

Implementing Collaboration and Structure: Bolstering USC AIAA in the Aerospace Community

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I. Summary

The University of South Carolina (USC) AIAA Student Branch represents one of the fastest growing aerospace communities in AIAA Region II. While approximately 30 members actively participate in regular events, over 90 students are registered AIAA members, reflecting the rapid expansion of aerospace interest at USC. The aerospace program within the Molinaroli College of Engineering and Computing (MCEC) has experienced record-breaking incoming classes in recent years, driving exponential growth in student organizations. The USC AIAA branch hosts more than a dozen events annually, including technical workshops on CAD software and composite manufacturing, industry guest lectures, and professional networking socials. The branch is advised by Dr. Wout De Backer, recently recognized with the AIAA Faculty Advisor Award, whose mentorship has been instrumental in both branch development and conference planning. Being a relatively new branch, USC had never hosted the AIAA Region II Student Conference. Hosting represented an opportunity to establish USC as a premier aerospace institution within the region, strengthen regional collaboration, and demonstrate the maturity of our student organization. For executive leadership, the effort also served as a meaningful way to give back to an organization that has significantly shaped our academic and professional development. Planning for the 2025 AIAA Region II Student Conference formally began in August, approximately seven months prior to the March 26–27 event. Although the timeline was compressed, USC AIAA quickly established an internal conference committee composed of six officers and student leaders. Rather than rigid role assignments, responsibilities were distributed according to existing leadership positions within the branch, allowing each officer to contribute to conference planning using their own experience. Early coordination relied heavily on biweekly meetings with AIAA Region II leadership. As planning matured, supplemental finance-focused meetings were introduced, and regional coordination has since transitioned to weekly engagements. Over time, the committee formalized its management structure through a centralized “master” Excel document containing financial tracking, scheduling, task lists, and personnel assignments. This document became the integral to accountability and progress monitoring. Securing appropriate facilities presented early challenges due to the late planning start and limited venue capacity in Columbia, SC. Through collaboration with university administration, USC AIAA obtained an on-campus venue capable of supporting the anticipated 300+ attendees, with 328 currently registered from institutions across the region. The program will feature student technical presentations alongside three invited speakers, including keynote and banquet addresses, creating a professionally structured regional event. Hosting the AIAA Region II Student Conference has underscored the importance of early institutional coordination and deliberate planning structure. While USC AIAA formally began organizing in August, future hosts should initiate the process at least 9–12 months in advance, particularly to secure written support and resource commitments from their college, department, and university administration. Early alignment with institutional stakeholders significantly reduces downstream constraints in venue selection, budgeting, and contracting. Equally important is taking time to plan the planning process itself. Clearly defining conference requirements, deliverables, timelines, and leadership roles at the outset would streamline execution and prevent inefficiencies. Although responsibilities were distributed among officers based on position, more formally defined roles and responsibilities would improve planning execution. From a leadership perspective, this effort has been a lesson in delegation and team management. Successfully hosting a conference of this scale requires a core group of committed students who can be trusted to execute their responsibilities independently. Without a reliable team structure, the workload can quickly lead to burnout. For first-time hosts especially, building and empowering a dedicated planning committee is essential. Ultimately, the experience demonstrates that hosting is not only a logistical endeavor, but a leadership development opportunity that strengthens organizational capacity.

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