

ASOR Program Committee, Annual Report 2019-20

Allison Thomason and Helen Dixon, Co-chairs, Program Committee
Arlene Press, ASOR Director of Meetings and Events

2019-20 was an extraordinarily challenging, but successful year for the Program Committee (PC). The PC co-chairs, Allison Thomason (in her first year), and Helen Dixon (4th year), ASOR Executive Director Andy Vaughn, and Director of Meetings and Events Arlene Press, along with staff in the ASOR office in Alexandria, VA, were fortunate to meet over a three-day weekend in late January to discuss issues related to the PC and the Annual Meeting (AM). The retreat was very successful, especially because it created a mechanism for the ASOR staff to be more involved in planning co-curricular events with the AM and to help in organizing the program schedule for the Annual Meeting, among other things. The retreat also resulted in a more common-sense timeline for the AM and its CFPs/deadlines, which fit better the realities of the academic year for many participants and the volunteer PC Co-chairs.

Annual Meeting 2020:

After a successful in-person Annual Meeting in San Diego, CA in November 2019, ASOR opened the call for session and workshop proposals and the PC quickly reviewed them by late January 2020. Expecting to have a large and well attended meeting in the popular spot of Boston, we initially accepted and planned to offer approximately 92 sessions and workshops over 120 time slots and anticipated up to 1200 attendees. This schedule would have had the AM at capacity for available hotel meeting rooms, and many workshop and session proposals were necessarily rejected this year for lack of space.

In March, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. This was just as presenters were submitting paper abstracts for consideration for standing and Member-Organized sessions. The abstract review process continued smoothly, and after several Zoom and email conversations, by mid-June, the Executive Director and PC along with Arlene Press were forced by circumstances to pivot the AM from an in-person one to an all-virtual one. Planning, scheduling, and organizing the Virtual Annual Meeting (VAM) continued in earnest among PC co-chairs, Andy, Arlene, and ASOR staff over the summer and fall months of 2020. ASOR was also able to hire additional staff to provide resources and help for the virtual pivot, including making IT specialist Jared Koller a full-time employee. Arlene and the PC Co-chairs also provided several Zoom-based informational sessions to keep session and workshop chairs abreast of the changes and adapted timeline, and to collect suggestions and feedback for a smooth VAM experience. ASOR contracted with OpenWater as a virtual platform host for the meeting. Andy Vaughn and the PC reduced the registration fee by 50% for the VAM, while at the same time providing scholarship funding for anyone affected by the COVID pandemic. This funding was supported by generous donations, including registration fees from those who had planned to attend the face-to-face meeting and already paid the earlier full registration fee, but chose not to request a refund of the difference, as well as registrations for lectures in a new online webinar series.

Member-Organized Session and Workshop chairs were permitted to postpone their accepted sessions to the 2021 meeting if they chose, and 20 sessions or workshops decided to do so. Those who were willing to continue to hold their sessions during the 2020 year were asked to have paper presenters pre-record their papers for a late October deadline. The

flexibility of having pre-recorded paper presentations with live Q&A/discussion-only video meetings during the conference allowed the meeting to be held over 8 days, for two extended weekends in November (12-15 and 19-22), with no more than 4 hours/day of live sessions (11 am -3 pm EST to allow greatest viewing possibility for worldwide time zones) for discussion of papers and workshops, including breaks, to avoid “Zoom fatigue.”

The VAM this year will have more than 700 attendees, with 62 separate paper and workshop sessions offering approximately 430 presentations. It was a (happy) surprise for the PC to see that these VAM numbers are consistent with past ASOR meetings in some smaller cities (e.g. Denver, CO in 2018). We will also have a synchronously viewable plenary address and live Q&A session and ASOR members’ meeting, along with some additional virtual programming related to select museum exhibits and informal virtual meet-ups. We received close to 40 poster abstracts, and in a new move allowed by the extended 8-day schedule, we were able to group the poster sessions thematically during the conference time slots for more interesting and relevant discussions. Like the paper presentations, the posters will be viewable to all attendees prior to and during the entire conference.

In addition to hosting the pre-recorded paper presentations and posters, OpenWater will also host the recordings of the live discussions in paper and poster sessions and workshops on their server for at least 6 months after the conference, to allow attendees with registered passwords to view the sessions even after the days of the conference in November 2020. This is a first for ASOR and the AM and the PC will seek to offer such opportunities to “extend” the meeting virtually in the future. In addition, with presenters’ and chairs’ consent, some recordings of live VAM sessions may be made available to the wider public (no password required) on the YouTube channel, ASORTV.

Business meetings of ASOR committees and affiliated organizations/overseas research centers will take place outside of the official meeting days, scheduled at the behest of those committees and organizations. The ASOR book and service awards will be presented as usual during the annual members’ meeting, and a new “Student Paper Award” was initiated for the 2020 VAM by Lynn Welton, Honors and Awards committee chair, with the assistance of the Early Career Scholars committee.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Initiative:

ASOR President Sharon Herbert announced a plan to form an ad hoc DEI Task Force to review ways that ASOR could increase the inclusion of diverse and equitable participants across all of its programs, events, and policies. ASOR’s PC strongly supports this mission and will work with the task force to increase such participation in all aspects of the Annual Meeting.

Code of Conduct for the ASOR Annual Meeting:

Just before the 2019 Annual Meeting, the PC co-chairs along with other PC members were involved in drafting, discussing and formulating a policy to cover conduct and respond to harassment events during the Annual Meeting. Some components and a draft policy were made public and put into effect during the 2019 AM in San Diego. Subsequently, the policy was accepted by the CCC and Executive Committee, with amendments, and went into effect by mid-year, 2020. Discussions involving the adaptation of this Code of Conduct for the 2020 VAM setting involved Sharon Herbert, Andy Vaughn, Arlene Press, and the PC co-chairs.

ASOR Strategic Plan 2020-2024:

The PC has been working on and will present soon a draft document suggesting the PC's priorities, suggestions, and vision for the Annual Meeting within ASOR's Strategic Plan for 2020-24. The PC has met to discuss ideas for the plan and will finalize a document to present to the CCC by the end of 2020. Highlights will include concrete suggestions for the DEI initiative and how to continue the beneficial virtual components of the AM beyond the years affected by the pandemic.

Planning for AM 2021:

Prior to the pandemic, the PC was consulted about cities of interest for future meeting locations. The decision was made to contract for the 2021 AM in Chicago, IL (downtown), scheduled November 17-20, 2021. A virtual component to this 2021 meeting will also be held December 9-12. Andy, Arlene, and the PC are monitoring the pandemic situation for 2021, but the possibility of a second all-Virtual AM is real. In the meantime, the call for MO Session and Workshop Proposals will go out later than in the past (open December 15 - January 15) and the call for papers will be open February 15 - March 15. All session chairs, workshop chairs, and paper presenters will be asked to clarify whether they are willing to contribute to an in-person meeting, a virtual meeting, or both, and the PC will plan to build both an in-person program and a later, virtual program, acknowledging that if the pandemic forces us to cancel the in-person meeting, we will have the full range of dates available (November 17-20 and December 9-12, 2021) for a VAM if needed.

2020 ASOR Program Committee membership:

Helen Dixon, co-chair (PC member 2016, chairship 2017-2022)

Allison Thomasan, co-chair (2019-2022)

Gojko Barjamovic (2018-2023)

Hanan Charaf (2020-2022)

Debra Foran (2020-2022)

Jennifer Gates-Foster (2018-2023)

David Ilan (2016-2021)

Kate Larson (2020-2022)

Scott Moore (2019-2021)

Kiersten Neumann (2020-2022)

Christopher Rollston (2018-2020, not renewing for a second term)

Sarah Wenner, Poster chair (2020-2022)