

A Guide to Preparing and Conducting a Special Session at the APS Annual Meeting

David M. Gadoury, Internal Communications Officer, dmg4@cornell.edu, and Amy O. Charkowski, Annual Meetings Board Director, acharkowski@wisc.edu

Playing the game well

In our business, many of us are very familiar with preparation of grant proposals. Do you want to be successful in this endeavor? **Read the request for applications (RFA).** This cardinal rule is drummed into our heads from the earliest stages of our careers. The RFA, if it is well designed and well written, tells the submitter of a proposal exactly what the program seeks to support and the precise criteria by which a proposal will be evaluated.

Special Sessions for APS Annual Meetings are selected based upon proposals submitted to the Annual Meeting Board (AMB). To make this submission process more efficient and transparent, we have developed the following “Guide to Preparing and Conducting a Special Session at the APS Annual Meeting” to serve as the RFA for anyone considering the submission of a proposal. The guide provides advice on what to do before submission, the criteria by which your proposal will be judged, and what to do if your submission is not selected in the first round. If your session is selected, the guide describes the critical steps that will ensure that your session is as good as your submission.

The seven members of AMB have the challenging task of choosing among a large number of special sessions submitted for a far smaller number of slots in the annual meeting program. Here’s something to consider: We hope that everyone planning to submit a special session will **read the RFA** and make the task of the AMB even more challenging by submitting the best possible proposals for special sessions.

Before submission

Special sessions are an exciting part of the APS Annual Meeting. They have the potential to inform and inspire. Any subject that is especially topical, useful, or has matured sufficiently to merit review is appropriate. Any APS committee, group, or individual member can submit a special session to AMB to organize and conduct a special session at a future meeting. AMB receives far more submissions than can be accommodated during any one annual meeting. Here’s how you can increase the probability that your session will be among those selected.

- 1. Topics with broad appeal will be more competitive than those with a very limited audience.** Ideally, the topic should not only have broad appeal and relevance, but should be presented in such a way that it can be appreciated by a broad cross-section of APS members. Complexity is expected, but it must be explained and placed in context for a more generalist audience. This principle must be evident in the proposal to AMB and should be communicated effectively to all speakers if the session is selected.
- 2. Demonstrate an awareness of what has gone before.** Do your homework and ensure that a similar session was not held in the recent past. If a similar session was held recently, justify why the topic should be revisited.
- 3. The best proposals assemble panels of highly qualified speakers and do so with attention to issues of diversity and inclusion.** Choose your speakers and moderators well. Technical expertise of speakers and moderators is one part of the total package. AMB will also scrutinize your proposal to ensure that you have a balanced slate with respect to other considerations. Is the proposed list of speakers balanced with respect to gender? Are junior and senior scientists included? Do they represent national and international diversity, multiple institutions, and different types of careers within plant pathology? Do the speakers for your proposed panel represent diverse perspectives on the topic? AMB is aware of challenges such considerations present when assembling a slate of four to five speakers, but proposals attentive to aspects of diversity are likely to be considered favorably. Including diversity in the composition of your planning committee will increase the likelihood of effective representation of diversity in invited speakers (Molecular Biology 5:1-4).
- 4. Develop and demonstrate broad support for the proposed session.** Joint sponsorship of a proposed special session by multiple committees, boards, and offices provides AMB with an important metric by which they can judge the potential appeal to a broader audience. Likewise, if you have outside funds to support the session, make this known in the proposal.
- 5. Develop interesting and informative titles for the session and talks.** As far as possible, avoid jargon, undefined acronyms, and dry and dusty prose. Titles should inform and spark interest without trivializing the subject matter.
- 6. Relate the theme of the proposed session to broader societal goals, priorities, and principles.** Do not assume these as self-evident for your proposed session.
- 7. Be realistic in your request for time, space, and financial support.** Request a room of sufficient but not excessive size for the anticipated audience. International participation is highly valued, but be prepared to beat the bushes for supplementary funds if an international speaker is not already attending the APS meeting and costs of their participation must be fully covered. The funds available for sponsorship recommended by AMB for most special sessions generally do not exceed \$1,000.
- 8. Develop a thick skin.** AMB can only select about one-third of the submitted sessions in any year. Inevitably, some excellent proposals will not be accepted due to limited space on the program. Be prepared for the possibility of resubmission. Some proposed sessions may require substantive changes to be approved. A sincere commitment to accommodate suggested revisions will greatly increase the likelihood of approval upon resubmission.

If your special submission is selected

Once you have been notified by AMB that your session has been approved, you should contact the speakers immediately and begin the process of coordinating their presentations. Share the abstracts of all presentations among the speakers. Set up a conference call to discuss the topic of coordination among the presentations, as well as the need to appeal to a broad audience within APS. A commitment to this process can be what separates a disconnected series of oral presentations from a well-coordinated and thought-provoking session. ■