

*MLA Task Force on Conferences
Survey Report
May 19, 2010*

Our task force was charged “to design and implement a survey to learn about members’ opinions on specific aspects of the annual conference.” We designed an instrument that incorporated ideas from Town Hall meetings, directives from the MLA Board, and many heartfelt comments from MLA-L. Thanks to Elizabeth Edminster’s invaluable technical help, this survey was distributed to the MLA membership in April. The response rate was predictably high: 488 (43%) of 1148 people polled began our lengthy questionnaire, and 428 (88%) of those who started it completed it. The survey was divided into eight rough categories: demographics, meeting attendance and cost, duration or timing, location, meeting elements, technology and being “green,” hotels, and conference information and promotional materials. Having information about the respondents has allowed us to analyze the data based on who was answering the questions.

Demographics, Attendance & Cost: Most people answering the survey held the status of individual member, and 79% of them were employed at colleges, universities, or conservatories of music. Similarly, 81% of the respondents were music librarians, split almost evenly among public services, technical services, and music library administration. The total number of meetings members had attended was fairly evenly distributed. There was a significant polarization between members whose institutions provided no funding to attend (31%) and those who received support for 76-100% of their expenses (26%). Reasons for lack of institutional support included the weak economy (26%), high transportation costs (35%) and hotel costs (35%). Almost one-third of respondents reported that they had attended MLA in previous years but could not do so in 2010.

Duration & Timing: Reactions to the option of either lengthening or shortening the duration of conferences met with little enthusiasm – it seems as if we’ve got this one right! Members favored keeping the meeting contained within the workweek if possible, a schedule especially important to church musicians. Eighty-one percent of respondents were willing to restrict committee business meetings to the beginning or the end of the day, reserving the middle of the day for program sessions. (The time-consuming work of BCC was brought up as a possible conflict with this schedule.) Others favored having an entire day set aside for committee meetings, which would allow members not involved with committee work the option of spending one less day at the conference. Ideas for lengthening the day were not restricted to committee meetings; members also suggested limiting the time and space needed for roundtables and chapter gatherings. Many respondents would like to see smaller, simpler conferences with fewer conflicting program sessions and a clear lunch break.

Timing & Location: The membership strongly disagreed with the concept of meeting every other year and did not want to alternate national meetings with chapter meetings. Consistency in the timing of MLA meetings was crucial; a fairly regular meeting time was important as members plan for expenses within a fiscal year. This was also a consideration when coordinating attendance at more than one national meeting. Early fall and late spring were universally difficult times for our membership. Respondents were surprisingly amenable to staying in dormitories during summer months, although concerns about air conditioning, local restaurants, convenient gathering places, and venues for exhibitors surfaced. Joint meetings were favored by some, but many members worried that regular joint meetings with organizations such as ALA or ACRL would either overshadow our identity (ALA) or disenfranchise those music librarians not associated with academic libraries (ACRL). The organizations most frequently mentioned as partners for joint meetings were SAM (124), AMS (120), and ARSC (48). While these might be attractive arrangements on an occasional basis, there was no overwhelming sentiment that consistent joint meetings would be beneficial. Although members enjoy rotating locations in U.S. regions each year, they were just as enthused about having a central location every other year (alternating East/West in the off years). Yet winter weather was also a consistent concern.

Meeting Elements: The response to our query about overarching themes for meetings was tepid; most respondents were neutral, and, of those with opinions, most were against the idea. The meeting elements most appreciated by the membership were program sessions on librarianship (84%), discussion sessions (71%), program sessions on music research (63%), plenary sessions (54%), and social activities (46%). The least popular activities were Big Band rehearsals (60%) and chapter-based activities (43%). Coffee breaks were by far the most cherished food event, especially when they included food, followed by the hosted reception and the banquet, which received similar rankings. Many respondents questioned the expense of the banquet and complained about the current seating system.

Virtual Meetings, Technology & Being Green: Hosting a “greener” meeting was important to many members; 57% would be willing to pay more in registration, and 47% were willing to pay more for more environmentally correct hotels. Not surprisingly, meeting together was a high priority for our membership. Being with other music librarians in both formal and informal settings was identified as one of most important benefits of our organization, one that cannot be replaced by virtual meetings. A resounding majority of respondents (89%) opposed using virtual meetings as an annual replacement for our conference, and 68% were opposed to meeting virtually on a biennial basis. At the same time, virtual meetings were viewed favorably as an enhancement to in-person meetings, especially for those people with schedule conflicts during the meeting or as a way to extend the reach of MLA to those who could not otherwise attend. Our meetings are dependent upon a wide variety of technology, and past requests seem to be both reasonable and well utilized.

Hotels: Most attendees make an effort to stay at the conference hotel (77% reported that they usually or always stay there.) Respondents listed the three most important hotel attributes as convenience, cost, and location. The membership prefers hotels in central locations within easy walking distance to inexpensive meals (nearby restaurants and grocery stores, with refrigerators in rooms a plus) and other cultural centers. Higher-priced hotels may be a worthwhile trade-off when meeting in cities with convenient “hub” transportation options (e.g. Chicago). Respondents were not strongly attached to many hotel amenities, although access to the Internet (preferably free) was considered “essential” to more than one-third of our members. Members appreciate the ability to stop by one’s room in order to drop things off or take a quick break. Respondents had mixed but surprisingly positive opinions about staying in dormitories; they were enthused but also concerned about amenities such as air conditioning or bathroom privacy. Respondents were also amenable to finding their own meeting space for small committee or roundtable meetings (33% “definitely” and 49% “maybe”) but noted that scheduled meeting times would need to be posted.

Conference Information & Promotional Materials: Printed programs were the most appreciated paper resource -- 52% thought it should be available free -- whereas totebags and folders were considered unimportant by more than half of those answering. The tote bag section elicited 72 comments and is obviously an area about which people have opinions they wish to share! Free tote bags were favored only when provided by sponsors (54%), leading one to wonder to whether that sponsorship might be better focused. Promotional materials were not read by 61% of the membership, although 91% wanted MLA to reap any benefits they may provide.

General Comments: The survey concluded with an invitation for general comments, and it was telling to gauge the sense of our membership by these unsolicited responses. Among the most consistent themes (by number of mentions) were support for 1) using a central location such as Chicago every other year, 2) eliminating the banquet, 3) including short breaks (e.g. 10 minutes) between meeting sessions, 4) being “green”, 5) having a central lobby/bar/meeting place to gather and see one another, 6) having a variety of restaurants and grocery stores nearby, and 7) meeting in smaller cities.

Recommendations: Our committee charge included the daunting goal of providing not only a report but also recommendations to the Board for their spring meeting. This is difficult at best. MLA is doing so many things right, and the over-riding sentiment of survey responses conveyed a sense that our membership loves our organization and believes it does things in a way that is beneficial to our profession. Our main recommendation, therefore, would be to make any changes carefully and slowly in order not to destroy the effectiveness of our meeting structure, an atmosphere described as “the envy of [their] colleagues” by one respondent. At the same time, reducing the cost of the

their own meeting space. Another option would be to have all roundtables meet at the same time, perhaps during an evening devoted to roundtables.

- *Consider eliminating chapter activities at the national meeting.*
- *Explore additional options to assist members to attend. Could the Development Committee be charged with thinking creatively about how to further assist younger members of the profession with travel costs? Should the registration rate for those in their first 3 years of professional work be lower? Could the registration form include an option for members to contribute directly to a fund to help defray travel for an upcoming meeting? Members truly love MLA because they have had the opportunity to experience its magic; as one respondent pointed out, we can not build on this tradition if younger members are not provided with the experience of attending a meeting.*
- *Keep the concept of summer meetings with dormitory accommodations on hold for the current time. Although the membership was surprisingly open to this option, changing to a summer meeting would complicate arrangements in many other areas. We advise exploring the use of a central location every other year (with Feb.-March meetings) first.*
- *The Big Band is a bit of an elephant in the living room. Although it is clearly a tremendous amount of fun and promotes a sense of pride (as well as great entertainment), some members question the amount of time and space devoted to this group of musicians. Is it really central to our mission? Our committee does not have information about whether this taxes room schedule, but we thought it important for you to know that the concern was raised.*

Respectfully submitted,

*Veronica Alzalde
Bonna Boettcher
Beth Christensen (Chair)
Elizabeth Edminster
Morris Levy
Tina Murdoch*