Rethinking the Conference Reviewing Process

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Panelists: Anastassia Ailamaki (Carnegie Mellon), Philip A. Bernstein (Microsoft), David DeWitt (Wisconsin), Alon Halevy (Washington), Zachary Ives (U Penn), and Gerhard Weikum (Max Planck Institute)

In recent years the database research community has endeavored to expand the scope of the field and attract a larger and more varied base of participants. We have also long worked at "educating" academic tenure committees and research management about the importance of our major conferences. We may now be seeing some unintended effects of our success. There is a growing dissatisfaction with conference reviewing from all sides of the process. Many now perceive the process to be "broken". A number of factors can be identified as precipitating the discontent:

- The number of submitted papers has spiked dramatically in recent years (see Figure 1).

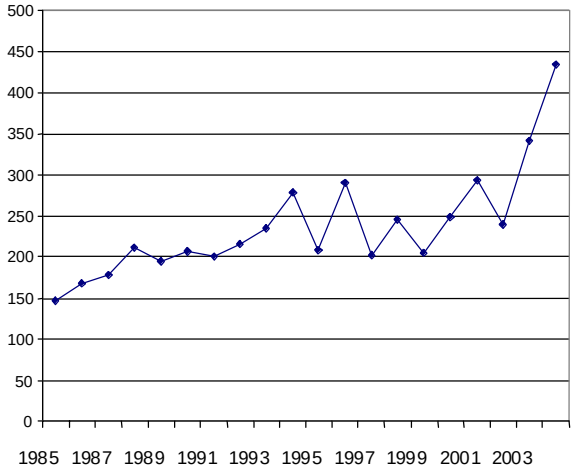


Figure 1 - SIGMOD Submissions 1985-2004

- To keep reviewing loads relatively stable, PC sizes have also increased (see Figure 2).
- Because of PC size, improved online tools, and overcommitted researchers, face-to-face PC meetings are not always held. When held they may be poorly attended.
- Due to the previous points, serving on a major PC is neither the honor nor the educational experience it once was, and PC members are less motivated and less accountable.
- The increasing breadth of our field has made it impossible for any one PC member to be expert enough to review a wide swath of submissions, and makes it difficult for the PC as a whole to compare papers from different sub-areas.

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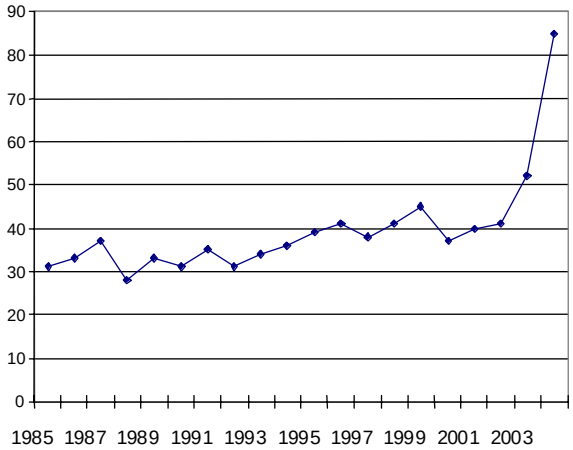


Figure 2 - SIGMOD PC Size 1985-2004

Much hand-wringing has been taking place over these problems, but only a few relatively conservative concrete changes have occurred. The trends seem to be significant, however, deserving serious attention. This panel is intended to initiate and foster open dialogue on the issues.

The panel will explore a variety of solutions to the problems outlined above, including but not limited to:

- The two-phase (early reject) review process used e.g., in SIGCOMM conferences.
- Reducing the size of the PC with an expectation of it being much more work but also being much more rewarding.
- Introducing a hierarchical PC structure as in ICDE.
- Having far more accepted papers with a corresponding change in conference structure, most likely several classes of accepted papers (e.g., presentation, poster, paper-only).
- Moving to a community-based, open on-line reviewing process with an oversight board and "all-volunteer" PC.
- Disincentives for submitting (or resubmitting) papers.
- Coordinating the major database conferences so that reviews follow a paper through the resubmission process.
- Developing innovative new publication venues.

The panel consists of the SIGMOD PC chairs from 1979, 1983, and 2002-2005, as well as two Assistant Professors with a significant stake in the process. The large number of panelists will enable the representation of a wide-ranging set of views. Formal presentations will be kept brief to keep the session lively. We expect this to be a very interactive panel. Panelists and audience members will, however, be discouraged from complaining specifically about the unfair treatment of any of their particular paper submissions (i.e., no whining).