To: Committee on Scientific Communication, AAA  
From: Sally Engle Merry, Program Chair, 2003 Meeting

October 14, 2003

My experience chairing the 2003 meeting has been a very good one in most ways. We have put together a program with 3427 participants in sessions plus workshops and film screenings. Many of the panels address the theme of peace, now as relevant as it was a year ago when we planned it. I am pleased that the conference shows how the discipline of anthropology can speak to pressing current issues. The executive program committee worked hard to ensure that all four fields were engaged in panels on peace.

I found Lucille Horn at the AAA office excellent to work with, providing wisdom, experience, and humor at various phases of the process. In general AAA staff were hard-working and supportive throughout the process. Choosing the members of the Executive Program committee as early as the spring 2002 meant that we had a full committee meeting on Wed. before the 2002 meetings, which was very helpful in developing the theme and getting an early start in putting together panels. The planning meeting in January was also very helpful in finalizing panels and selecting presidential and executive sessions from those proposed. I would recommend following a similar timetable. The early start was made possible by Don Brenneis's early request to me to be program chair, an approach which should be continued by future presidents.

This year's Executive Program Committee again faced the challenge of developing new program formats. We promoted the idea of roundtables but restricted these to presidential and executive sessions in order to cope with software which does not provide that option. In order to avoid confusion, we called this format "Conversations." We have two panels called "Conversations," and we urge future executive program committees to continue offering this format as a possibility. Another innovation this year is evening sessions on Thursday. We canceled the third tier of sessions on Sunday but added a Thursday evening time slot to see if this would generate audiences. There are only 11 panels in this time slot and we regard this as an experiment. We also moved the business meeting to noon on Friday to see if that would increase attendance.

The Executive Program committee was very interested in holding a dance this year, but confronted financial problems. Holding a dance with a band requires funds which the AAA does not have. We are still exploring the possibility of having a DJ. It might be worth considering whether this is an activity the CSC would like to advocate, recognizing that funds are always short. Similarly, we discussed an opening reception Thursday night, for which there was again a great deal of enthusiasm on the part of the executive program committee but insufficient funds in the AAA budget. It might be wise to consider raising membership dues to provide revenue for these events which might be greatly appreciated by the membership.

The scheduling meeting was carried out by a small subcommittee, as it has been in the past, consisting of the president, the president-elect, the secretary, and the program chair. This worked very well and should be continued.
I have a few suggestions for the CSC and for future program chairs. The scheduling process was made more difficult by the low level of technology we used. Lucille Horn and I have discussed this at some length and have developed an improved approach that will require less tedious writing on the part of the scheduling committee and fewer errors. However, it would be a great advantage to do the scheduling electronically, both to avoid errors and to avoid double bookings. Although there are a relatively small number of double bookings, they generate a surprising level of outrage from people who can't imagine how we did this. I gather that improving the software for the meetings is not possible at the moment, but I strongly urge the association to consider investing further in its software for meetings in the near future. The web interface continues to provide challenges, necessitating numerous emails to disgruntled members whose applications were lost or who did them inaccurately. Lucille and Lorie Van Olst handled most of this, and I did also. I found that members would readily respond to explanations of web difficulties. However, I would urge upgrading the software to make it more user friendly if at all possible in order to avoid this low-level irritation.

The issue of bringing high-visibility plenary speakers is also one the CSC should consider. We approached two or three people outside anthropology who we thought would be good speakers on the issue of peace but, although some were interested, they ultimately declined. It is very difficult to approach prominent individuals and ask them to give a plenary speech without providing any honorarium. I found that even providing airfare and one night's hotel accommodation taxed the association's resources. I think that the association needs to confront this issue if it wishes to hold plenary lectures by prominent public figures outside the discipline. Unless we are willing to pay honoraria, I think it is difficult to do. I do not think it is necessary to have such speakers, however. We have two plenaries this year, one of which involves a small amount of support for travel. Both bring prominent scholars, some from other disciplines, to the meetings and should provide a lively and provocative discussion. Thus, it seems to me that we can have strong plenaries without providing honoraria, but that we cannot count on bringing people such as Jimmy Carter (our first choice) without more funding.

Much of the hard work of putting the program together was done by Section Program Chairs. In the current model, section program chairs need to develop their invited sessions before the deadline for volunteered paper sessions. However, Ann Hill, section program chair of GAD, suggested making the deadline for decisions on invited sessions later, after section program chairs have looked at the volunteered panels. This means that if an excellent volunteered paper session comes it, it could be made into an invited session. This seems to me to be a good idea.

Ann Hill also points out that because much of the program is put together by sections that it is more difficult to have discussions across subfields and theoretical approaches. The Executive Program committee worked hard to do this, but it is harder for section chairs to do this. Ann suggests pairing sessions on related topics in the same room one after the other and urging audiences to stay for both. While this is an appealing idea, I think it poses yet another challenge for scheduling committees. However, it might be worth encouraging section program chairs to collaborate with other sections in finding panels that might fit together sequentially and putting this information in their scheduling requests.
Overall, I think the process of meeting planning and organization works very well, and my suggestions are for minor rather than major changes. The meeting survey from last year suggested that people valued the opportunity to meet and visit with others as a top priority in the program. Some want more openness to the program and some want higher-quality papers. We have endeavored to do both. I think we need to work further toward more flexible formats and creating the software that would make that possible, and developing a software system that will be easier for staff and members to use. I hope we will find ways to put more panels in the middle of the meetings, and suggest an assessment of the Thursday evening panels and the noon Friday business meeting. It has been a pleasure to work with the AAA staff and section program chairs and I am pleased with the meeting that has developed through this collaborative effort.