

ASOR Program Committee Annual Report 2021

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

2020 was a rewarding and challenging year for the Program Committee (PC). With one all-virtual meeting (2020) under our belt, we set about planning the 2021 meeting, which has both an in-person and virtual component. We also consulted on and considered initiatives related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and sustainability.

2021 Annual Meeting Planning and Scheduling

The 2021 meeting was announced in late 2020 as a dual-component meeting, with an in-person component at the Chicago Hilton during the traditional ASOR dates, Nov. 17-21, 2021 and a second all-virtual component, December 8-12, between the times of 11:00-3:30 am Eastern, hosted once again on the Open Water platform and with the support of ASOR staff. A single registration fee (from \$100-\$310) covers attendance at both components. Due to the unpredictability of the Covid-19 pandemic and the surge of the highly contagious Delta variant, the PC and ASOR's Director of Meetings, Arlene Press, wisely predicted that our planning for both components would require the utmost in flexibility. When presenters initially submitted abstracts to the 2021 session in February, they indicated their desire as to form of attendance. We allowed member-organized session and workshop (MOSW) chairs to choose to offer their sessions in either the in-person component, the virtual one, or both, and they were allowed to make a declaration in late summer/early fall 2021. We asked those chairs of ASOR standing sessions to be able to attend the Chicago component, or line up a co-chair who would be able to attend in person if they could not. By late summer 2021, session chairs and attendees were asked by ASOR to indicate their final choice of attendance format—in-person, virtual, or both—for their sessions and workshops. At this point, we also allowed chairs of MOSW to postpone their sessions until 2022 if necessary.

However, even by early fall 2021, many institutions were still not funding or allowing domestic or international travel, and several countries' borders were effectively closed due to the pandemic. In Fall 2020, the Biden Administration announced that as of Nov. 8, 2021, international travelers with proof of vaccination and negative Covid test could travel to the United States, including those across land borders from Canada and Mexico. This left little time for travel planning, and many people who initially in early 2021 had intended to travel to Chicago to attend the in-person ended up requesting to withdraw their papers or only present in the virtual component. This has also resulted in the cancellation of some in-person MOSW and Standing sessions. As a result, the in-person Chicago meeting will have 500+ attendees, which is a fairly strong showing in the face of such uncertainty, and the participants of the virtual component exceed 1,000, which shows the popularity of the format.

The numerous change requests resulted in a great deal of extra work and real-time responding to emails by the PC co-chairs and ASOR Meetings Director to accommodate them all and appropriately set the schedule for both components. As of this writing, we were still receiving requests to change formats and even time slots due to change of travel plans from session and workshop chairs and individual attendees. Some in-person sessions dissolved at the last minute due to travel problems and the pandemic, and we re-homed a few papers in

standing sessions for those presenters who still wanted to attend the in-person meeting. Due to technology / cost limitations and our contract with the Chicago Hilton, ASOR will continue to require in-person presentation, and cannot allow live-streaming and wanted to discourage pre-recorded videos of papers being played at sessions in the hotel. The schedule of sessions and papers for the in-person and virtual components was therefore highly changeable. While we realized this amount of flexibility was entirely necessary this year due to the pandemic, it is not sustainable in future years due to demands on the time of ASOR Staff and PC co-chairs. We hope that for next year's Annual Meeting, which will once again have two components, the dates and deadlines will be more set and we will be able to adhere to them.

Annual Meeting 2021:

As of the writing of this report on November 8, 2021, the in-person component of the annual meeting will consist of 33 Member-Organized Sessions and Workshops and 44 ASOR Standing Sessions (77), with a total of 367 presentations and approx. 500 attendees.

The Program Committee invited Dr. Morag Kersel to deliver the synchronously viewable plenary address in Chicago, with in-person Q&A to follow. ASOR President Sharon Herbert opted to cancel the traditional cocktail reception after the plenary in light of room capacities and social distancing still required by the pandemic. A video recording of the lecture and the Q&A afterwards will be made available on ASORtv and the Open Water platform for those virtual-only attendees to watch by December. An exciting new opportunity also arose due to the dual-component meeting. In order to bring cohesion and balanced experience to the two-component annual meeting, the PC invited a panel of speakers local to Chicago to a complementary plenary event for the virtual component, to be moderated by Dr. Kersel with the help of ASOR staff, to discuss the Dr. Kersel's plenary and allow Q&A from virtual attendees. This will be offered on Wednesday night, Dec. 8, before virtual sessions begin the next day.

Poster Session:

The Program Committee, led by Sarah Wenner (PC member and Posters Chair), also allowed either in-person or virtual poster participation for the 2021 annual meeting. Poster submissions could be digital in PDF format, or in the traditional large-scale printed format for in-person presenters. ASOR will have both the physical posters displayed throughout the in-person conference and perhaps a digital portal to allow access to virtual-only posters. A poster session Q&A with all authors present takes place at lunchtime on Saturday in Chicago. After the experiences of the virtual poster sessions in 2020, we opted for a new format in order to ensure the most efficient and individualized use of presenters' and attendees' time. For the virtual component, where Open Water created an online "Poster Gallery," poster presenters will have a single synchronous Q&A session of 1.5 hours, where each will have their own "breakout" room and attendees can join the breakouts of their choice to ask questions after they visit the main session "room".

Other Events and Offerings:

In addition to hosting the plenaries, 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-December 2021. This allows ASOR and the PC to “extend” the meeting virtually into the near future. In addition, with presenters’ and chairs’ consent, some recordings of live virtual meeting sessions may be made available to the wider public (no password required) on the YouTube channel, ASORTV.

Some business meetings of ASOR committees and affiliated organizations/overseas research centers will take place outside of the official meeting days, while other standing committees will meet during the in-person Chicago component. Due to the uncertainty of attendance numbers forced by the pandemic, members of ASOR’s standing committees will be provided with gift cards to the hotel’s breakfast kiosk to grab and go meals at their own convenience for the morning meetings. All meetings were scheduled at the behest of those committees and organizations in consultation with ASOR’s Director of Meetings.

The ASOR Book Awards and Service Awards will be presented as usual during the annual members’ meeting in-person, with pre-recorded announcements, which will then be uploaded to the OpenWater platform for virtual attendees. The new “Student Paper Award” initiated for the 2020 virtual annual meeting by Lynn Welton, Honors and Awards Committee Chair, with the assistance of the Early Career Scholars Committee, is continuing for the 2021 Annual Meeting.

Finally, because the location of Chicago for the in-person component was chosen in part due to museums of interest to ASOR members, we are delighted that the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago is hosting a reception with refreshments for ASOR attendees in their galleries during the conference, with bus transportation to Hyde Park from the Chicago Hilton provided. We thank Kiersten Neumann, PC member, for her initiative and help in organizing this splendid event.

Sustainability Efforts:

In order to reduce ASOR’s carbon footprint, the PC and Executive Committee discussed options for the Program and Abstract books, which have traditionally been produced, typeset and printed ahead of time and then shipped to the AM. ASOR opted this year not to print a bound copy of the schedule and abstract book for the in-person Chicago component ahead of time. Rather, all participants were asked to declare if they needed a printed schedule and abstract booklet, regardless of availability of the Attendify app and its scheduling capabilities. As a result of this polling, ASOR staff will need to print less than 100 program and abstract booklets to print and distribute in Chicago, saving on postal costs, and as necessary, the text will be editable until just before the conference in order to accommodate the ongoing changes forced by the pandemic. Of course, up-to-date PDFs of the program and abstract book will be available online for both components.

Happily, ASOR will still provide the sustainable and much-loved tote bags for participants and plenty of maps of conference areas in the Chicago Hilton for convenience! Finally, the PC will continue to schedule in-person AMs in travel-friendly hubs with related cultural interest sites, and hope to continue shifting to dissemination of information and schedules through PDFs/online apps/OpenWater. In 2022, a new ad hoc committee on sustainability will be formed under the direction of Virginia Hermann and Andy Vaughn, and Helen Dixon, PC co-chair, has agreed to serve as a representative of the Program Committee in these conversations.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Initiatives:

The Program Committee co-chairs met with members of the newly-formed DEI task force in March 2021 to talk about how to address equity and inclusion issues both at the annual meeting and in the pipeline of calls and events leading up to the meeting. Once that task force's report was completed, the PC set about addressing the recommendations that were possible to implement in preparation for the 2021 meeting. For example, the PC voted this year to eliminate the second line of institutional affiliation on name-tags at the in-person annual meeting, reflecting our complex discussion of equity issues and balancing that with expectations of members around networking. Though we had opinions on all sides, the Program Committee ultimately hopes that attendees will ask questions and deepen conversations about where others are coming from, allowing participants to discuss their affiliations on their own terms and offering more equitable footing, without relying on labels or inviting some to screen for prestigious institutions. ASOR's Board of Trustees and Executive Director have also worked tirelessly to develop scholarship funds to eliminate or reduce registration fees for all attendees who wish to attend, and to particularly target and support those from BIPOC communities, who have been underrepresented at the annual meeting and in ASOR's membership ranks. In its meetings, the PC continues to discuss ways that ASOR could increase feelings of inclusion of diverse participants across all of its programs, events, and policies. ASOR's PC strongly supports this mission and will work with ASOR's standing DEI committee to increase such participation in all aspects of the Annual Meeting.

ASOR Strategic Plan 2021-2025:

The PC presented a draft document suggesting the PC's priorities, suggestions, and vision for the Annual Meeting within ASOR's Strategic Plan for 2021-25. Highlights included concrete suggestions for the DEI initiative, attention to sustainability issues and the AM, and how to continue the beneficial virtual component of the AM beyond the years affected by the pandemic. These ideas were well received in the CCC, incorporated into the draft, and the new Strategic Plan continues its journey to being adopted by ASOR's Board of Trustees.

Planning for AM 2022:

Prior to the pandemic, the PC was consulted about cities of interest for future meeting locations. Recently negotiations produced contracts for the 2022 (and 2025) annual meetings to be held downtown in Boston. Other locations for 2023-24 have not yet been set. A virtual component for the 2022 meeting will also be held in December and "save the date" notices will hopefully be sent during or shortly after the Chicago meeting. Andy, Arlene, and the PC are monitoring the pandemic situation for 2022, and hopefully planning and scheduling the in-person component will be easier next year.

In the meantime, the 2022 call for MO Session and Workshop Proposals will open soon and close January 5. The 2022 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 ASOR staff along with 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 (in November and December) for a virtual meeting if needed.

Respectfully submitted,
Allison Thomason and Helen Dixon
on behalf of the Program Committee

2020 ASOR Program Committee membership:

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

Allison Thomason, 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 (2019-2024)

Kiersten Neumann (2020-2022)

Madadh Richey (2021-2023)

Sarah Wenner, Poster chair (2020-2022)