

Frequently Asked Questions: Conferences

Tools and Resources

General Conference Questions:

1. What is a conference?

Conferences generally involve participation by multiple Federal agencies, or bureaus within one agency, and may include private sector attendees. They typically involve topical matters of interest and often include registration, a published substantive agenda, and scheduled speakers or discussion panels. Training sessions, retreats, award ceremonies, and office meetings do not qualify as conferences.

2. Can my agency host a conference on its own even if it doesn't have specific conference authority?

Yes. An agency generally does not need express statutory authority to host a conference, as long as the agency determines that a formal conference is reasonably and logically related to carrying out its statutory responsibilities.

3. Can we hire a conference planner to put on an agency conference?

If you have made the determination that the conference will further your agency's mission, then you can enter into a contract with a conference planner.

Funding a Conference:

1. Can we use appropriated funds to pay for a conference?

Yes, as long as the agency determines that a formal conference is reasonably and logically related to carrying out its statutory responsibilities.

2. Can we enter into a no-cost contract to put on an entire conference?

No. A no-cost contract is one where the contractor makes its money off fees the contractor collects, and the government is not responsible for any costs. A no-cost contract for an entire conference represents an improper augmentation of the Department's appropriation. Note, however, that fixed price or cost-reimbursement contracts for conferences can contain certain no-cost elements. See [convenience fees](#). A convenience fee is one that the attendee voluntarily pays to the contractor in order to obtain services such as meals, lodging and refreshments, that the Department does not consider an integral part of the conference. As such, the fees are not received "for the Government" but rather collected by the contractor for its own use.

Partnering:

1. If there is another agency or organization that shares our interest in the subject matter of the conference, is there a way to partner with that other agency in order to leverage resources?

Yes. If the conference involves one or more partners, a formal agreement must be executed. The Department's Joint Project Authority, 15 U.S.C. § 1525, may be used to enter into agreements with other government entities and non-profits on matters of mutual interest to the parties, the costs of which are equitably apportioned. The parties would have to enter into an agreement delineating each party's responsibilities with respect to the conference. [Click here](#) for more information on Joint Project Agreements.

Individual bureaus may have other authorities which they may use to partner with outside entities. For example, The International Trade Administration and the Bureau of Industry and Security have the [Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1971 \(MECEA\)](#), which they may use to partner with various outside entities. Contact the General Law Division for more information.

Fees:

1. Can we charge and retain attendance fees?

As a general rule, no. The Federal government must have specific statutory authority to retain fees from outside sources. There is no Department-wide authority to retain fees; however, individual bureaus may have authorities, specific to them, which authorize them to collect and retain fees. For example, the International Trade Administration and the Bureau of Industry and Security have the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1971 (MECEA). Contact the General Law Division for more information.

To the extent that we do charge an attendance fee without statutory authority, the fee would be considered a user fee under 31 U.S.C. § 9701 and would have to be deposited into the General Fund of the Treasury pursuant to the Miscellaneous Receipts Act. 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b).

Note that a contractor may charge a [convenience fee](#) as part of a no-cost element of a contract for conference services. The convenience fee is not technically an attendance fee, but rather an expense the attendee is voluntarily paying in order to obtain services that the Department does not consider an integral part of the conference. As such, the fees are not received "for the Government" but rather collected by the contractor for its own use.

2. Can we charge and retain exhibitor fees?

No. Exhibitor fees are the same as attendance fees, see # 1, above.