

10 Tips on How to Organize and Promote Diverse and Inclusive Panels and Keynotes

Diverse perspectives and backgrounds make better panels and speaker rosters. A wide variety of voices and perspectives challenge the audience (and participants) to think differently about the topic. This variety generates far more dynamic and engaging discussions, with less repetition of the same talking points.

As an Invited Speaker, Panelist, or Moderator

When you are asked to participate in or moderate a panel or give a keynote address, inquire from the conference organizers about the other panelists or speakers. Let the organizers know that you expect diversity to be represented, and that you will have to decline the invitation if you are going to be one of many others representing the same perspective or demographic, also known as an “Inclusion Rider” (see “Yet Another List...”).

As an Organizer

Look for speakers far beyond your personal network.

(see “How to Diversify Your Professional Network”). Invite speakers one to two degrees separated from you. You can find these individuals by asking your network for names and contact details of experts whose voices are typically underrepresented in the topic area, asking invitees who decline for recommendations (specifically for women or underrepresented minorities), and contacting relevant professional society chapters representing affinity groups (e.g., African American female engineers, LGBTQ computer scientists, Veterans small business associations, etc.).

Give yourself enough time.

Forming panels with many new people takes more time, effort, and preparation than forming panels and inviting speakers who are well-known to you and have been asked previously.

Give yourself enough support.

Diverse panels and speakers require more people on a search committee than within-network, less diverse panels. Be sure that you have sufficient staff to find, invite, plan, and work with more diverse panels and speakers. A diverse search committee and staff can help with Tip 1, but it is not a guarantee since they may share the same, less diverse network as you. Make sure everyone on the search committee is committed to diversifying

the line-up before proceeding.

Invite underrepresented individuals FIRST.

To guarantee participation reflecting the demographics of the topic, you may have to adjust the days, times, and/or location of the event to allow those individuals to participate. You may also have to invite more than you think are necessary, since these individuals often have more constraints on their time and may need to cancel at the last minute due to caretaking responsibilities. After you have their acceptance, then fill in the remaining slots with speakers who are typically well represented.

Consider the topic and set your goals.

If it is focused on or likely to impact specific communities (demographic, geographic, cultural), prioritize the participation of several individuals from that community. If, after a lot of effort, you can only identify speakers from one demographic group, consider broadening your topic.

Organize the event in a room with videoconferencing technology.

Consider meshing in-person and video-conferenced individuals; this capability will reduce the impact of last-minute emergencies and allow overcommitted individuals to participate. Make sure to offer presenters disability accommodations, as well as review the event venue to ensure disability accommodations are available for attendees.

Avoid tokenism.

The only woman or underrepresented individual on a panel should not be asked to speak for all people who identify in this way. To avoid that situation, aim to have the panel represent the demographics of the topic.

Support diverse panels and speakers with necessary resources.

Some demographic groups may not have access to the same institutional support that allows others to participate in conferences more easily. Provide the necessary support that makes it equally easy for all individuals to travel to and participate in events.

Offer training and other participation support.

Some of your panelists and speakers may have never participated as a panelist or speaker before, or ever attended a similar event. Provide them with information on the format of the event and the anticipated audience, how they can make their participation successful, and what are typical expectations (e.g., using PowerPoint, reading from a prepared statement, etc.).

Organize practice panels and keynote speeches in your unit for early career individuals.

Help them learn the format and provide them with constructive feedback. This has been called the “farm team” or “feeder team” approach, cultivating up-and-coming talent for future panels and speaker slots (“Putting an End...”).

Finally, should you end up with a panel or speaker roster that is missing key voices, seriously consider the message you are sending; maybe it is time to regroup and rebuild until you can offer diversity. If you choose to go ahead, take time to acknowledge those missing voices at the start of the event.

As an Attendee

Actively listen to the diverse perspectives on a panel.

Having expectations is part of our cognitive make-up, but with deliberate action we can become better listeners and benefit from the diverse voices organizers make efforts to provide.

If you find yourself attending a panel that appears not to be diverse, listen with an open mind. Not all diversity is visible.

If you find yourself at a panel at which a single point of view is being expressed and reinforced, point this out during the panel and do what you can to provide or to make a space for others to provide additional viewpoints. Follow up with panel organizers with this list of tips for how to organize diverse panels or rosters of keynote speakers.

Sources

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