

THE MANAGEMENT OF AAS MEETINGS

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Abstract. The American Astronomical Society organizes the largest astronomical conferences in the world. This article describes the way we organize our own conferences, the content of our meetings and how it is developed and provides some tips for successfully organizing scientific conferences generally, both financially and scientifically. Organizing meetings is difficult and requires specialized skills and experience. It is often best to have scientists focus on organizing the scientific aspects of conferences while leaving the logistical and financial aspects to professional meeting organizers. The AAS provides these services for its own meetings, the meetings of its Divisions and to others on a case-by-case basis.

1. Introduction

Science proceeds through communication. An isolated scientist, filling personal notebooks with amazing results that are never shared, is not helping move human knowledge forward; however much their personal knowledge of the world is enhanced. This is why written communication – beginning with the authorship of books (at first scrolls!), writing letters to fellow scientists, and the publication of scientific journals – has been used to share scientific knowledge. However, the written word alone is insufficient to allow scientific progress. Scientists have always gathered together in small and large groups to discuss ideas and data and to challenge each other with alternative viewpoints or interpretations. Although the mode of interaction has shifted over time, the fundamental benefit of gathering and sharing ideas has remained the same.

Meetings of a handful of scientists require no substantial planning. A shade tree and good weather often host ad hoc gatherings at campuses

everywhere. And where would the typical science department be without the coffee room, departmental library, or student study lounge for ad hoc discussions of the latest interesting results? However, as the numbers of scientists gathering at one time grow, logistics become more complex. This is fundamentally driven by the desire to have all (or most) attendees actually “present” their research, whether in spoken or printed form (as scientific posters), or both. Audio amplification is required, as session halls grow larger. Projection of presentation materials must be arranged and ample chairs, lighting and physical comforts must be provided. Lodging must be arranged for meetings longer than a single day. Even the simple progression of the meeting, whether singular talks by individuals, panel sessions or workshops must be scheduled and shared with the planned attendees. As meetings get larger, a single session room will be unable to host all the presentations and the flow of the meeting must be considered and planned, sometimes with any given room being reconfigured throughout any given day as appropriate. Even smaller meetings often require contracts with third-party service providers, whether simply for catering needs or for audiovisual support, security or even provision of poster boards, chairs and other temporary infrastructure. Truly large meetings are events unto themselves, requiring substantial advance planning, many additional service providers and greater attention to a wider range of ever-evolving requirements, special requests and unique situations. To put it bluntly: planning and executing a scientific conference is hard.

Clearly, once meetings progress to a certain size – typically 50 or more people – the additional planning and services required to ensure the scientific value of the meeting entail substantial costs. Those costs are typically recovered via participant registration and so; an additional area of concern, financial planning, budgeting and collection of fees comes into play. This is an important, yet many times neglected area of effort. Without sound budgeting, regular assessment of costs and dynamic adjustment in the lead-up to the meeting, financial losses are nearly guaranteed. Changes made at the last minute or while on-site can have devastating financial results. For example, handing out a complementary ticket to a banquet at the last minute, after confirmed numbers have been provided to a caterer, can have a double-whammy effect financially as the ticket is provided at no charge *and* a penalty may be incurred from the provider. Banquets are not unique in this regard. Sound financial management and oversight combined with careful decision making in the final weeks of planning as well as while on-site is critical to a positive result.

Each year the American Astronomical Society organizes a winter meeting with more than 2,500 attendees (occasionally greater than 3,500 attendees), a summer meeting of roughly 1,000 attendees, between one and four

Division meetings from 100 to over 1000 people each and a wide range of smaller meetings, mainly necessary for Society governance. In addition, the Society now provides meeting management services to scientific conferences not specifically sponsored by the AAS or one of its Divisions (*e.g.* the 2011 Extreme Solar Systems II meeting held in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, USA) and has recently announced the establishment of an AAS topical conference program beginning in summer 2013¹.

Because of all this meeting activity, the Society has invested carefully in its meeting planning and execution systems. Based fundamentally on talented professionals who are non-scientist employees of the AAS Executive Office, the Society has moved from a management system that relied heavily on local organizing committees and volunteer efforts to a system fully managed in-house by the AAS Executive Office as our preferred model. Additionally, substantial infrastructure is now in place, along with proper separation of function and accounting practices, to allow reliable financial success for all meetings as well. This is important, as meeting cost overruns represent funds that cannot be used to achieve other goals and are essentially wasted. Every dollar not paid out in penalty or for unbudgeted expense is a dollar that can be used to enhance and share humanity's understanding of the Universe, the mission of the American Astronomical Society and, I would argue, the main reason we hold any science conferences at all.

This contribution to OPSA II is meant to accomplish several things. First and foremost, it is a detailed snapshot of how the AAS operates its meetings at this point and time in its history. Second, it lays out the systems by which the Society will interact with meeting organizers in the astronomy community to carry out a successful astronomical conference. Finally, it can serve as a guide to those who are undertaking their own meeting organization and hopefully help them avoid common mistakes. I hope that by sharing the AAS perspective on the management of meetings, I can help others in our field achieve this common goal.

2. AAS Meeting Management: The Basics

The AAS maintains a meeting services group, consisting currently of a Director (part time), a Meetings Manager, a Registrar & Meetings Coordinator, an Exhibits & Sponsorship Coordinator (part time) and a Meetings Abstract Administrator. The Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer and other finance staff provide substantial additional planning and support functions. For our large meetings, a large fraction of the entire office of 16 people travels to and works on-site, in addition to contracted support staff. For a typical AAS meeting, we utilize substantial fractions of five

¹For details, please see <http://www.aas.org/meetings/aastcs>

staff member's time throughout the two years leading up to the meeting itself. This workload is not constant, but it builds over time. We have the additional challenge of organizing multiple meetings at the same time and several years in advance. At any given time our staff could be handling nine or ten meetings at the same time. It is a tremendous challenge and one our staff is expert at handling.

Volunteer meeting organizers should realize that they should be spending a day or so (at least) every month in planning work starting two or more years in advance of the meeting, increasing to multiple days a week as the meeting approaches. Inattention to details and planning well in advance will make the process unduly challenging in the final months.

Because substantial savings can be attained and preferred dates retained by planning well in advance, the AAS regularly identifies meeting locations many years ahead of time. At the present time, we have contracts in hand for winter meetings six years in advance and summer meetings four years in advance. The process of site selection is complex. No single criteria or formula can be used to select a given location, but many aspects have to be favorable before we present a possible location to our meetings committee and elected leaders. We select meeting locations primarily based on geographic location; whether they are close to a large population of astronomers or not, with many astronomers close by being preferred. Adequate and easy connection to an airport is also nearly always a requirement. Also important is whether they present attractive pricing for lodging and for the meeting location itself. Sometimes hotels provide free meeting space if a certain room block is filled or food and beverage purchases made. Sometimes local Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs) provide subsidy to organizers to cover expenses if a certain number of attendees will be staying at local hotels. The variety of possibilities is nearly boundless.

This key point, that there are a variety of possibilities during contract negotiation available to a meeting organizer is not widely known, especially to amateur meeting organizers or those who organize a meeting only occasionally. Understanding contract details and undertaking contract negotiation BEFORE signing are highly important. Once you sign, its normally too late to change key components of the arrangement with nearly all vendors. A few key points to remember:

- a.) Sales people from hotels and meeting venues often receive bonuses for landing new business. This usually happens quarterly. They will often express a need for haste, or a chance for missed opportunity as quarter boundaries approach. Consider this carefully as you negotiate meeting contracts. Sometimes the pressure is false and driven by this commission compensation scheme, sometimes it is real, with a chance for a preferred date range really being lost if a contract is not signed. The

best approach is to know what you want and be prepared to adjust if an opportunity is really lost. Direct communication with the location representative can be helpful. Sometimes Convention and Visitor's Bureaus can advise you here. Be sure they are independent and represent the location, not a coalition of local hotels, before getting their advice however.

- b.) This may be obvious, but it is very important to read and understand all parts of any contract you sign. Very often, secondary documents are referenced and included as part of the contract. Get them and read them too (often referred to as 'terms and conditions').
- c.) In the United States it is common to include additional fees and taxes as a percentage of the total expense. This is most common with food and beverage expense (F&B). Most states do not allow non-profit organizations to avoid paying tax on food and beverage, some do. However, nearly all contracts I have signed for food and beverage provision at our meetings include (the dreaded) 'plus-plus'. This term refers to a service charge (usually 18-25% of the total) and a tax on the service charge (varies, but 7-10% is not uncommon). If an F&B price is quoted, make sure it either includes the 'plus-plus', or be sure to incorporate this addition in your budgeting.
- d.) On the non-profit status point included in point c), it is possible that if you represent a non-profit organization you can avoid paying tax simply by registering in the state where the meeting will be held. Sometimes states won't allow this, sometimes they will. Check well in advance.
- e.) Termination penalties are very important to understand. Hotels often require payment of a significant fraction, if not all, of the expected meeting revenue if the meeting is canceled ... be sure you understand these penalties and under what conditions (and when) the meeting can be canceled without penalty (however, note too that hotels are often willing to secure you for a future meeting or meetings to avoid any payment of penalty for the current meeting ... this is sometimes an option if you are facing a significant penalty for cancellation or other reasons).
- f.) If you sign a contract to fill a certain number of rooms, be sure to be conservative on this commitment. It is likely some of your attendees will find lodging elsewhere, share rooms or stay with friends (we've even had people camp at a nearby campground!). This will limit the number of rooms sold. **DO NOT OVERCOMMIT!** (read those bold letters again). It is nearly always advisable to be conservative, as additional rooms can often be had at the contracted hotel, or a nearby partner hotel, while hotels are very resistant to leniency if you don't fill the contracted number of rooms (typically called a "room block"). Remember, your

- responsibility is to organize and hold a financially viable meeting, not ensure every single attendee has a room. Overcommitting to a large room block nearly ensures, nay, guarantees you will end up paying a penalty ... called 'attrition'. Don't let that happen to you!
- g.) Also, remember that many attendees don't stay for the whole meeting. Plan on fewer rooms at the front end and back end of the meeting (dubbed the 'shoulders').
 - h.) Hotels will often provide a monetary incentive per each room night actualized. Note that this money more or less comes directly from your attendees' pockets. You can utilize this to offset meeting costs, in which case it serves as a second source of revenue to the registration fees. You can negotiate the level of this payment and whether to even have it or to simply provide lower room rates to your attendees.
 - i.) Sometimes you can negotiate benefits to your attendees at the hotels ... for example, free breakfast, free Internet access, free bottled water in the rooms or whatever. Ask and see what the hotels are willing to provide.
 - j.) Secondary vendors are sometimes limited by contract with the primary venue. For example, external caterers may not be allowed, or only allowed under certain conditions (or by payment to the primary). Be sure you understand any limitations contained in your primary (and all other) contracts on additional service providers.
 - k.) Audiovisual provision is a profit center for most hotels and meeting venues. However, you can nearly always find a better deal from an external provider ... review venue costs carefully in this area and make your decision accordingly.
 - l.) Instead of ordering food off of the stock menu any F&B provider delivers, consider setting a price-point (don't forget the plus-plus) that you can afford and asking the provider to do what they can at this price point (usually a per-person cost). You'd be amazed at what venues can provide given this challenge. The stock menus are often not your best purchasing deal for F&B. This option is not always available; it varies based on location.
 - m.) If you do have a problem with the meeting that is contractually controlled, don't forget that most venues are willing to work with you to ensure success. You may have to promise (sometimes in writing) a future meeting to be held at the location, referencing the venue in professional communications or something else, but you can often negotiate your way out of financial penalty. The best way forward is not getting into trouble in the first place.
 - n.) Finally, be clear what your signature means on the contracts. Are you signing as an individual, as a representative of your organization or

for a third party or entity? Be clear here as this is a legal matter and inattention to this detail could make you financially responsible for costs exceeding several hundred thousand dollars or more.

By following the above hints and negotiating firmly, you can secure far better financial conditions for your meeting than by just accepting what you are initially provided.

As a general guideline, you will need the following services for most meetings (optional items are included in this list in italics).

1. Meeting room space (sometimes at the hotel(s), sometimes at a convention center or university)
2. Hotel rooms for meeting attendees
3. Food and Beverage (F&B) ... your attendees have to eat and drink!
4. Audiovisual services (sometimes with the venue, sometimes an outside vendor)
5. Abstract services or proceedings services
6. Poster board rentals or exhibit setups, registration desks etc.
7. Registration support staff or meeting assistance, sometimes provided by venue or through CVB (*e.g.* restaurant reservation assistants, etc.)
8. Security (sometimes the hotel or convention center can provide this, more important for meetings with exhibit halls).
9. Meeting cancellation insurance ... available from many reputable insurance brokers ... covers termination costs in the case of certain natural disasters.
10. Entertainment
11. Transportation (to/from airport, to/from offsite activity locations).
12. Offsite locations for any meeting-related events.
13. Tours for attending spouses or attendees.
14. Support equipment for particular needs (*e.g.* outside tents in case of rain, port-a-potty rentals, etc.).

3. Basic Financial Practices and Structures

It is important to properly budget for a meeting to ensure financial success. Such a budget needs to change over time, as costs become known. Shown below is a snapshot of a typical spreadsheet for a small meeting organized by the AAS from the expenses section and including the bottom-line. Using a spreadsheet is an obvious piece of advice that likely goes without saying these days, but a functional spreadsheet program provides a wide array of useful tools so I view using one to budget any meeting a necessity.

The AAS begins meeting planning by establishing what costs we may encounter. Until we know for sure the majority of the costs, we do not set the

registration fee. I highly recommend this procedure. By setting registration fees early, without knowing all costs, it is possible to end up with more costs than revenues, which is not a comfortable situation. When tabulating expenses, we always incorporate a reasonable contingency. There are nearly always last-minute expenses that crop up, or free registrations that need to be provided to special guests or whatnot. Plan ahead for these unknowns by incorporating an adequate contingency reserve. A rule of thumb is 3 to 6% of your total known costs. If you planned well and don't need your contingency, you can easily dispose of the surplus by providing additional food and beverage to your attendees or donating the surplus to your host institution or professional organization (hint, hint).

Sometimes, hotels require deposits ahead of the meeting. You can negotiate this, or arrange for deposits to be made that coincide with your registration deadlines. Sometimes cash flow is not an issue as an institution or non-profit entity (*e.g.* the AAS) is providing the cash up front. Be clear before signing any contract about when deposits are due and how much they are. Ensure you will have the ability to pay.

Calculating revenues is far trickier than determining expenses. You are never sure how many attendees you may actually get. If you have a student rate and a regular rate, and an on-time rate and a late rate, you now have an eight variable problem, with no known quantities, only unknowns. Be careful!

The general rule of thumb for budgeting attendance is to be highly conservative. Do not use your optimal attendance number as your budgeting number; assume at least 10% and as much as 30% fewer attendees as your hoped-for attendance. This conservative stance, combined with a comprehensive tally of your expenses will allow you to calculate a reasonable registration rate that guarantees no loss. Unless your host institution or you are independently wealthy, this is something to pay attention to. Again, ending up with a small positive is much better than ending up with a large or small negative ... the goal of the modern science conference organizer is to arrange a successful meeting that highlights the science without financial loss.

As the planning for the meeting continues and registration begins, keep your spreadsheet up-to-date with a column for actuals. Monitor your progress regularly. If multiple people are organizing the meeting, keep only one master spreadsheet from which all organizers work. Do not have multiple spreadsheets as this leads to errors and extra work.

After the meeting concludes, go over the bills very carefully. Many times errors or extra charges creep in that you are not ultimately responsible for. My favorite was a hotel that tried to implement cancellation fees on the AAS for rooms canceled at the last minute by meeting attendees ...

Source	Unit	Price/Person	Est.	Days	Num.	Amount
FOOD/CATERING						
Coffee breaks		\$10.00	276	11		38,741
Dinner/Banquet		\$28.00	167	1		5,622
Drink Tickets		\$3.00	251	1		904
Opening Reception		\$20.00	200	1		4,000
Total F&B						\$49,267
OTHER DIRECT COSTS						
Credit Card Processing Charges	2.5% of registration and banquet total					2,582
Museum Entry Fee for Banquet	\$2.00		276			552
Banquet Entertainment						1,000
Bus Rental						1,000
Internet Connectivity						0
Printing						0
Audio Visual						7,900
Computer Rental/Cyber Cafe						0
Postage/Mailing						500
Exhibits Management						0
Program/Program Update						0
E/PO Advertising						0
AV Shipping						0
Student Support Grants						0
BAAS Abstract Publication Charge						6,515
AAS Admin Charge						5,097
Subtotal						\$25,245
CONTINGENCY						
						\$4,000
					Est. Income	\$109,790
					Est. Expenses	\$98,924
					Est. Balance	\$10,867

Figure 1. A portion of a typical small meeting budget worksheet showing expenses and the bottom line. Note the inclusion of a contingency. ‘Plus-plus’ has been included in the calculation of the food and beverage expenses (noted in the ‘notes’ , but omitted here).

unfortunately for the hotel, these costs were not in our contract, although they were regularly a part of other contracts the hotel made. The finance department simply did what they normally do ... luckily we caught the error and had the multiple thousands of dollars removed from the bottom line.

These days it is important to maintain records that are auditable and accurate. Keep all contracts and paperwork, make no verbal agreements or contracts and ensure all payments provided to vendors result in a receipt. A final note of caution, don’t risk your reputation and that of your institution by paying for inappropriate expenses. For anything that takes place at your meeting or is associated with your meeting, you should be sure you are comfortable with a description showing up on the front page of the New York Times highlighting it. Recent meeting excesses² have been in the spotlight, don’t make a misstep and bring ruin on yourself and your reputation.

²See for example <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-leadership/post/may-the-gsa-resignation-serve-as-warning-to-all-leaders-considering-lame-training-conferences/2011/04/01/gIQAvKgBtS.blog.html>

4. Scientific Content

AAS general meetings are structurally and thematically complex. The range of content at each meeting is diverse and can take many forms. However, it is fairly easy to define the vast majority of activities at our meetings and these types are common among other meetings as well. There are some differences between our winter and summer meetings and these are detailed below within this list of meeting content and explanatory description.

4.1. CONTRIBUTED SESSIONS

Attendee contributions are a core component of all AAS general meetings. Every Full, Emeritus, Associate and Junior (with advisor approval) member of the Society is entitled to make a (meaning one, singular) contributed presentation at each AAS meeting, whether orally or via a poster. Additional contributions may be made in the areas of History and Education. This rule does not apply to Division meetings or to Divisions who meet with the Society. These Divisions may set their own limitations on submissions to their meeting or their portion of the overall AAS meeting.

Historically, contributions have been referred to as ‘papers’, and we still sometimes hear references to presenting a ‘paper’ at an AAS meeting. This linguistic habit should not be construed as a requirement that only published content can be presented. The Society welcomes works in progress along with published results. Non-members are allowed to submit contributed content as well, although they may do so only once and must have a sponsor, who is a full member of the Society.

Contributions are either presented orally or in the form of a poster. Posters are hung in the exhibition hall, while oral talks are in one of the numerous rooms reserved for the meeting at either a convention center, hotel or conference center.

At the very early meetings of the Society, all presentations were oral and substantial time was allocated for presentations. As meetings grew in size, multiple parallel sessions were first introduced, typically broken up by subject area, while the allotted time for oral presentations progressively shrank. The Society now provides five minutes for each contributed oral presentation, with a few minutes for questions and 15 minutes for a dissertation talk with five minutes for questions. With such limited time constraints and an ever-growing number of submissions, the Society’s meetings will eventually have to grow to five days in length or some submissions will have to be rejected. As we wish to encourage the research and presentations of our members, it is likely the AAS Council would opt to extend the length of the meeting *vs.* turning away member content. The primary constraint is simply the number of co-located meeting rooms in any given facility. We



Figure 2. A typical session room at an AAS meeting ... screen, LCD projector, podium, microphone, audience ... let the scientific dialog begin! (© AAS)

currently don't want to have a meeting at two disparate locations or at very large, expensive locations, so the tradeoff to these requirements is expanding the length of the meeting or turning away submissions.

The AAS establishes deadlines for the submission of contributions and utilizes an online submission system that ties the membership database to an external vendor who processes meeting abstracts. This way, the various rules regarding submissions can be effectively administered without (much) human interaction or attention. Exceptions always crop up and are handled by meeting staff, with special cases being handled by the senior Vice President or Executive Officer.

Rules & procedures governing the submission of member contributions and deadlines and appropriate submission forms are published online well ahead of each meeting, approximately three months before the actual meeting date. This allows all potential submitters to fully understand the details and meet defined deadlines.

Submission deadlines must necessarily be two or more months in advance of the meeting as the contributed abstracts for oral and poster presentations are sorted by member-volunteers and the resultant sessions are organized

into a logical structure by the senior Vice-President with advice and help of the junior VPs and AAS staff. Lead-time is also required for the printing of meeting materials, which increases the time between the meeting and the submission deadline. Although we strictly adhere to our submission deadlines, very occasionally exceptions are made for late-breaking scientifically exceptional results. Allowing an exception occasionally expands the scientific impact of the meeting and adds to its newsworthiness. A late deadline exists for the submission of contributions until just a month or so before the date of the meeting, but all late submissions are by default poster contributions and are preferentially placed on the last day of the meeting.

During AAS Winter Meetings, posters are displayed for one day, so a new set of posters is displayed each day of the meeting. As mentioned above, late submissions are displayed on the final day of the meeting. During Summer Meetings posters are sometimes displayed for two or more days, depending on how many posters we have received for the meeting in question and space constraints.

4.2. INVITED SPEAKER SESSIONS

Invited Speakers are chosen by the Committee on Meetings, composed of the Society's three Vice-Presidents, the Executive Officer and the President of the Society. The senior VP is the chair of the committee. Input from members is welcome and some Invited Speakers have been selected from member suggestions.

The Committee selects individuals to be Invited Speakers who are typically good communicators and who have undertaken research in some particular area of astronomy, related sciences or performed some other activity of benefit to our discipline. As there are only a limited number of Invited Speaker Sessions at each general AAS meeting, there is a degree of prestige to the invitation, and individuals are typically invited to speak no more frequently than once per decade.

Invited Speaker sessions are plenary sessions, with no other meeting content held concurrently. Right now, each Invited Speaker session is fifty (50) minutes in length and has been for some years. Speakers are encouraged to speak for approximately 40-45 minutes and reserve the balance of their time for questions. Due to the tight scheduling of the meetings and available rooms, it is not usually possible (in fact it is nearly never possible) to extend an Invited Speaker Session (or any other session) beyond the allocated time allowed.

The AAS has established partnerships with the Kavli Foundation and the New York Community Trust, both of which sponsor an Invited Speaker



Figure 3. An AAS Press Conference. Scientists use modified versions of their professional presentations to describe results to members of the media. A special room is set aside for these events and they are mainly attended by the press only, although members may attend if they wish. (© AAS)

at one or more AAS meetings per year. These partnerships expand the range of possible Invited Speakers by providing resources to enable travel for astronomers overseas, for example.

4.3. PRIZE SESSIONS

The Society awards prizes for meritorious work in our discipline and some of these prizes include an opportunity to address a general meeting of the Society. Functionally, they are treated in the same way as Invited Speaker sessions. Currently, the honors or prizes awarded by the Society that come with a speaking opportunity are:

- Henry Norris Russell Lectureship
- Newton Lacy Pierce Prize in Astronomy
- Helen B. Warner Prize
- Annie J. Cannon Award in Astronomy
- Lancelot M. Berkeley – New York Community Trust Prize for Meritorious Work in Astronomy

In addition, some of the AAS Divisions, who meet with the AAS are provided speaking slots for their prize winners. Other Division prize lectures are presented at Division-specific meetings. These include:

- George Ellery Hale Prize – Solar Physics Division
- Karen Harvey Prize – Solar Physics Division
- Dirk Brouwer Award - Division on Dynamical Astronomy
- Bruno Rossi Prize - High Energy Astrophysics Division
- Leroy Dogget Prize - Historical Astronomy Division

Through its relationship with the American Institute of Physics, the AAS has Prize Sessions for the Dannie Heineman Prize for Astrophysics and sometimes for the Andrew Gemant Award, depending on whether the winner prefers to speak at an AAS meeting.

4.4. SESSION VIDEOS

The AAS began recording Invited and Prize Sessions in 2007. Although initially they were full video and audio, we found that capturing the on-screen slides and audio of a presentation could adequately convey the core content of a given presentation. This greatly reduced the price for production of these videos and decreased the required bandwidth to provide this service. As technology improves, we anticipate being able to provide full video capture of the speaker, their slides and the audio of their presentation. Archived videos of Invited and Prize Sessions are available to all, six months after the meeting takes place. We archive these sessions online³.

4.5. SPECIAL SESSIONS

Special Sessions are scheduled in response to proposals from AAS members and are held at both winter and summer meetings of the Society. Special Sessions have a length of 90 minutes and are scheduled in parallel with other special sessions and contributed oral sessions. Special sessions may be held on any of the days of an AAS meeting and do not have a required format. Some sessions have several speakers, some have a panel discussion, sometimes they are short workshops; the structure is left entirely up to the proposer, with only the time limit of 90 minutes being critical.

Deadlines and submission details are available online at the AAS website. Proposals are submitted online and collected in an underlying database. The meeting committee, led by the AAS Vice Presidents, is responsible for selecting from among the proposed special sessions. Submission of a proposal does not guarantee acceptance and acceptance does not imply the proposer's selected day and time will be provided. Special

³http://aas.org/meetings/meetings_past.php



Figure 4. The plenary session hall at an AAS Summer Meeting. Seating for approximately 1500, two screens, podium in center, good lighting, audiovisual technician seated at the rear and (mostly) comfortable seats. (© AAS)

sessions should represent the overall demographic composition of the Society and a list of session presenters are required to be submitted with the proposal. Proposals with confirmed speakers are given higher weight than those with tentative lists of speakers.

Special session proposers must meet certain deadlines for providing descriptions of their sessions and confirmed speaker lists, which occur well in advance of the meeting itself. These deadlines facilitate the inclusion of all meeting content in the final meeting materials.

4.6. MEETING-IN-A-MEETING SESSIONS

“Meeting-in-a-Meeting”, or MiM, sessions are meant to fill a gap in demand between a 90 minute Special Session and a full-week specialized conference. The goal of the MiM program is to provide (at the AAS Summer meeting), a longer format session available to attendees. MiM sessions are scheduled in response to proposals submitted (online at the AAS website) to the AAS Committee on Meetings, led by the Vice-Presidents, by AAS members. MiM’s may be from two to eight sessions, with each session being 90 minutes long. They are scheduled in parallel with other special and contributed sessions.

As they are meant to be highly focused in nature, but take place at a general meeting of the Society, the format requires an opening introductory talk suitable for a non-specialist audience. The hope is that every meeting attendee could attend the first session and understand the general nature of the topic being presented, perhaps deciding to attend further sessions to gain a deeper understanding of the specialized area.

4.7. TOWN HALL MEETINGS

Town Hall meetings grew out of a request from the major US funding agencies for astronomy to provide a question and answer session for the community they serve. Due to demand, they have been broadened and now include sessions from high-profile missions or facilities; AAS or non-AAS Committees, or others who want a short, open session centered around dialog between the session proposers and the community of astronomers represented at the meeting.

They are scheduled in response to proposals submitted by AAS members and approved by the Committee on Meetings. They are held at both winter and summer meetings of the society and typically take place during the 12:45 to 1:45 pm and sometimes in the early evenings. This is considered the meeting lunch hour and other Town Hall Meetings will be scheduled in parallel. Efforts are made to avoid strong overlap in content.

4.8. WORKSHOPS

Workshops are scheduled in response to proposals from AAS members and are highly flexible in content and timing. However, they typically only take place on the weekend prior to the first full day of the meeting (which is typically a Monday). Workshops can be one or two days in length. Registration fees may be charged and are collected by the AAS to cover expenses required, such as food and beverage, audiovisual expenses and so on. Any proceeds from such workshops are retained by the Society and directed toward supporting activities at AAS meetings such as the undergraduate student reception. Workshops may be full- or half-day or held all day long on both days, and any combination thereof. Very, very occasionally, workshops are held during the meeting itself, either in the evening or on the days following a meeting. They are never scheduled in parallel with contributed, special or MiM sessions. Abstracts are not published for workshops. Workshops are meant to be hands-on learning.



Figure 5. The AAS Press Services Room ... a place to work with fax, photocopy, Internet and phone. (© AAS)

4.9. SPLINTER MEETINGS

Splinter meetings are defined to provide a venue for meetings to be held at AAS conferences, which are not scientific sessions. Examples would include planning meetings for scientific missions or facilities, research team get-togethers, meetings of an administrative nature and so on. They may not be used as an optional outlet for a special session and are subject to review and approval by the Executive Officer or the Committee on Meetings. Splinter meetings can be scheduled before, during or after AAS conference days (additional fees may apply to meetings scheduled after the AAS meeting closes). Any AAS member can request a Splinter meeting however; participants must be registered for the meeting for at least the day of the Splinter meeting itself. A summary of the meeting topic and content must be submitted. Public Splinter meetings must not conflict with Invited or Prize sessions. Private (invitation only) Splinter meetings can be scheduled at any time. Costs associated with catering and equipment rental are the responsibility of the splinter meeting organizer. The fees will be invoiced by the AAS once the meeting closes and is audited. Meeting requests are honored and assigned on a first-come, first-served basis depending on meeting room availability. Other requirements and details are available online at the AAS Meeting Services website.

5. Building the Scientific Content of an AAS Meeting

The AAS contracts with a third-party vendor to collect, process and help organize the abstracts associated with our meetings. The way we construct the scientific content of the meeting plays into this process and is detailed here.

The AAS organizes its meetings with the help of a Meeting Committee. This committee is led by the senior Vice-President, with the other VPs as members along with the current President and the Executive Officer. The Past-President or President-Elect are sometimes called upon to help as well. This task is actually one of the most rewarding our elected leaders participate in.

About a year before any given meeting, the AAS begins reminding members through email and other communications and on our website about deadlines for submission of Special Session and Meeting-in-a-Meeting proposals. Planning for the next AAS meeting takes place at the AAS meeting just prior. Once the deadline for submission of these proposals passes (usually a month before the next AAS meeting), AAS staff collates the proposals and prepares a summary listing that is then provided to the Meeting Committee. At the AAS meeting prior to the meeting being planned, the Meeting Committee meets to select the session proposals, invited speakers, town halls and any other generic content.

The Meeting Committee chair then sends out invitations to Invited Speakers and prizewinners. The Meeting Committee chooses days and times for each during the planning session. Special session and Meeting-in-a-Meeting session proposers are informed and must then submit abstracts from their speakers for inclusion in the abstract database. This often takes a while, which is why we start well ahead of time gathering this critical input.

Several months before the meeting takes place, we have an ‘on-time’ abstract deadline for submission of individual member contributions. These abstracts come in tagged with a generic subject category and are then sorted by member volunteers using an online system into coherent sessions following timing rules, limits on the number of dissertation abstracts allowed in each session and any individual timing constraints (*e.g.* personal travel limitations, or wanting to have two talks back-to-back). A final deadline allows last minute, poster-only contributions to be included on the final day of the meeting. The Meeting Committee, usually in the form of the senior VP, then arranges all the contributed sessions to augment the fixed schedule of Invited Speakers, Prizewinners, Special Sessions, Town Halls and Meeting-in-a-Meeting sessions. This is a subtle task, but one that all VPs have enjoyed. The final sorted sessions and abstracts are assembled



Figure 6. A typical AAS Exhibit hall showing mainly the scientific posters lined up into the distance. (© AAS)



Figure 7. The area in and around the posters is used for interactions amongst colleagues, with more people in the exhibit hall between sessions. (© AAS)

into various schedules and into online programs that allow access to the abstracts as well as the physical scheduling information.

The end result of this process is a coherent program, which augments the scientific impact of the meeting by providing logical flow and structure. Members do not have to jump around among different rooms to hear talks of a similar subject. We attempt to not schedule similar subjects at the same time, while spreading content out over the whole meeting to ensure attendance for all days and also maximize the impact and exposure for any given meeting attendee. It is much more an art than a science to arrange a large meeting like the AAS meetings, but the value to the attendees is, we feel, substantial and central to our mission.

6. Press Functions

As many interesting scientific discoveries are presented at AAS meetings, many press-related activities and functions are scheduled at the conferences. First and foremost, a suite of press conferences takes place, usually three per day for the core part of the meeting. The Society's Press Officer selects topics for these press conferences, who reviews all meeting abstracts seeking results of interest to the general public (*e.g.* black hole research, supernovae results, dark energy, etc.) The Press Conferences are structured to have at least two presenting authors and a non-affiliated scientist who provides expert comments from outside the research teams. The Press Officer or a Deputy Press Officer moderates the Press Conferences. The AAS started recording these events in 2010 and they are available online to view⁴. Members of the press who pre-register with the Press Officer, may view the Press Conferences in real-time via the Internet. The AAS Press Officer also contacts authors who have submitted interesting scientific results, but who were not selected for a press conference, and encourages them to issue a press release at the meeting. These, along with other press releases submitted to the Society, are distributed to the media during the meeting. The Society also operates a press room, which provides services to attending media representatives including Internet access, fax and photocopy machines, desk space, telephone service and refreshments.

7. Exhibit Hall

A key part of the AAS meetings is the exhibition hall, which serves as a quasi-trade show and the location for the display of contributed posters. The AAS contracts with a meetings and exhibitions contractor to build the exhibit booths, to provide electricity and Internet services, to rent furni-

⁴http://aas.org/press/archived_press_conferences



Figure 8. A typical exhibit booth at an AAS meeting, with pop up display, chairs and a table for distributing information and “freebies”. (© AAS)

ture for the booths and so on. A member of the AAS staff distributes an exhibitor prospectus roughly four months before the meeting in question. The prospectus provides all relevant details for potential exhibitors such as the hours the exhibit hall will be open, the cost of booth space and rental equipment and other details. For the cost of a booth rental, two registrations are included, which are intended for the people who will be staffing the booth.

A wide variety of exhibitors opt to participate in AAS meetings. Examples include government agencies, space missions, telescope facilities, vendors selling research-related articles (such as high-quality filters, gratings or instruments ... even whole telescopes!), vendors selling pedagogical materials, textbook publishers, other publishers, curiosity vendors (*e.g.* fossils or meteorites) and so on. A typical winter meeting has 70 or more exhibitors and summer meetings about one-third as many.

Hosting an exhibit hall provides an important venue for communication between organizations and people, while making the meeting about more than just oral presentations. The exhibition floor space also provides room for the display of the contributed posters, which are changed daily at winter meetings and sometimes less frequently at summer meetings. Of course, the added revenue from the exhibition hall also helps with overall meeting costs, although the costs for building the booths, providing electricity and so on are not inconsequential.

The AAS makes use of the hall itself for a self-promotional booth, booths for our Divisions who opt to have one and, at winter meetings, the AAS Job Center, which serves to connect Job Seekers with Employers.

The population of the Exhibit Hall ebbs and flows throughout the day. When a popular plenary session or the normal parallel oral sessions are taking place, the number of people in the Exhibit Hall decreases substantially, while at other times it can be quite crowded. Nearly all the attendees enter the Exhibit Hall sometime during the day, many more than several times. It is viewed as a central meeting spot and somewhere to ‘be’ when not in a scientific session.

As wireless devices became widely adopted, the AAS undertook the provision of Internet connectivity via wireless networks. This is a non-trivial expense. Not only must high-end routers be purchased and installed by trained staff or contractors, but the bandwidth required must also be paid for as well. Few attendees appreciate that roughly \$50 of their registration cost is used to provide Internet access on site. This incorporates all costs, including staff preparation time and on-site setup and support. Special Internet access points provide Exhibitor-only access, for which Exhibitors pay a premium.

8. Conclusions

Meetings – of any size – are difficult to plan and execute. They are, however, fundamental to the communication of scientific knowledge and ensuring further scientific progress. When planning for a meeting, the goal that should be foremost in everyones mind is to provide the most conducive environment for scientific discourse and collaboration at the lowest possible cost. Efficiency, cutting out the extras and focusing on what is truly important will ensure a successful meeting. Along the way, be conservative when estimating your revenues, comprehensive in tallying your expenses (ahead of time!) and careful in your contracting. Utilize engaged volunteers or professionals who are willing to work hard well ahead of the actual meeting dates and start planning earlier than you think you should. Negotiate seriously with meeting sites, hotels and other vendors. Be careful what you sign. Don’t undertake inappropriate expenses. If you need help, just ask. The AAS is happy to help meeting planners, whether they are looking for a full partner to help undertake their meeting planning or just need some specific or general advice. We’re here to help further our science, not just our own meetings. Proper organization of scientific meetings is central to furthering human knowledge; it deserves just as much attention and care as we put into our research projects or writing scientific papers or the care and attention of professional meeting planners.