conferences provide excellent and high-quality learning experiences and resources for teachers, budgetary constraints and conflicts with disciplinary or research-oriented meetings sometimes make attendance at large teaching meetings a challenge. The meetings are also yearly events and often large in scope, which makes the development of collaborations or events outside of the conference timeline a challenge for participants. Furthermore, the online resources offered by the major psychology organisations are not particularly amenable to the development of local teaching and research collaborations.

An alternative approach to supporting psychology teachers is to foster events, meetings, and resources that are more local and specific to the interests of local institutions. Examples of and recommendations for smaller local or regional psychology teaching conferences have appeared in the literature for many years (e.g. Appleby & Harmon, 2015; Lucas, 1981; McPherson & Wylie, 1983). However, there are several challenges to the creation and maintenance of these local opportunities. First, the lack of an organisational structure and committed leaders may make local events more difficult to plan than regional or national events. Second, local meetings will find it difficult to offer the range of topics and presenters that larger meetings can offer, potentially limiting the appeal for psychology teachers. Third, there are unlikely to be reliable mechanisms of financial support to enable the meetings to thrive. Fourth, for most teachers, giving a presentation at a local event may be less appealing (e.g. may carry less promotion and tenure weight) than presenting at a regional or national conference.

Despite these challenges, creating a local psychology teaching organisation has its own set of unique advantages. First, attendees may be more likely to know others at the annual meetings. Second, the opportunities for longer-term collaborations may be greater than from larger meetings. Third, schedule and financial constraints are typically significantly smaller than those associated with national or international meetings. Fourth, local organisations can take advantage of the diversity of university, community college, and high school psychology teachers and capitalise on that diversity outside of annual meetings that tend to be narrower in scope, focusing either at the high school or higher education level. In particular, a regional meeting increases the chances of attendance among high school and community college teachers who frequently have limited or no travel budgets.

In this paper, we describe the development and maturation of a local psychology

teaching organisation. Since its inception, the goals of this organisation have included providing an annual venue for coverage of teaching topics; generating collaboration opportunities among local institutions of higher education; including high school teachers and developing partnerships with them; and providing resources and connection opportunities to members on a year-round basis.

### **History of PET**

The Nashville/Middle Tennessee area is home to over 27 colleges and universities, including three historically Black colleges/universities (HBCUs) and six community colleges. These institutions reflect a range of size and scope in their psychology departments: Volunteer State Community College is an institution with over 20 full-time and adjunct teachers; Belmont University is a small, private religiously-affiliated school with five faculty members; Tennessee State University (TSU), is an HBCU that is Nashville's only public university, with Masters and Doctoral programmes and 18 faculty members; Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) is a regional comprehensive university with the largest undergraduate student body in the state and a faculty of over 50 teachers; Vanderbilt University is research-intensive university with over 65 faculty members. In addition, many public and private high schools in the area offer Advanced Placement (AP) and regular psychology courses.

Clearly, there are a large number of psychology teachers within the mid-state region. Despite the close physical proximity of these diverse institutions of learning, collaborations and partnerships were infrequent. PET was initiated to create a network among psychology teachers in the middle Tennessee region to share resources, exchange ideas, and increase research and teaching collaborations.

In 2010, a group from TSU, Belmont University, and a Nashville-area high school received a grant from the APS Fund for

Teaching and Public Understanding of Psychological Science, which served to kick-start PET. At the first meeting, we accomplished three major objectives. First, we organised the annual Teaching of Psychology Conference. Second, we compiled and distributed a directory of regional psychology programmes. Third, we created the PET website (<http://psychedtn.wix.com/psychedoftn>).

The PET Steering Committee consists of the authors of this paper, along with additional community college and high school members. Since 2010, PET has benefitted from the support of the participating institutions, as well as from the generosity of textbook publishers and instructional technology vendors. The 2012 PET meeting received an STP Small Grant to support its conference theme of 'Building Bridges' between high schools and colleges.

For the first three years of PET, the conference was free to all attendees. Beginning in 2013, we charged a nominal registration fee (\$10) in order to generate funds to support keynote speakers and other conference expenses. Our typical conference budget ranges between \$2000 and \$3000 (USD). We use these funds to provide a modest stipend (and travel expenses, if necessary) to the keynote speaker, refreshments and lunch to conference attendees, and PET-related supplies and promotional materials.

Over the past five years, we have brought in outside keynote speakers as well as recruited both keynote and breakout speakers from our own ranks. The first PET meeting featured two speakers who discussed racial identity development and diversity issues in psychology teaching and high engagement teaching techniques. Speakers for subsequent meetings discussed the use of instructional technologies in the classroom, teaching online, and teaching controversial topics in the classroom.

### **Conference themes and pragmatics**

During the first five years of PET, conference themes have included using technology in the classroom, building bridges between high

schools, community colleges, and colleges/universities, career advising for psychology majors, and creating engaging learning activities and environments. In addition to the invited keynote speaker(s), there are concurrent breakout sessions, poster presentations, and vendor exhibits. Breakout and concurrent sessions tend to focus on teaching tips and methods, often of interest or targeted to high school or community college teachers. In the poster sessions, institutions provide information about their programmes and individuals present on teaching-related topics. We encourage these sessions to also provide information that is relevant to high school and community college teachers.

The annual meeting provides a venue for the development of collaborations and partnerships in both teaching and research. To encourage this development, we finish each meeting with an open forum. In this final session, we discuss possible topics and speakers for future meetings and ideas for expanding the organisation and making it more effective.

Each year, the annual meeting location rotates among Belmont University, TSU, and MTSU. All of these institutions are within 40 miles of each other. The yearly conference chair is the Steering Committee member from the hosting institution and is responsible for the conference planning and pragmatics on his or her campus. Each year, the host institution typically helps to cover the costs of the meeting. PET has enjoyed good attendance with each conference, averaging between 30 to 40 attendees. Although attendance varies from year to year, the typical breakdown shows around 40 per cent university, 40 per cent community college, and 10 per cent high school teachers.

We have found the Steering Committee structure and the rotating of annual meeting locations to be good for the organisation. Whereas the major time, effort, and stressors associated with planning the meeting fall onto the host institution's committee member, the other committee members provide extensive support as well. The rota-

**Table 1: Evaluation data from two recent PET annual meetings**

Measure	Mean	SD
1. The publicity (announcements, updates, information) for this meeting was adequate.	4.00	0.86
2. This was a good location for the meeting.	4.78	0.53
3. The breakfast and break refreshments were good.	4.18	1.03
4. The lunch meal was good.	4.50	0.64
5. I enjoyed the opportunities to network with teaching colleagues.	4.58	0.55
6. The breakout sessions were beneficial for me.	4.18	0.81
7. As a whole, the meeting did a good job of covering the conference theme.	4.45	0.60
8. The keynote address was useful.	4.54	0.64
9. I would consider attending this event again in the future.	4.82	0.45

Note:  $N=40$ . All items are significantly different from the scale midpoint (3),  $p<.001$ .

tion of the host university also creates less of a yearly financial burden on the participating institutions. The Steering Committee meets two to three times a year to plan the meetings and to ensure that all required components are in place.

### **Evaluation results**

Attendees complete a conference evaluation form each year. Although it varies somewhat from year to year, this form typically includes items about quality or adequacy of the publicity, meeting location, food, and so on. Other items address the opportunities to network, the breakout sessions, and the conference theme. We also use the evaluation form to assess attendee interest in new ideas for PET. Respondents rate the items using a five-point Likert scale (one=strongly disagree, five=strongly agree). Table 1 presents the typical evaluation survey items and attendee responses from two previous years. As the table indicates, participants in the PET meetings have reported very favorable attitudes and experiences.

As part of the conference evaluation form, respondents also answer a series of open-ended questions pertaining to what they most liked and disliked about the meeting, suggestions for upcoming conference themes and keynote speakers, and what

they would like to learn more about at next year's meeting. We use these responses to gauge better what works and what does not and to further encourage PET 'buy-in' and feedback from participants.

There are other ways that we can evaluate the impact of PET in the future. These include examining access and usage data from the organisation's website. We can also measure the impact of the network on teaching throughout the year, by surveying annual meeting participants about their use of PET resources.

### **Plans for expansion**

Our current long-range goals include several ways to continue expanding the resources and services offered by PET beyond the annual meeting. First, we intend to improve the PET website by providing psychology teaching materials and resources (e.g. recommended books and videos, online materials, a member discussion board). Second, we plan to create a researcher database to facilitate communication and collaboration among the member colleges and high schools. This database will include faculty research interests, expertise with specific equipment and software, and data collection opportunities for research samples with greater ethnic and age diversity.

In discussions at our annual meeting, we have learned that there are many events hosted by individual universities and high schools that are not announced to other institutions. A third way that we intend to expand PET is through the development of an opt-in member list-serve or social media page through which we will post announcements of speakers, activities, and other psychology-related events that occur on the member campuses. Finally, we plan to create more opportunities for collaborative research grants among our member institutions. In addition to the broad range of faculty interests and expertise across the PET membership, each of our institutions has its own unique strengths and funding options. We are excited by these plans and anticipate that they will help us to further meet our major goals of creating more collaborations among our the universities, community colleges, and high schools.

Beginning in 2015, we implemented a change to the structure of the annual meeting programme. In particular, we removed concurrent sessions so that all participants are together for the duration of the meeting. We made this change so that no one has to choose between multiple sessions that might be equally appealing and to increase the cohesion of the attendees during the meeting and afterwards. This change originated from feedback on the post-meeting evaluation forms.

Writers have focused attention for some time on creating psychology research opportunities for high school students (e.g. Mattimore, 2004; Wojcik, 2012). PET has discussed the creation of an 'adopt-a-school' programme in which each university partners with a nearby high school for teaching and research purposes. As an illustration of this kind of collaboration, MTSU is developing a research partnership with a local magnet high school. The high school requires students to complete a senior thesis, which includes an external research mentor. Students receive institutional review board (IRB) ethics training and collaborate

with MTSU faculty members on a variety of research projects. They also present their research at local and regional conferences that are held in the spring. MTSU faculty members visit the high school, speak to psychology classes, and serve as mentors for student projects. This partnership is a win-win situation for both institutions. The university researchers have the chance to recruit high school students to their institution and to their psychology research topics, while the high school provides high-level research opportunities to its students and information and experiences that should help students in their transition to college (Cohen et al., 2008).

### **Challenges with developing and maintaining PET**

We hope that we have made it clear that PET is on a positive trajectory and has a great deal of potential for further development. Despite this status, we have encountered several challenges and barriers with moving PET forward. First, funding for the organisation and annual meeting is very limited. Our funding often forces us to recruit local rather than regional or national keynote speakers. It also limits the quality of support we can provide to attendees, such as refreshments, meals, handouts, and PET-related paraphernalia. Alternatively, a benefit of limited funding is that we are forced to keep things simple. In particular, we do not try to do too much or grow too large – we keep the annual meeting short (typically three to four hours), increasing the chances that teachers new to PET might attend and that past participants will return.

Another challenge is our lack of administrative support. Because of the nature of the organisation, we are unable to support full-time staff or even provide compensation to part-time staffers. All of the work falls to the Steering Committee and its members' ability to plan and accomplish tasks themselves or with help from their home institutions. This situation requires a cohesive and dedicated Steering Committee that is willing to

provide support when necessary. We recommend a minimum of four members for such a committee. We have found that rotating the campus location among the Steering Committee members has worked very well for planning and implementation of the annual meeting. This rotation balances the workload and decreases the chances of burnout among committee members.

A third challenge for PET involves finding themes for the yearly conference that will appeal to all levels of psychology educators. Our conference evaluation form is essential for addressing this challenge, since we encourage attendees to suggest meeting themes and other topics that they would like to see covered in the future. To date, we have chosen themes that are attractive to PET members, reflect their stated interests, and encourage their return to the yearly meetings.

Other challenges involve mainly pragmatic issues. For example, when planning the annual meeting, we must take into account the schedules of the colleges and universities and the high schools. Breaks often do not fall at the same time for different institutions. We have always held the annual meeting on a Saturday, which sometimes limits high school teacher attendance because the weekends are frequently their only time off. Scheduling the meeting for a weekday might increase high school attendance but at the same time reduce college teacher participation. If one's country or region does not provide the resources and support for high schools that professional organisations in UK and US do, this can limit efforts to build bridges and create partnerships with high school teachers. Our managing and maintaining the PET website has also been challenging, because different individuals (college staff or Steering Committee members) have taken responsibility for the site at different times. Recruiting or assigning a single individual to manage this aspect of the organisation is a good idea.

## **Conclusion**

In its brief existence, PET has proven to be very effective at meeting its major goal of developing and maintaining teaching collaborations among a wide range of local institutions. The core group of regular attendees has developed into a network of local peers and additional institutions have participated as word about the organisation has spread. It is crucial to identify a Steering Committee of teachers and faculty members who are willing and able to devote the necessary time and energy to such a venture. We schedule our annual meetings in the fall, which is a time when there is somewhat less competition with other teaching and research conferences. We encourage other institutions, particularly those that can draw on a large pool of local colleges, universities, and secondary schools, to consider 'taking the plunge' to meet the psychology teaching needs of their nearby colleagues and peers.

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