

Member's Forum

AAAI Conference's "Conservative Style"

I would like to add my support to Lawrence Hunter's proposal to modify the review process for the National Conference on Artificial Intelligence (NCAI).

For some time now, I, too, have been disappointed with the majority of papers presented at NCAI—not with the quality of the papers but with the conservative style. I would leave a paper session thinking that AI is progressing but at a painstakingly slow pace! Someone, somewhere must be doing some really innovative research, but why isn't he or she presenting this work at the premier AI conference?

Allowing controversial papers but maintaining the quality criteria is a needed improvement for NCAI and AI in general. A controversial paper would encourage, if not force, debate and dialogue that would be beneficial to all. *AI Magazine* could facilitate this debate by continuing the discussion in print, possibly in the Member's Forum.

I hope Lawrence Hunter's proposal is accepted if not permanently, then experimentally.

Dennis Heher
Scotts Valley, Calif.

AAAI-94 Program Cochairs Reveal Plans to Revitalize the Conference

In recent years, there has been increasing concern in the AI community that the National Conference has become too specialized, that it focuses narrowly on incremental results of mature research in particular paradigms, and that it no longer represents the true diversity of AI research. Causes of the present situation and possible responses have produced lively debate at recent Conference Program Committee meetings, at AAAI Council meetings,

and in the *AI Magazine* Member's Forum. Some colleagues feel that the conference is doing a good job upholding high standards for accepted papers; expanding the conference implies lowering standards. Others feel that the present standards are high, but also biased toward particular research paradigms; expanding the conference implies expanding review criteria, not lowering standards. Some colleagues feel that a highly selective conference allows researchers to produce prestigious publications that advance their careers. Others feel that this function is better served by journals, while the conference should provide a forum for communication and interaction among a larger number of researchers. Despite these differences, there is a growing consensus that the conference has become too conservative and too exclusive. It has lost the atmosphere of excitement, innovation, controversy, and intellectual engagement that characterized earlier AAAI conferences and, more importantly, that continues to characterize AI research.

As program cochairs of the 1994 conference, we are responding directly to popular demand for revitalization of the conference. Our strategy is to expand active participation in the conference to include a more representative cross-section of the AI community and its research activities. As indicated in the 1994 Call for Papers (in this issue of the *AI Magazine*), we invite submission of papers that "describe theoretical, empirical, or experimental results; represent areas of AI that may have been under-represented in recent conferences; present promising new research concepts, techniques, or perspectives; or discuss issues that cross traditional sub-disciplinary boundaries." We are introducing a new student abstract and poster session so that pre-Ph.D. students can present their work in its early stages to their peers and to more



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senior researchers. We have expanded review criteria for the technical program, effectively increasing the number of ways in which a submitted paper can qualify for acceptance. Most importantly, we have revised the review procedure to encourage acceptance of a larger number and broader range of papers, as discussed below. (This procedure supersedes the one described in the preliminary *Call* distributed at AAAI-93.)

1. Each paper will be assigned to three reviewers and a supervising area chair. Assignments will be based on individuals' prior identification of papers they are qualified to evaluate (based on papers' titles, content areas, and electronic abstracts), corrected for conflicts of interest, and blind to authors' names and institutions. In the past, each paper received two reviews and, if necessary, a third tie-breaker. Including a third reviewer and a supervising area chair will reduce error in the review process and give a paper two extra chances to get a positive evaluation. Since positive reviews will carry more weight than negative reviews in the decision process, this will increase a paper's chance of acceptance.

2. A paper's three reviewers will review it independently. When all of the reviews have been submitted, they will be redistributed to all three reviewers and the paper's area chair. The reviewers will then discuss the paper by electronic mail or telephone and inform the area chair of any changes in their reviews. However, they are not obliged to reach consensus and will be instructed to maintain honestly held evaluations regardless of other reviewers' opinions. This protocol is intended to support productive discussion of a paper, while protecting its positive reviews from the negative biases of group decision processes.

3. The area chair will review a paper's three reviews and recommend acceptance or rejection. If two or three reviewers favor acceptance, the area chair will recommend acceptance. If only one reviewer favors acceptance, the area chair can still recommend acceptance if, for example, the area chair agrees with the positive reviewer, thinks the positive reviewer makes a good case for acceptance, thinks the disagreement among reviewers reflects a disagreement in the field, or thinks the paper would promote interesting discussion in the field. Area chairs, who will be selected for broad perspective and open-mindedness as well as for area-specific expertise, will be encouraged to recommend acceptance of these papers.

4. Area chairs will meet as a group in March, 1994 to discuss all papers submitted to the conference. Individuals will defend their accept/reject recommendations for papers they supervise, with appropriate adjustments made following group discussion. Area chairs will work together to ensure that we achieve our goal of expanding conference participation and that we do so in a manner that is consistent across different sub-disciplines of AI. Final decisions on all papers rest with the program cochairs.

The revised review procedure departs significantly from the procedure employed during the last several years. We think the changes are warranted by the community's growing demand for a more inclusive and varied conference and by the failure of previous subtler efforts to meet

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this objective. With the revised procedure, we are committed to accepting more papers and a greater variety of papers for the 1994 conference. Whether or not this restores the "atmosphere of excitement, innovation, controversy, and intellectual engagement" we want at our conference depends on one crucial variable: *you*. We can accept only papers that are submitted. So, please submit

your most important, exciting, interesting, innovative, or controversial papers to the AAAI-94 conference.

Barbara Hayes-Roth
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Richard Korf
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Attendance at the AAAI Business Meeting

I was distressed to see that only one of the 12 (or 16) current AAAI councilors bothered to show up for the AAAI Annual Business Meeting this year. The AAAI Annual Business Meeting is the only official meeting where members can talk to the people who run the AAAI. It seems to me that if executive council members are serious about their job, they would show up at this meeting.

Perhaps these absent members view lunch with fellow colleagues as more important than meeting with the people who elected them?

Peter Patel-Schneider
Murray Hill, NJ

AAAI President Barbara Grosz Responds:

The Executive Committee of AAAI, which comprises the President, the President-Elect, the Past President, the Treasurer, and the Executive Director, always attend the Annual Business Meeting. This meeting is the time at which the presidency is officially transferred and a financial overview of the organization is presented to members. Members are also encouraged to bring to discussion issues of concern, suggestions for new activities and the like. However, this meeting is only one of several mechanisms by which information flows among members and the AAAI Council and office. E-mail exchanges, conversations at conferences and symposia, and even pages of the *AI Magazine* are frequently used, and typically more popular, conduits.

The AAAI Executive Council members meet twice each year at all day meetings to discuss AAAI business. Minutes of these meetings are published in the *AI Magazine* as is a full financial statement. Most Council members also chair or participate in the many smaller subcommittees that do the bulk of the work entailed in carrying out and overseeing AAAI's programs (e.g. the conference, workshops, symposia). Because each subcommittee reports to the Council at its meetings, members are kept informed of the work of these committees through the general Council minutes.

AAAI exists for its members and can function only with the volunteer efforts of many people. All of us in official positions depend on support from the full membership. We encourage communication and suggestions from members at any time, not just at the Business Meeting.

Barbara J. Grosz
President, AAAI



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