

# The Annual Meeting Program: Organization, Planning, and Performance

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Another annual meeting has come and gone. Since some changes have been made by Council, often at the request of members, it may be useful to review how a program is put together to achieve the first-rate meetings we have come to expect.

Members generate the initial ideas for programs. According to the APS Manual of Operations, the Program Committee, consisting of the president elect (chairman), vice-president, and secretary and the chairmen of the Extension, Industry, Public Relations, Teaching, and subject matter committees, "develops the

format and schedule of events." This is a tall order, involving selecting symposia and recommending their approval to Council; organizing contributed paper and poster sessions and assigning papers to sessions; scheduling discussion sessions, colloquia, and other events; coordinating all meetings of committees, Council, and interest groups; coordinating exhibits and displays; and scheduling social events, field trips, and all other activities associated with the meeting.

In practice, any committee can request a place on the program, and most of the main events are suggested by the various committees. In the last few years, the program has expanded far beyond expectations and nearly to the limit of available time slots. In 1985, Council suggested curtailing the program somewhat, instituting night sessions, or expanding the number of days. Most members of the Program Committee favored downsizing and night sessions, if necessary. Because this recommendation had the potential for conflict and competition among various committees, criteria for program requests were articulated more definitively than in the past. These criteria are: 1) if the annual meeting has a theme (some do, some do not), topics or areas in keeping with that theme should be given preference; 2) timeliness of the subject or area should be a consideration, with yearly repetition avoided when possible; 3) the program should provide a balance in the scope of subjects or areas; 4) places on the program should be assigned equitably; and 5) the program should be developed within the space limitations of the site during the time allotted. A computerized listing of all major activities is being maintained at headquarters to keep track of who sponsored what and when, and this should make planning the program somewhat easier.

The task of assembling all these inputs and dealing with them in a fair way was seen as too cumbersome for the Program Committee, so in 1985 Council established a Program Coordinating Committee. This committee, consisting of the incoming president elect, vice-president, and senior councilor-at-large, oversees the various facets of the program and adjudicates any contentious matters that might arise.

Symposia are dealt with somewhat differently than other activities. Symposia have the highest priority but need to be nearly in final conceptual form at one annual meeting to be considered for presentation at the subsequent one. This is because symposium organizers are provided \$1,500 per symposium (generally three a year) for defraying costs of publication or for obtaining speakers (usually nonmembers of APS), or a combination thereof. In 1986, Council voted to allow some flexibility in policy so that, in exceptional cases

approved by the Program Coordinating Committee, members of the Society can be reimbursed for travel. Council gives final approval for topics and expenditures, including those attendant with speakers in plenary or special sessions. The remaining areas are left to the discretion of the program chairman in consultation with the Program Coordinating Committee. In general, every committee has an opportunity to participate in the annual meeting at one level or another. Cosponsored events may receive a higher priority than those with single sponsorship.

Two dates determine the time schedule for program development: the last date the preliminary program can be mailed to members and the last date the final program can be printed to be available at the annual meeting. The preliminary program alerts members to potential errors and conflicts not known to the Program Committee (publication of preliminary programs is a rarity among professional societies, by the way). Everything else is scaled back from those dates to enable reasonable handling of about 1,000 activities, which include each paper and poster and each speaker in a special event. Thus, members might sympathize with the Program Committee in requiring deadlines 4-6 months in advance of the annual meeting. Preliminary listings of major program participants and titles are sent back to the sponsoring parties for verification, as these often change during program development. The president elect also tries to accommodate special needs in timing or location, when possible. For example, persons attending a viral epidemiology meeting the week before the annual meeting in 1986 requested that virology papers be presented early in the program.

Personnel at APS headquarters are indispensable for maintaining continuity in development of the annual meeting program. They have been charged not only with keeping records of sponsored activities but also with preliminary sorting of abstracts according to designated codes. This system, instituted last year, seems to be working well, although further refinement of the codes is likely. Assembling all the activities in the space and time allotted requires more than a month. The president elect seeks advice from the Program Coordinating Committee and other colleagues in all scheduling and grouping of papers and posters. Nevertheless, programming to accommodate member and division requests, last-minute inclusions or cancellations, unclassifiable subjects, and rare subjects sometimes makes for strange bedfellows.

Members of the Society can help to develop the program. Ideas should be given to a committee chairman or Council member. Committee chairmen should keep the vice-chairman informed, and the vice-chairmen and committee members should be thinking ahead (for example, a 2- to 3-year lag time for getting a symposium approved and funded is not unusual). Only one oral presentation per person should be requested (more than one may be denied by the Program Coordinating Committee). Greater participation in poster sessions should be considered. The limit of four abstracts per year per author (including divisional meetings) should be adhered to. Other professional society meetings conflicting with the APS meeting should be called to the attention of the president (APS sets its schedule 5 years in advance; this is more time than many other societies allow, so conflicting overlaps should be avoidable). If a member's favorite topic seems unlikely to emerge on a program within a reasonable time, cosponsorship by a committee should be considered to increase the probability. Finally, both positive and negative feedback is important. Officers, especially the president elect, should know if members are pleased or displeased. Both organization and quality of the meetings have improved markedly over the years and surely will continue to do so—with the help of members.