

The Midwest Universities Analytical Chemistry Conference: Still the Midwest's Secret Weapon?

The Midwest Universities Analytical Chemistry Conference (MUACC) is a small and exciting meeting of the “U.S. Midwest” analytical community, with attendees coming from a number of universities, both large and small.

The first MUACC conference was held in 1947, and it is still going strong after almost 70 years. George Morrison, as Editor of *Analytical Chemistry*, wrote an editorial in 1985 describing MUACC as the Midwest’s “secret weapon.” He pointed out that the talks of MUACC were informal, dealt with research in progress, and generated considerable discussions, and the meeting had strong participation of young academics from many smaller institutions. Perhaps surprisingly, Editor Morrison’s points on MUACC are still true after another 30 years.

When describing a small scientific meeting, many think of well-defined topical meetings such as the Gordon Conferences. While the Gordon Conferences are certainly an effective meeting format, MUACC is anything but well-defined. Overall, it is a dynamic and high energy meeting that includes many opportunities to learn about interesting science outside of our own well-defined research. This year, MUACC 2016 was held on my campus at the University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign and had nearly 90 attendees. Prof. Joaquín Rodríguez-López (UIUC) deserves credit for his outstanding job in organizing the 2016 meeting. About one-third of the attendees were advanced graduate students and postdoctoral research associates, about a third were professors from a range of smaller schools, and one-third were professors from larger universities.

Every time I attend, I learn new and exciting science; this year, I also learned U.S. geography in that Oregon and North Carolina may now be in the Midwest. At least, faculty from these areas attended. Could it be that the Midwest is extending into new geographical areas that contain high quality measurement science?

More seriously, talks included a description of a new course combining analytical chemistry and art history, efforts to discover mosquito attractants in specific species of birds, and issues related to pharmaceutical formulation stability. Other topics included pedagogy, how to turn your research group into a business, more typical research talks, and perhaps most importantly, multiple talks that highlighted an issue with a research topic followed by a discussion on how to solve the problem.

The talks are chalk talks—2016 style. While originally chalk talks involved the speaker writing and drawing their talks on a chalk board, this year we used white boards and an iPad with drawing software. Why “chalk talks?” Goals of chalk talks include the desire to slow talks down and to encourage the speakers to focus on their science and not their data. This format is not something many of the younger students and faculty have seen often; outside of MUACC, many said that they have not attended a conference that required chalk talks. I will add that the creativity of “cheating” is amazing; one speaker wore a shirt with a complex illustration and pointed out items

on their shirt as they did not want to draw them. Overall, the chalk talks were effective and encouraged audience participation.

According to many faculty that I talked to about the meeting, a benefit of MUACC is that the audience includes attendees from both smaller undergraduate institutions and larger Ph.D. granting universities. The advanced students, postdoctoral associates, and faculty had lots of time to interact. Many mentioned that they did not skip any sessions because the topics were so diverse—they never knew what would be exciting. I overheard several new collaborations starting and several individuals planning to visit neighboring universities; these occurrences are signs of an effective conference.

While this format of meeting has become less common in the U.S.A., I am sure there are many examples of exciting small and broad analytical meetings worldwide that help to keep our field dynamic and continue to attract the best educators and researchers into our field. What is happening in your part of the world?

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■ AUTHOR INFORMATION

Notes

Views expressed in this editorial are those of the author and not necessarily the views of the ACS.

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