

Inclusion Report for HSS Annual Meetings

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I. Introduction

Academic conferences are meaningful sites for scholars to present research, network, and forge new teaching opportunities connected to scholarship. As such, they should be spaces of inclusion. For disabled people, that requires conferences to adhere to the American with Disabilities Act; conference spaces, whether in hotel rooms or university campuses, must be accessible for disabled academics. However, accessibility does not necessarily grant inclusion. Even if the bare minimum is reached to meet ADA parameters (e.g. wheelchair access rooms), many disabled academics encounter obstacles that prevent them from fully engaging in a vivid scholarly atmosphere. This is particularly pressing as disabled people often have to exert energy for extra labor into adjusting when basic access, accommodation, and adaptation request are denied.

This report is intended to provide a list of ways the History of Science Society might consider making their meetings more inclusive for everyone. It is, however, by no means comprehensive, but a step in discussing how we, as scholars, might think about the spaces in which we present, converse, and discuss with each other. It is also intended to broaden the scope of conversations about disability, to avoid prejudicial and dismissive biases, and to think about how to provide accessibility and accommodations for academics with physical, intellectual, and invisible disabilities.

II. Accommodations Coordinator

It is necessary for there to be an Accommodations Coordinator with a team of 2-3 persons operating on a voluntary basis to facilitate accommodations request for speakers or attendees as required. The team should also be responsible for working with HSS and the Local Arrangements Committee to ensure that accessibility standards are adhered to—including space, signs, and access.

Since disability is multivocal, ADA requirements and universal design principles might not fit the particular accommodation needs for disabled academics. Coordinators thus fills this role and will serve as the first point of contact for any requests and problems to ensure reasonable accommodations are fulfilled. During the meeting, they are also responsible for solving any accessibility problems. Attendees can contact the Coordinators in advance to fulfil any request, including, but not limited to the concerns listed above.

Below is a non-exhaustive list for how Accommodations Coordinators can serve delegates to meet their accommodation needs. Please note these are not the legal requirements (elevators, escalators, screen-projected CART services), but merely a list of suggestions to incorporate inclusiveness.

MOBILITY

- For any raised platforms, ensure there are ramps and handrails for steps. As well, ensure that the podium is at a suitable height for all presenters who will be on stage.

SOUND

- Closed captioning should be mandatory for keynotes, plenary sessions, and the HSS General Meeting. Screen-projected CART (Communication Access Real-Time Translation) is the best way to do this.
- Delegates should be mindful for making their own presentations accessible for d/Deaf and hearing-impaired delegates. Google Slides and, as of early 2019, Microsoft PowerPoint, have built-in closed captioning features that transcribe the speaker and audience's words on to the screen. The features are by no means perfect, but the more frequently they are used, the more accurate the translation becomes.
- If a microphone is being used, it should be required for all participants and audience members. There have been numerous complaints about microphones

not being used when available. HSS should include a statement in their program to request all conference attendees to adhere to microphone use.

PRESENTATIONS

- For presenters reading large blocks of quotes, it is helpful to have text on the screen for audience members to follow along.
- The option for videoconference is one of the most asked for accommodation request. This is owed to several reasons: travel is physically exhausting; conference is financially draining on participant; schedule conflicts prevent attendance; last-minute medical emergencies. Given that tech difficulty and limited panel time – as well as wifi access at venue—makes this challenging, HSS should still offer the option for those who **have been accepted into the program** but within a specific time period (minimum 1 month prior to meeting) can no longer attend. The Accommodations Coordinator will then work with HSS and venue organizers to arrange for videoconferencing.
- Paper copies for presentations are helpful for audience members who have difficulty following along due to barriers—hearing, understanding, fatigue, speech, accents. While acknowledging that conference papers are often work-in-progress and delegates may not wish to share them, the Accommodations Coordinator will work with presenters to fulfil any request for paper copies and ensure they are returned after the presentation. Paper copies are also helpful for translators.
- For people with visual disabilities or those who use an alternative communication method, it is helpful to have a copy of powerpoint presentations on their laptop to follow along. It should be mandatory to have USB copies of keynotes and plenary sessions powerpoint for audience members who request accommodation; the Accommodations Coordinator will facilitate between speaker and requestor and to ensure that rights/ownership of presentations are not violated.

- Presenters should ensure that the any colors they use on their slides are friendly for people with colorblindness. There are online apps—e.g. Vischeck—that will check each slides to ensure they are accessible. Colors on the opposite side of the color wheel work best together (red/blue, yellow/purple); this [accessibility color wheel](#) is also helpful
- PowerPoints: Avoid flashing images; ensure that all text on slides are easily readable from the back of the room (Sans Serif fonts work the best).
- Ensure there are volunteers during poster exhibits to read posters, index cards for buffets, or give directions to blind and low-vision attendees

SPACE

- Attempt should be to make conference spaces fragrance-free. In meeting programs as well as in promotional materials prior and during the conference, organizers should stress that the conference space is fragrance-free. Signs should also be posted besides the main HSS registration table(s).
- In addition to a “Parent Room”/“Breast-Feeding Room” for mothers, there should be a designated “Quiet Sensory Room” for meeting attendees who are not staying in the conference hotel but who are psychologically and physiologically overwhelmed and need quiet time to recover from sensory overload.
- For plenary and keynote sessions, lights should **not** be turned off where the speaker is, even if dimmed for audience to see the presentation, as this prevents lip-readers from seeing and understanding the speaker.
- Front seats on all plenary and keynote sessions should be reserved for accommodation requests for those who have difficulty understanding when seated

elsewhere, including, but not limited to: lip-readers, low-vision/blind people, wheelchair users.

INCLUSIVENESS

- For LGBTQ inclusiveness, name badges should include option to add preferred pronoun(s). This small change would allow more people to acknowledge gender diversities and provide LGBTQ delegates an opportunity to assert their chosen identity/identities.
- When contacting panelist prior to session, panel chairs should make effort to also inquire about proper pronunciation of speaker names and whether they have a preferred pronoun.
- Any roundtable or plenary sessions in which a table is placed on a stage must include a ramp or handrail for steps. Further, there should be a long tablecloth to provide decorum comfort for speakers wearing skirts.
- Signs for elevators, stairs, and escalators should be clearly marked and care should be given to ensure the signs are not obscured by a coat rack, door, or crowds.
- For visually impaired persons, it is helpful any group announcements should use specific descriptions of where things are (“on the left side outside the main red doors”) rather than using gestures or unspecific phrases (“over there”).
- The meeting app should ensure that there is an accessible format of the program that is compatible with screen reading software. If it is not, then a PDF of the program should be available.

- Where requested, alternative versions of documents should be made – large font size, different font, etc. The Accommodations Coordinator will work to facilitate these requests.
- Catered food should have index cards specifying ingredients for people with dietary/allergy restrictions.
- Coffee breaks should provide some nourishment. It is often difficult for delegates wanting to attend numerous panel sessions throughout the day to find time to eat and thus tend to be physiologically drained.
- All images on the website, app, and other online platforms should have ALT-text descriptions.

III. Conclusions

Conferences often involve a set of normative assumptions about scholarly activities. Disabled academics, however, find the process of navigating and participating in meetings challenging; even where ADA requirements are met, accommodations are unavailable, not inclusive, or fall short of expectations. The aim of the Accommodations Coordinator is to assess various opportunities for accommodation in the form of technology, requests, or adjustments, that will make HSS meeting spaces inclusive for diverse participants.

For future conferences, HSS should aim to build and financially support the infrastructure of the conference (e.g. providing captioning or relay services) so delegates are not burdened with managing their accommodation and access needs. This will certainly make meetings more inclusive for everyone. By acknowledging that accessibility and inclusion needs to be a priority, the Accommodations Coordinator will ensure that flexibility is granted and that delegates are comfortable in asking for what they need.