

Students and SIGGRAPH

There are hundreds of them, clad with red or blue vests, yet we often manage to overlook them. They come from across the world, and are part of the big behind-the-scenes organization that enables the SIGGRAPH conference to run. Although it's been around almost since the inception of the conference, few attendees (except of course those who were volunteers in past years) know exactly how the Student Volunteer Program works.



The Student Volunteers Headquarters

The first step to joining the Student Volunteer Program usually takes place back in February. This is when students can submit their application to be considered for the program. The application consists mainly of writing three essays, that help the selection committee assess the reasons a student wants to attend, how much he or she will benefit from the conference, how well he or she will be able to contribute and help attendees enjoy the conference, and in what capacity. For example the student must describe a stressful situation, and how he/she handled this situation. Of the thousands that apply, only a few hundreds are selected for the next step. Of these some are not able to attend due to a change of mind or because of the cost of the trip. That being said, depending on financial need, some student volunteers are granted travel aid to cover some or all of the cost of flights. Additionally, depending on the number of hours a student volunteer signs up for, his or her accommodation can be covered in part or in full for the conference week.

For students who were part of the Student Volunteer Program in previous years, and who want to (and are able to) take on more responsibilities, there is the option of becoming a team leader. Every year there are approximately 20 to 30 team leaders, for 350 to 500 student volunteers. Each team leader becomes an integral link between the various SIGGRAPH program Committee representatives, and the student volunteers (SVs). The team leaders coordinate a team of SVs and ensure that any speaker, any session, any gallery, etc. that they are helping with, is well taken care of.



A team leader briefing his team

When a student misses his duty (which can at times happen as it's easy to lose track of time in the various interesting areas of the conference), team leaders must act quickly to either find or replace the missing volunteer. But these issues are not that frequent, thanks to the fact that student volunteers do get free time to attend sessions, panels, visit the galleries, etc. Each student essentially chooses between 18 to 30 hours of duty during the week; the rest of their time they are free to attend the conference. In addition, as an added perk, some conference activities are organized especially for the students, and can only be attended by them. This year, among such events was an introduction to the Computer Graphics domain, and talks given by well known studios such as Dreamworks, Pixar, Electronic Arts, et caetera.

Another aspect of SIGGRAPH, that most student volunteers pay close attention to, is the Job Fair. Although not exclusive to students, it provides a great opportunity for those who have just graduated, or those about to graduate, to approach companies directly. In the Job Fair, it's common to see varied means employed to get to the front of the line: everything from the classic printing out of a resume a few hours beforehand, to showing videos and demo reels on an iPhone screen. Of course not all the contacts made here will result in a job contract, but at least the connection is made - and that's a good start to networking.



The Job Fair (Ubisoft Booth)

The Student Volunteer Program provides a great opportunity for students to get in touch with professionals in computer graphics, and maybe even get inspired to be speakers at future SIGGRAPH conferences. If you look at the roster of current and past Chairs, committee members and attendees, many of them are ex-student volunteers. As Maya Karp, of the 2009 Student Volunteer Committee said, "Today's students are the future of SIGGRAPH and CG".

But what happens when SIGGRAPH ends and students go back to where they are from? This question is what motivated Lou Harrison, and a handful of other SIGGRAPH committee members, to create (in fall 2008) SIGGRAPH Student Services. Still a work in progress, the aim of this project is to maintain the bond created between the students and professionals while at SIGGRAPH, throughout the year.

The first part of this program, on which Lou and his committee are working, is a mentoring system in which a professional agrees to dedicate some of his or her time to help a student - be it with demo reel review, resume review, etc. Each professional can sign up for the time investment that suits him or her, be it three hours a week, three days a year, or somewhere in between.

In parallel, some students didn't wait for the Student Services Program to take shape in order to get involved. Testament to this is the many ACM SIGGRAPH Student Chapters that already exist around the world (an exhaustive list can be found on the Chapter's webpage www.siggraph.org/chapters).

I had a chance to talk with Leah Bend, Chair of the St. Louis ACM SIGGRAPH Student Chapter (Missouri). For two years now, they've been inviting professionals from Sony Imageworks, Disney and even Pixar to give lectures at their Chapter. They also organized a student computer animation festival, called Kinematifest, where they rewarded the best student animations in the following six categories: 2D, 3D, visual effects, interactivity, storyboard and composition. Impressively, the jury for the festival did not consist of members of the Student Chapter, or teachers from St. Louis, but professionals from actual CG studios.

The students who get involved with SIGGRAPH, either as volunteers or through Chapters, are often the ones who return to the conference year after year - demonstrating that the passion that brings so many of us to SIGGRAPH starts long before we become professionals.

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