

TO: AAA Committee on Scientific Communication
FROM: Alisse Waterston, 2005 Executive Program Chair
RE: Annual Meeting Chair's Report

October 5, 2005

It has been a privilege to serve as this year's executive program chair, and a pleasure to work with AAA staff, section program editors and the executive program committee on this effort. I especially appreciate the opportunity to participate in shaping a scholarly agenda for anthropology by means of the theme statement for this year's meeting. The theme "Bringing the Past into the Present" seems to have generated a sense of inclusiveness, a forum where the diverse interests and specialties of anthropologists can be voiced. I am particularly pleased that the conference program demonstrates that the discipline of anthropology can and does address the critical issues of our times by means of thoughtful reflection of the past, and a humanistic vision for the future.

The sense of inclusiveness and relevance to current issues is particularly important this year considering the all-around disappointment felt by members and AAA staff and leadership (including of course, the 2004 executive program chair and executive program committee) resulting from last year's situation. All of us working on this year's program have made the conscious effort to gracefully respond to members' questions and requests, to feature presidential and executive panels that included some of last year's displaced panels, to have representation from all subfields, and to highlight topics related to critical issues, including labor, development disasters, and human rights.

In light of last year's disappointment, my hope was that we would have a stand-out program this year. The 2005 Annual Meeting will be the largest ever with 506 scheduled sessions, 29 poster sessions and 230 special events. There will also be distinguished outside guest speakers, such as Rick West, Founding Director of the National Museum of the American Indian, and historian Howard Zinn. The program is quite full, with sessions beginning at 2 p.m. on Wednesday afternoon, going until noon on Sunday, and with an extended program until 9 p.m. on Thursday night. This year, 178 papers were rejected. The AAA was able to secure extra meeting rooms and time, allowing us to be more inclusive and which also helps account for the low rejection rate.

It has been my great pleasure to work with Lucille Horn who always made herself available to me and the executive program committee to answer questions, guide us through the complex steps of the process, promptly provide materials we needed, respond to members' questions that we could not handle, and much, much more.

Challenges

There are some specific challenges we faced in developing this year's program, most of which I believe are longstanding issues. The following lists the specific issues and my suggestions for addressing them, as relevant.

Online Submission Process

According to AAA staff, this year's online submission process went more smoothly than before which is not surprising since we would expect to learn from the previous year's mistakes or problems. Still, there were some glitches, including proposals that were (temporarily) lost in the process.

A key point in the annual meeting process is the submission stage. Given the number and type of submissions and the number of sections to which submissions must be directed, it is essential that the online process be glitch-free and user-friendly. This may require dedicated time and resources for a computer consultant or staff-person who can address the problems that arise.

The Scheduling Process

The current scheduling process is terribly inefficient (in terms of time, effort and probably expense), and it results in problems such as double booking and scheduling errors. The scheduling committee (this year composed of the AAA president, AAA president-elect, executive program chair, and next year's executive program chair) enjoyed the three days we spent together. However, it is clear that the time has come to move into the digital age and immediately transition to electronic scheduling. At the same time, it was very useful to have the incoming president and the 2006 program chair attend the scheduling meeting since it provided the opportunity for them to learn about different aspects of the entire program process, allowing for a smooth transition from this year to next. Once the transition to electronic scheduling is accomplished, the scheduling meeting could be shortened from three days to one day.

High-Visibility Speakers

One of the more frustrating aspects of my experience this year has to do with efforts to bring high-visibility speakers to the annual meeting. Since this year's meeting is in Washington, D.C., and given the theme statement, the executive program committee thought it would be appropriate and exciting to invite prominent political leaders to speak at the conference. A good amount of time and effort was expended in efforts to bring Senator Hillary Clinton, Senator Barack Obama and Congresswoman Maxine Waters to the meeting. None accepted. Although the end result of these efforts is disappointing, I believe that the very process of communicating with them and their staff may have also helped raise their awareness of anthropology, anthropologists, and the AAA.

It is difficult to identify the main obstacle/s to bringing these speakers to the AAA. It is possible that these political leaders (all Democrats) do not consider it worth their while to participate in a conference whose attendees, they may believe, are already among their supporters.

In my view, the AAA should continue to try to bring one or two high-visibility speakers to the meetings each year which gives us more visibility in a wider sphere and allows for us to dialogue with key leaders outside our discipline, thereby enriching the meeting program.

Size of Program and Session Format

There has been an ongoing debate among members about whether the annual meeting program should be more or less exclusive. As noted above, this year's program is the largest ever with over 500 sessions. Some members may conclude that this means we are too inclusive. I don't agree. I believe that the current system of evaluating proposals by section editors works well, and I do not believe we should be arbitrarily exclusive by predetermining the appropriate number of sessions. The annual meeting, a central activity of the AAA, also serves multiple purposes for its members. The large size of the meeting is one indicator of its importance to members.

Another ongoing point of discussion has to do with the format of panels. Efforts were made to offer alternative formats (e.g., poster sessions, roundtable discussions), and many members would like the opportunity to partake in panel discussions rather than follow the usual format of paper presentations. We need to acknowledge that many speakers need to be listed as paper presenters (for travel reimbursement and for resume building) which may account for their resistance to alternative formats.

My suggestion is to involve sections and section editors in a formalized brain-storming process on how to best structure alternative and flexible formats while accommodating the needs of members. I also suggest we develop a software system that would enable the submission of alternative and flexible formats.

Overall, this has been a rewarding experience, and I so enjoyed collaborating with AAA staff, section leaders and the executive program committee on this important project. I look forward to an exciting and memorable 2005 conference.