One (Online) Site: A New Paradigm for MLA Concurrent Session Planning?

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Objective

to assess the effectiveness and usability of an online Section/SIG program planning process for the MLA 2013 meeting, and to investigate whether the time has come for the process to move online for future meetings.

Methods

Traditionally, MLA has required that Section and SIG planners attend two on-site meetings that take place the year prior to the meeting being planned. An experiment grew out of necessity when planning for the 2013 international federated meeting resulted in a meeting planning timeline that did not follow the usual pattern. An alternative method was devised, implemented, and tested. All 2013 program planners were invited to participate in a survey to gauge their satisfaction with the online session theme planning process. A follow-up interview was conducted with those planners who had earlier experience with the previous planning process. Survey comments and focus group discussions were analyzed qualitatively using Weft QDA.

Results

34 planners (from all 23 Sections and 7 SIGs) responded to the survey. 1 respondent had not used the online planning site at all, due to inaccessibility of Google Sites at work. Of the remaining 33 respondents, 17 were first-time program planners. Responses about the site were generally positive (4 responses from experienced users were negative about usability, and 3 indicated it was ineffective). Non-users of the online tutorials perceived the site’s usability negatively or very positively, though perceived site effectiveness did not differ by tutorial usage. The overall online planning process was perceived slightly less positively and 3 experienced planners felt the 2013 process was worse than their previous experience (same n=7; better n=5. Most planners favored adding an in-person component, though 3 felt it would not have benefited the process, and 11, primarily first-timers, were unsure.

Communication challenges were mentioned in qualitative survey comments and focus group discussions, though it was acknowledged that the online process allowed more people to participate in a more efficient, trackable manner.  Strong leadership, perceived as evident for 2013, could ensure future success with online planning.

Conclusion

For the online planning process to succeed in the future, an in-person component should be retained as a supplement.