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The format of and preparation for a typical research conference are familiar to many professionals—the poster sessions, lectern sessions, and committee meetings set months in advance so that attendees can plan their schedules. But what if conference planning was turned on its head? What if attendees had no prepared conference program and what if sessions were planned on the spot by participants, so that neither the attendees nor the organizers knew the content of all of the sessions until after the conference actually started?

TransportationCamp, called an "unconference," answers these questions. The camps are a series of events held across the country and hosted by different organizations. The Washington, D.C., TransportationCamp is held on the Saturday before the TRB Annual Meeting in January and is organized by Mobility Lab, an Arlington, Virginia–based non-profit transportation research and advocacy organization.

Developing a Conference Onsite

At these unconferences, attendees submit session proposals upon arrival. Each participant writes a proposed title, session format (e.g., a slide presentation with a question-and-answer period, a panel discussion, a brainstorming session, or a demonstration of innovative transportation software), and any other relevant information on a piece of paper and submits it to the organizers.

Organizers then select a variety of proposals, using their discretion to determine the topics that will be of greatest interest to attendees, and arrange the sessions in a large grid on the wall so that attendees can view the schedule and select which sessions...
to attend. The sessions are sorted into hour-long periods, offering a variety of topics for attendees to choose from. If two proposals have similar topics, the organizers and presenters can decide to merge them into a single session—allowing for spontaneous collaboration between people who may have never met before.

The sessions in each period are not grouped by theme; rather, when planning each period, organizers strive for a variety of sessions that represent multiple transportation modes and mobility concerns and try to avoid overlaps of similar or complementary sessions. After the periods—typically four or five per camp—are over, attendees can network at a reception and continue the day’s discussions.

At the 2018 TransportationCamp D.C., some attendees resumed their conversations the following day at the Innovation Caucus, held during the opening reception for the Exhibit Hall at the TRB Annual Meeting. The Caucus offered a casual forum for innovators to discuss ideas for a new transportation product or service and to take their ideas from proof of concept to a live business.

Since 2010, TransportationCamps have taken place throughout the United States and Canada, including in New York City; Houston, Texas; Atlanta, Georgia; Toronto, Ontario; and Los Angeles, California. Holding the camps in diverse locations has allowed for robust discussions of various transportation issues and for the events to reflect each region’s unique demographic characteristics and issues.

TransportationCamp D.C.
The biggest and longest-running of the camps, TransportationCamp D.C. draws those who want to get an early start on the Annual Meeting as well as those who only are able to attend weekend events. The cost of the camp is subsidized by several corporate sponsors; this helps ensure participation by students and young professionals. The registration fee generally is $50 or less, and student discounts are offered.

This year’s D.C. camp drew approximately 400 people from private, public, nonprofit, and academic organizations in the engineering, planning, advocacy, and technology sectors. Attendees hailed not just from the Washington, D.C., metro area, but also from around the country and the world.

According to Paul Mackie, Mobility Lab’s Director of Research and Communications, more than half of Transportation Camp D.C.’s attendees every year are students or young professionals, who appreciate that the session-planning structure allows everyone to have an equal voice in developing and managing sessions.

Other participants are further along in their careers, attending TransportationCamp because they find it invigorating to learn about students’ and younger professionals’ new ideas and because they are curious about what others have to say, Mackie notes. These seasoned professionals can learn about emerging topics and the concerns of the next generation of transportation researchers and practitioners.

Informal and Innovative
Although the TRB Annual Meeting includes research that has been rigorously peer-reviewed before the conference, TransportationCamp focuses more on transportation innovations and how those innovations are applied across sectors. Many attendees describe themselves as “transportation nerds” and are eager to spend the day with academics, practitioners, and professionals who are equally passionate about transportation policy, innovation, and infrastructure.

TransportationCamp’s informal nature is part of its appeal—the variety of session formats generally allow for highly interactive discussions. These formats include laid-back discussion groups, lightning talks, and PechaKucha presentations—that is, 20
slides shown for 20 seconds each. Attendees are encouraged to “vote with their feet” and to move among sessions while they are going on, based on session quality or personal interest.

During sessions, a designated attendee takes notes in a document that is made available online during and after TransportationCamp for other attendees and the general public. Participants can also add to or revise the notes, much like a Wikipedia entry.

The notes from TransportationCamp D.C. are available at the event’s website, under “Propose a Session.” According to Mackie, 60 to 70 percent of the sessions at the 2018 TransportationCamp D.C. are documented online, making it possible to track ideas and outcomes of the various discussions.

**Getting Started**

The nearly 10-hour Washington, D.C., event began with breakfast and a welcome from Mackie, who encouraged attendees to tweet throughout the day using the #Transpo18 hashtag. According to Mackie, in 2017, TransportationCamp D.C. trended nationally on Twitter for five hours. Mackie announced later that the 2018 camp was a top nationally trending hashtag for eight straight hours during the event.

After the welcome remarks, each of the 400 attendees introduced themselves to the group using three words that best described them or their transportation interests. Some introductions, like “state legislatures matter,” revealed attendees’ place of employment; others, like “jargon confuses people,” described pet peeves; and yet others, like “pedestrian safety rocks,” “women bike together,” and “I’ll model that,” described transportation passions. “Need more coffee” reflected the start time of 8:30 a.m., and “we are hiring” and “need a job” demonstrated the desire of participants to network with one another.

After the introductions, attendees began to propose session ideas. The camp offered five one-hour time slots, with each time slot offering 12 to 13 sessions for a total of 62. Although the 12 sessions in the first time slot were chosen in advance, the remaining 50 were proposed and selected during the introductions and the first session. Most of the 2018 sessions can be categorized broadly into the following topics:

- Connected-automated vehicles,
- Big data,
- Public transit,
- Shared mobility,
- Pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure,
- Accessibility and equity issues for specific populations, and
- Transportation governance.

**Examples of Sessions**

The use of innovative data collection efforts to examine a large number of transit systems was the topic of a session by Dan Malouff of the Arlington County Division of Transportation. In “Eleven Things I Learned When I Looked up the Busiest Bus Lines in Every U.S. City,” Malouff demonstrated how, through
crowdsourcing, he collected data on the busiest bus lines in the 70 largest U.S. and Canadian urban areas to examine ridership trends. He then was able to determine the highest-ridership bus line in most of these urban areas.

According to Malouff’s findings, cities with lines that have an average daily ridership of 25,000 or more are rare, and lines with a daily ridership of less than 8,000 are not optimal. During the ensuing discussion, attendees brought up questions that included the following:

- How do bus rapid transit lines appear in the data?
- What conditions result in high ridership peaks versus low ridership peaks?
- Can these data work as a proxy for overall transit ridership?

At the end of his presentation, Malouff provided a link to an online spreadsheet so that attendees could input ridership numbers for other U.S. and Canadian cities he is looking to examine.

Another session, “At the Movies,” used a multimedia approach to examine transit agency advertising approaches. In this session, Paul Mackie joined Lisa Berardi Marflak, TRB’s Communications Director, and Aimee Custis, Deputy Director for the Coalition for Smarter Growth, to show seven videos produced by U.S. and Canadian transit agencies.

Each video promoted a particular transit system, and after each one played, Marflak, Mackie, and Custis scored it on a scale of one to ten and explained their scores. They commented on the extent to which each video was accessible to the general public, its production value, and whether each video’s length allowed it to communicate its message effectively. Audience members provided additional commentary, leaving with the takeaway lesson that the most-effective videos include both a goal and a call to action—regardless of a high-end or budget production value.

“The Role of U.S. DOT: Laws, Regs, Funding, Policy? What Do You Think—An Open Discussion” featured a dialogue about the role and challenges of the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT). In this session, Eric Plosky, Chief of Transportation Planning at U.S. DOT’s Volpe Center, asked attendees to consider both the role of the agency and the extent to which U.S. DOT’s resources are aligned with its strategic plan for 2018 through 2022.

First, attendees shared their perceptions of the primary roles of U.S. DOT. The dozen or so items they came up with included the following: making transportation-related funding decisions, drafting environmental impact statements, and facilitating the use of open-source data. Attendees then discussed the U.S. DOT’s Strategic Plan and considered the role of the courts in U.S. DOT rulemaking.

In addition, participants also discussed how U.S. DOT employees can strike a balance between exercising leadership in implementing the agency’s programs and policies and carrying out the priorities of the current presidential administration. At the session’s conclusion, attendees better understood how they can shape U.S. DOT’s mission as it fulfills its Strategic Plan.

Looking Toward the Future

Several additional camps have occurred or are planned throughout 2018, including Atlanta in February; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Boston, Massachusetts, in April; Baltimore, Maryland, in May; and Ithaca, New York, in June. Other camps may also take place in Iowa, Colorado, and California.

According to Mackie, groups can contact him about how they can host their own Transportation Camp and he will provide advice on planning logistics and will publicize the event through Mobility Lab. He adds that Mobility Lab is working on a guidance document for anyone interested in planning their own camp. The motivations for those seeking to plan their own camps are varied: many camp planners are seeking ways to innovate and effect change in organizations that often are described as too bureaucratic. Other camp planners wish to create a forum to learn about cutting-edge trends in the transportation field and to facilitate networking among a diverse array of professionals.

Learn More

For more information or to attend a Transportation Camp, visit transportationcamp.org. As in years past, the 2019 Transportation Camp D.C. will be held on the Saturday before the TRB Annual Meeting in January.