AAA Program Committee Annual Report

It would be hard to claim that this year's experience organizing the meetings was an unalloyed joy. Most of the sessions that I personally helped to organize or oversee will not meet, and most of the program that I scheduled will not take place. Many people have been quite distressed by the choices that the AAA made, both with respect to the number of papers possible at the meeting, and with the decision to move the meeting to Atlanta, neither of which decisions was made by the program committee. However, the very distress indicates just how involved and engaged our membership is. This is a very good thing.

Let me speak in this report to issues of scheduling. This year, members submitted 3579 papers (396 more than the last time the meeting was in San Francisco) and 501 sessions (121 more than in 2003—nearly thirty percent more than last year). Section editors composed another 125 sessions out of individually volunteered papers. Not counting the 33 poster sessions, this means that there were 593 total sessions to schedule. And many of these were double sessions, meaning that they required two room slots. We had 474 room slots available from Wednesday noon to Sunday noon. Over two hundred sessions didn't fit.

Our own solution to this problem was adhoc. We first scheduled invited sessions from all sections. Then we scheduled A-ranked panels in order of their ranking. For the most part, we were able to give those panels the times which section program chairs suggested, although if a section ranked more than half of its panels A, its lower ranked A panels were less likely to get their desired times. Once the As were scheduled, we continued to schedule panels from each section, in order of their ranking, until nearly two thirds of each section were scheduled. However, at least one section had more A panels scheduled on Wednesday and Sunday that they would have liked because they happened to be the last pile we picked up, and some sections had a smaller percentage of panels scheduled than they should have, because we were working with paper and pencil calculations in a context where we had not anticipated such a shortfall of rooms.

It is possible that this situation might arise again, although it is also true that this year seems to have attracted an unusually high number of submissions, possibly due to the combination of the theme and the proposed venue: San Francisco always draws many more submissions. Incoming program chairs should perhaps get clear figures from the AAA office prior to scheduling about the number
of papers and panels submitted by each section, to ensure a clearly equitable rejection rate.

It is also true that the high rejection rate this year prompted many members to wonder whether there might not be ways to be more inclusive. It is true that some members feel that we have too many sessions as it is. In fact, some years ago, I believe that the association passed a resolution that there should be no more than three hundred panels in an annual meeting. No meeting since has followed this resolution.

Other members, however, are strongly of the opinion that we should be more, rather than less, inclusive, because reimbursement for travel usually depends upon presentation at the event.

There are several obvious ways to increase the number of available slots. One is to have sessions on Thursday night, Sunday afternoon and Wednesday morning. The experimental use of space on Thursday night in last year's annual meeting drew small audiences, however, and was deemed by many to be a failure. Another is to cancel all workshops (or move them to Wednesday morning) and free up space at noon. Yet another is to purchase more conference space. This would, however, increase the cost to the association, and drive up the registration fee. A third is to encourage more poster sessions, or to convert paper sessions to post sessions.

The easiest solution to the problem of maximizing participation within our current space limitations is to encourage post sessions. Far more posters can be presented in a ballroom than papers during one two hour slot. Indeed, no posters submitted this year were rejected for reasons of space. The conversion of paper sessions rejected solely for space reasons to poster sessions is more complex but certainly manageable. However, such a conversion would require some planning on the part of future program and section program chairs.

Despite these difficulties, and the challenges of the subsequent decision to move the meeting, it has been a pleasure to work with so many committed members of the association and with the unflappable staff of the AAA. It promises to be a very nice meeting.