

SPS Zone 7, 8, and 9 Meeting, Fall 2010

(Hosted by Eastern Michigan University)

The goal of our zone meeting was to gather SPS chapters throughout zones 7, 8, and 9 so we could exchange organization experiences, provide a platform for active physicists to reach out to the student community, and instill camaraderie and communication among future physicists. We wanted participants of this event to leave with a broader perspective of the physics community and their opportunities within it. The overarching theme of the meeting was that physics has broad applications (academia, industry, entertainment, policymaking, etc.)

Some of the events we had planned were a Halloween costume contest, a trip to our observatory, student talks/posters, physics jeopardy, talks from guest speakers, an “ethical issues in physics” breakout session, and a pumpkin catapult contest.

Hosting a zone meeting of this size brought with it a lot of logistical concerns, but in spite of this, the event ran very smoothly. One of our biggest obstacles was lodging. We wanted lodging to be affordable and convenient for attendees of the meeting. Thankfully, our university’s recreation center offered us the building at cost for the night. We used the center for check-in, our costume contest, night time activities, and breakfast. We were given access to the entire building, and essentially had a “lock-in” for the evening.

Pizza for Friday (22 October) evening was ordered from Mr. Pizza. Breakfast was a continental arrangement purchased from Sam’s Club. Lunch was delivered by Eastern Catering Services. Food was the greatest expense of the event, but we were able to provide for everyone.

Saturday’s (23 October) activities were held at a set of rooms in our university library (Halle). We were able to rent out rooms (including a very nice conference room) at no cost. We provided easels for the student posters and audio/video systems for student talks. We used the conference room for invited speakers’ talks and for physics jeopardy. Breakout sessions on ethical issues in physics were held in the conference room and adjoining rooms.

While the event went very well, we missed our mark in a number of areas: We were able to cover physics in industry and academia very well, but were unable to get speakers from entertainment (special effects coordinators, writers, etc.) or policymaking. Probably the biggest reason for this is the fact that speakers from these areas tend to be high-profile, and are either unavailable or too costly to afford. We invited 11 Nobel Laureates, members for the Department of Energy, and a number of television figures (Bill Nye, Mythbusters, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Michio Kaku etc.). Even getting one high-profile speaker

would have guaranteed a much greater attendance to the meeting. It also would have been an excellent way to get non-members interested in the organization.

Getting participation in the costume contest and pumpkin catapult was also difficult. While it was clear from talking to various groups that they were interested in the catapult contest, it seemed that they were unable to organize and build their devices in the time that we gave them. Much of this has to do with the time of year that we hosted it; while we announced the zone meeting and pumpkin catapult contest in August, we couldn't organize a website with rules for the contests until a month before the event. Word of the meeting didn't seem to really spread until two weeks before the event. Fall semester zone meetings with such contests definitely require announcement as early as spring.

Funding the event was also very difficult, and would have been impossible without the \$250 advance from National and direct assistance from our Department of Physics. The bulk of registration for the event came in after the selected due date, and left us with very limited options for housing the event and feeding the attendees (though we ended up very fortunate in both regards). While members of our chapter worked very hard, we didn't seem to have the manpower to both organize the event and advertise it effectively. More effective advertising would have given us much more of the in-advance funding (from registration fees) we needed to order food and prizes. Our Zone's advertising resources, and SPS National's advertising resources were not used effectively in this regard.

In spite of these set-backs, the event was *very* well-received. Academia tends to take center-stage at these conferences, but for our meeting, opportunities in industry were far better-illuminated. We were also able to provide a solid forum for students to present their current and past research efforts. The students really appreciated this chance to present their research to their peers and the faculty members and speakers who attended.

Our speakers were excellent. Our first speaker was from the University of Michigan and talked to us about materials science. Our second speaker was from our Physics department, and lectured on ethical issues in physics (with a break-out session for discussion). The third was an ex-truck driver who went into industry. Our final speaker was a researcher from Ford. The overall message of the speakers was that the discipline you receive from a physics education gives you a great advantage in the "real world", a physics education gives you great mobility/adaptability, and a scientific education gives leaves you with a certain amount of social responsibility. Attendees left the talks both sobered and inspired.

This event was an excellent opportunity for both the members who attended and people who helped host it. The active discussion between physics students across the country and the wisdom provided by experienced physicists gave us something that is difficult to provide in the classroom. We all learned so much from the event, and are very grateful for the assistance we received in hosting it. We all left with a broader view of the world of physics, and with a renewed desire to be a part of it. The zone meeting was a success.