

The Black Hole

There is a black hole for most AALL members in the Annual Meeting program selection process: that period between the deadline for submitting a program proposal and the date you are notified whether or not your proposal was accepted. This year I had a chance to sit inside that black hole as a member of the Annual Meeting Program Selections Committee (AMPSC). I learned a lot from what I saw during the proposal review process and thought others might find some of it useful in preparing proposals in the future. Please bear in mind that I speak for myself only, not for AMPSC or AALL, and that procedures and processes change over time.

Having said that, let me also say a little about what we did before entering the “black hole” period. All AMPSC members were assigned to be liaisons to multiple SISs, Chapters, caucuses, and other interest groups. We were charged with helping groups know about the program theme and proposal deadlines, made sure they all had copies of the *Program Planners Handbook* (which we also revised), and worked with them to help clarify questions or issues to be considered. My liaison assignments included both the Technical Services and Online Bibliographic Services SISs, and I sat in with their education committees during the Annual Meeting as program ideas were discussed.

Once proposals were turned in, however, it was time to change hats and become a member of AMPSC, charged with looking at all of the programs submitted. And there were a lot of them! Approximately two weeks after the submission deadline, each committee member received a big black

notebook with 170 program proposals, 17 workshop proposals, and indexes to the above—done every which-way (by proposer, SIS, broad topic, length of time, format, etc.). We had one week to read, review, and rank proposals. Our responses were then sent to Headquarters and compiled into more lists that we used during our selection meeting in September.

I’d never seen that many proposals before, and it was intimidating. I didn’t know anything about some of the topics, so how could I judge their value? And others were near and dear to my heart—how could I be objective? I had to look at everything as a whole, not as individual components, which sounds lofty and wonderful but is hard to do.

Tim Coggins, our fearless AMPSC leader, gave us some good advice on delving into all this: read through everything without trying to make notes or rank, then read it all through again, starting at number one, and fill out ranking/comment forms. Do you know how long it takes to read 187 proposals? Twice?!? And how hard it is to keep them straight? I stocked up on little colored sticky notes, closed the door, forwarded the phone, and settled in. The first time through, I put a sticky on each proposal with some idea of the subject, which wasn’t always obvious from the title. Since proposals went into the book in the order they were received, it was possible to find proposals on similar topics submitted by different people scattered throughout, and it would be important later to consider them together. By the end, I had so many stickies that it was sometimes hard to find what I was looking for and knew was there. I may possibly have gone overboard!

My second pass through the notebook took two days. I read each proposal, scribbled notes and questions, and highlighted things that grabbed me or made me question. Then I ranked each on a scale of one to five and added comments and questions on my form and moved to the next proposal. When you’re looking at that many proposals as a big block, it’s amazing what things stand out as both positives and negatives. And it became easier to review and evaluate proposals from a subject or area of law librarianship that was outside my own academic tech services realm.

There were lots of solid programs that were well thought-out and presented with good speakers and clear learning outcomes. There were also some badly written proposals with great topics, well-written proposals on tired subjects, overlap or duplication across several proposals on the same topic, wonderful programs with over-exposed speakers, and things we expected but didn’t see at all. The comments, questions, and issues we raised as we read through all the proposals became the basis for much of our discussion at the September meeting and were conveyed to proposal coordinators after decisions were made.

After reading, ranking and commenting, our information went to Headquarters to be recompiled. We arrived in Chicago the same day that the Starr report was

continued on page 30

A Great Proposal Has ...

- An easy-to-read look. Typed pages are easier to read in great quantities than hand-written pages. Word-processed proposals were the easiest of all.
- No typos!
- Learning outcomes that truly were learning outcomes.
- Program levels and target audiences that matched the program description.
- Clear, well-written program descriptions.
- Identified speakers, or at least well-defined “speaker group.”
- Some indication why those speakers, including AALL representatives to other groups, were selected (as an appended bulleted list, vitae, Web page information, etc.).
- Ranking for proposals from an SIS.
- Relationship of the program to others presented in the past or in the current group (follow-up, counterpart, etc.).

released (which was a wee bit distracting) and faced the task of making final program selections. We had new lists of proposals in order of their compiled ranking, which was quite eye-opening. There was no way that we could thoroughly discuss and review all 187 proposals in one and a half days, so we started with those ranked most highly by the group and went from there. And that's when I realized what a huge chunk of the work had been done by us as individuals as we read (and ranked) our way through "The Notebook."

Don't be misled; we didn't just accept the top-ranked 70 proposals! Every one that was accepted, and many that were not, was discussed by the committee and revised to be sure we had a good balance of topics, speakers, sponsors, and formats. Some were accepted without any changes, but the majority were revised in some way to create stronger programs and a more solid overall conference package. Committee members didn't always agree with each other during the discussions, but we listened and learned and did our best to come up with a mixture of different programs that met the needs of our Association colleagues.

One thing that was very clear to me by the end of it all was the importance of the overall impression that a proposal made by its look and attention to detail. I don't mean the topic, which naturally is important, but how it looks on the page and how well it is written. See the sidebar for a few of my thoughts about what a good proposal should include—things that helped shape my initial overall impression of the 187 proposals I read this year. Remember: proposals are read first by individuals who are going through dozens of them in a short time period. Appearances do count.

Anne Myers (amyers@bu.edu) is Head of Technical Services at Boston University's Pappas Law Library.

AALL Spectrum wishes to thank Technical Services Law Librarian, the newsletter of the Technical Services Special Interest Section, for permission to print this article, which will also appear in TSLL vol. 24 no. 3, March 1999.