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Association of Canadian Archivists

Tips and Pointers on How to Prepare Proposals
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Conference Program Development Process

Tips and Pointers for Preparing ACA Conference Proposals

- **Always consider that you are addressing an audience of archivists**
  - Ask yourself the question: is this something that the **archival** community would want/needs to hear about? Or is it more appropriate to an IM or historical community? If it is the latter, you will have a harder time convincing the Program Committee to accept the proposal; remember that this is the conference for the Association of Canadian *Archivists* and the ACA Board of Directors has asked the Program Committee to create a conference that is both intellectually stimulating and a career enhancing professional development event.

- **Look closely at the "suggested list of topics" that appears in the formal *Call for Submissions* and see if your proposal would fit in.**
  - In developing the conference theme, the Program Chair and Committee try to create a number of suggested topics or "sub themes" that could inspire proposals. The listing is not by any means exhaustive, but it usually indicates the kind of streams or groupings of sessions/papers that the Committee is considering as a basis for the program's development.

- **Can you put together a proposal for an entire session, rather than a single paper?**
  - Realistically, if you can get together with colleagues (either from your own institution or from elsewhere in the community) and create an entire session proposal that would address different aspects or perspectives on the theme, you will have done much of what the Program Committee would have to do to put a single paper together with related ones to create a single session.

- **Advocate for your topic strongly and explicitly in your proposal – remember that it is one of *dozens* that will be received by the Program Committee**
  - Make sure you explain clearly and succinctly the importance of your particular paper or session. Too often proposals –especially for individual papers – are much too heavy on the details of the particular project or topic, and do not contain enough of an explanation as to how the paper fits into the conference theme (or the suggested topics), and therefore don't explain ***why*** the paper should be chosen for one of the limited slots on the conference program.

    For example, simply stating that a new finding aid project has been completed, or a new acquisition was made is not enough. You need to explain why the project would be relevant to the archival audience. In a nutshell, failing to address the "why question" leaves the Program Committee grasping to make its judgment call as to why the paper should be chosen, even if they know the subject is a very interesting or worthy topic.

- **Resist the urge to be *overly* trendy or cute in tying your proposal to the conference theme**
  - There is a fine line – and one that is very difficult to define precisely – between providing enough "catchy" text for the Program Committee that highlights the linkages between a paper/session proposal and the conference theme, and providing so much that it detracts from the actual substance of the proposal. To be honest, Program Committees do like to read the "fun stuff," but when that's the strongest element of the proposal, they cannot in good conscience allow that to sway their decision to accept or reject.

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- **Don't be afraid to ask questions!**
  - The Program Chair would be pleased to answer any questions that you might have about your proposals. For instance, if you have an idea for a paper but aren't sure if it would fit into the theme because it's not obvious, don't hesitate to ask their opinion. If you have a great idea for a paper or a session and would like to include other archivists but don't know where or how to start, ask the Program Committee and its members for suggestions – they are representatives of the archival community, and have network(s) to draw upon.

Conference Program Development Process

Overview

The ACA Conference planning process for program content begins approximately 14-18 months prior to the conference, when the Program Chair chooses the members of the Committee to be approved by the Board of Directors, and selects the theme of the conference. While it is the Chair's ultimate responsibility to select the theme, which is approved by the Board, themes are generally done in consultation with the members of the Program Committee, as well as the Host Chair, who may have ideas for possible theme(s), keynote speakers, or other initiatives.

Conference themes are carefully chosen to provide a unifying element to the overall conference. The theme typically features a link to the conference locale, and also addresses current issues facing the archival community. The intent is to provide a balanced means of creating internal coherence for the program presentations, while at the same time being broad enough to encompass topics that are not necessarily aimed directly at the theme, but are nevertheless of interest to the archival community.

Once developed, the theme is placed into a draft *Call for Submissions*, which is then submitted to the Board of Directors for approval; typically this is done at the spring Plans and Priorities session. Once the *Call for Submissions* is approved by the Board, a copy is prepared to place into the conference delegate package for the current conference.

Immediately after the completion of the current Conference, the *Call for Submissions* is placed on the ACA Website, published in the ACA Bulletin, and sent to appropriate list serves. Posting to the list serves is done by the ACA Office, and two (2) reminders are sent by the Office: one is sent 30-45 days after the initial posting, and the other 15 days prior to the final deadline for submissions.

Program Planning Meeting

The Program Committee holds one face-to-face meeting for planning the program content, approximately 2 to 4 weeks after the submission deadline. The ultimate goal of this planning meeting is to prepare the draft program for approval by the Board of Directors, in order to begin the process of confirming speaker attendance and requirements, and prepare the Web and final program.

Reviewing Submissions

The vast majority of proposals are in fact submitted through the ACA Website, although some do come in directly to the Program Chair through email. The Website automatically sends a copy of the submission to the Program Committee Chair.

It's important to note that the evaluation and selection process is not a "blind review," as might be the case for a peer reviewed journal such as *Archivaria*; both the identities of the Program Committee and the proposer(s) are known to each other at each stage.

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Initial Ranking of Submissions:
In the weeks between the closing date for submissions and the Planning Meeting, each Committee member is asked to review and rank each submission on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being outright rejection, and 5 being a "must have." The Program Chair develops and issues criteria for the Committee members to use when conducting this initial review: typically, those criteria include as a minimum the following questions:

- How well does the submission link to the conference theme?
- Is the topic clearly linked to archival subjects/topics/issues? (i.e., is it something that an audience of archivists should hear)
- Does the submission have clear linkages to other proposals(s)? Might that suggest a "stream"?
- Has the topic been presented in recent years? If yes, does this submission present new information (i.e., the evolution of the ideas)?

The initial rankings are sent to the Program Chair for collation prior to the meeting; this allows the Chair to essentially "triage" the agenda for the face-to-face program meeting by identifying where a broad consensus already exists within the Committee (either for acceptance or rejection) and where there is a divergence of opinion that will required more detailed discussion to resolve.

Putting the Draft Program Together

Program Structure: There are specific parameters on an ACA conference program that are imposed by the Board of Directors. There must be:

- no less than two and no more than three conference session days planned;
- one reserved for meetings; and
- one or two days for workshops (if offered).

This makes for a total of a five or six day conference. Conferences typically have conference workshops held on Monday-Tuesday, meetings (SISs, Boards [Directors and *Archivaria*] and other committees) on Wednesdays, and sessions on Thursday-Friday-Saturday.

A standard ACA conference schedule usually includes:

- 3 opening plenary sessions (1 opening conference keynote and a plenary on days 2 and 3), each lasting 60 minutes.
- 21 concurrent sessions (normally 90 min each) arranged three per time period.
- **Required conference elements** (unless cancelled by the Board), including:
  - a Student session.
  - the ACA Members Input Session; and
  - the Annual General Meeting.
- a poster session

Other program elements can include information sessions, which are defined as "a session in which the ACA and its officers provides information to ACA members and other interested parties on aspects related to its services." There are limitations on who can ask for information sessions to be included in the formal program: the Board of Directors, the *Archivaria* Editorial Board, the ACA Office, and all ACA Committees and Special Interest Sections (SISs). "Promotional" presentations, i.e., by sponsors, are not information sessions and are only allowed with Board approval.