

Demystifying the program selection process

How to submit a successful proposal for the 11th ACRL National Conference

by Larry Hardesty



So you have spent considerable time and effort developing a program proposal for ACRL's 11th National Conference, "Learning to Make a Difference" (Charlotte, North Carolina, April 10–13, 2003).

You write it up for the particular session format (contributed paper, panel, poster session, preconference, roundtable, or workshop) and send it off to ACRL. Then what happens? What processes and criteria are used to decide which proposals are accepted for the conference? Given all the work you have put into your proposal, this is a valid question.

At the recent ALA Midwinter meeting, I, and several cochairs of the various subcommittees associated with the national conference, attended as many executive committees of the ACRL sections as possible to urge section leaders to encourage their members to submit program proposals. At the same time, I encouraged the cochairs of the programs' subcommittees to figure out a way to say "yes" to as many proposals as they could.

For example, we agreed to increase the number of poster sessions from 48 to 72. My goal for the conference is to be as inclusive as possible by offering a wide variety of programs that reflect the diverse interests and needs of the membership.

Nevertheless, not all proposals can be accepted. At past national conferences, many more proposals were submitted than could be accepted because of the productivity of academic librarians and the limitations of space and time. The acceptance rate for some of the major venues (contributed papers, panel sessions, and poster sessions) is similar to the 25 percent to 40 percent acceptance rate of the major journals in the profession. Selection obviously is competitive. Therefore, some of our colleagues will be pleased and some, unfortunately, will be disappointed.

The process

What process is used to ensure fairness, balance, excellence, timeliness, and all those other factors that make for a great conference? The process will vary somewhat from one type of proposal to another. For the proposals for session formats, such as panels, posters, and contributed papers, the process

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may be similar to refereeing journal manuscripts. There may be blind reviews by more than one individual, and there may be reviews by individuals with particular expertise outside the subcommittees. To promote consistency, the reviewers may use checklists or rating sheets as they evaluate the proposals.

For other session formats, such as workshops, preconferences, and roundtables, the process may be less structured and more varied. Relatively few opportunities for presenting preconferences and workshops are possible and fewer individuals may be involved. In addition to subcommittee members who review proposals for such factors as relevance, appeal, and timeliness, the ACRL staff reviews the proposals to ensure that program costs are reasonable and fall within ALA/ACRL policy guidelines.

Tips for a successful proposal

1) Carefully read the "Call for Participation" at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/charlotte/program/cfp.html>:

- Review the "Selection Criteria," particularly regarding how you will encourage active learning.
- Consider the different requirements of the various "Session Formats."
- Keep in mind and refer to the "Conference Theme Tracks" in writing your proposal.

2) Review "Preparing for ACRL's 11th National Conference" in the March 2002 *C&RL News* at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/confmar02.html>.

- Adhere to the requirements, including deadlines.
- Discuss your idea for a proposal with your colleagues both in your library and other libraries and solicit their comments before submitting your proposal.
- Review the literature, including the presentations at previous ACRL National Conferences.
- Have several people read your proposal for context and clarity and for typographical and grammatical errors.

While following these tips does not guarantee that your program will be selected, I am confident that they will greatly improve your likelihood of success.

The numerous roundtables offer a format that requires neither the methodological rigor of a contributed paper session nor the broad appeal of a preconference. The main criterion is whether a core group exists that wants to have a lively discussion on a particular topic. Therefore, the members of the roundtable subcommittee will conduct the review of these proposals.

What about the criteria? Six major criteria are delineated in the "Call for Participation,"¹ published in the November issue of *College & Research Libraries News* and available at the conference's Web site, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/charlotte/program/cfp.html>. I strongly encourage potential submitters to review the "Selection Criteria," as well as the nature of specific session formats, in planning their proposals.

Other considerations

Over the years I have been a reviewer for several journals, including *College & Research Libraries*, and probably the single most important criterion that leads to rejection is neither methodological error nor lack of clarity. It is the "so what" factor. Does the proposal have significant relevance or importance to attract the needed audience? Reviewers are less likely to recommend acceptance of proposals on topics few individuals have an interest in or those where findings cannot be generalized to other situations.

At the other end of the spectrum are those topics that are "often discussed, but never so well." Unfortunately, however well presenters may address some topics, to the potential audience, the topics already have been discussed ad nauseam. A review of the literature should reveal such topics to be avoided.

More subjective are the criteria of balance and representation. While I encourage inclusiveness, there is no set quota for either type of library or type of section within ACRL. In my meetings at the last Midwinter meeting, I encouraged some of the smaller sections to collaborate with larger sections to develop proposals with wide appeal. At the same time, there is the risk that proposals dealing with topics of broad appeal may be rejected because they are duplicated by other proposals of higher quality.

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The library was also a significant component of our FLC throughout the semester. Our students knew that we were librarians and that we expected them to use the library. The GSU library, as with many academic libraries, is a scary, intimidating place for many freshmen. Coming to the library with us and visiting us in our library offices hopefully helped our students feel more at ease and more likely to seek librarian assistance.

When we submitted our proposal for another FLC next year (yes, we are going to do it again!), we reworked it to appeal to more students. We replaced the government class with a math class to attract students interested in computer science and business. We also renamed the FLC from "Information Odyssey" to the "Internet and the Information Age."

Most FLCs this year had much more descriptive titles than ours, so we hope the more straightforward name will appeal to students. Our new FLC brochure narrative emphasizes how this FLC will help students succeed in college and keep their scholarships, and it now speaks much more directly to the students than our initial description. We hope these changes will result in a full community next year and provide us with the ability to further integrate the courses, particularly the English composition class, where using the library and information resources are natural emphases.

Conclusion

Reflecting on our experiences teaching the stand-alone GSU 1010 course in fall 2000 and GSU 1010 and the Perspectives seminar in our FLC in fall 2001, we believe that several important outcomes are noteworthy.

- Librarians gained new perspective about freshmen likes, dislikes, and approaches to learning and the world around them. This insight is helpful as we revise our approach to teaching students at the reference desk and in library instruction classes, and focus more on what students learn than on what we teach.

- Teaching faculty recognized that GSU librarians are, in fact, faculty members who can make valuable contributions to the university's educational mission. Since we attended faculty meetings with teaching faculty and participated in discussions about student learning, teaching techniques, successes and problems, teaching faculty have come to recognize librarians as equal partners in the teaching mission of the university.

- A positive start was made in the ongoing task of raising academic librarians' status and position to that of other teaching faculty in our university.

- We discovered the benefits of taking risks by venturing into an area unfamiliar to us as academic librarians. Discovering what doesn't work, as much as what succeeds, is an important part of lifelong learning.

The creation and implementation of our FLC was a rewarding but time-consuming process. We were fortunate that our library administration and the director of freshmen studies strongly believe in the importance and benefit of having librarians advise and teach critical thinking to freshmen. We would not have been able to do what we did, or feel free to take the risks we did, without their support. Their faith in our abilities to succeed made us more comfortable and eager to expand our roles and continue to seek new ways to contribute to the educational mission of the university.

Notes

1. Donald G. Frank, Sarah Beasley, and Susan Kroll, "Opportunities for collaborative excellence," *CE&RL News* 62, no. 10 (2001): 1101.

2. Initial retention figures from the first FLC in fall 1999 show increased retention rates in fall 2000 over non-FLC students. Visit <http://www.gsu.edu/~wwwwugs/flcretention00and01.pdf>.

3. "Objectives for information literacy instruction," *CE&RL News* 62, no. 4 (April 2001): 416-28. ■

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Obviously the selection processes and criterion are complex. Our colleagues involved in the selection process will work very hard within a relatively short period of time to ensure fairness, balance, timeliness, and excellence.

Working together, I know that ACRL will offer a terrific and varied collection of programs. Good luck, and I look forward to seeing you in Charlotte.

Note

1. The "Call for Participation" was published as an insert in *CE&RL News* 62, No. 11 (November 2001) and is also available at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/charlotte/program/cfp.html>. ■