Introduction

This working group, convened by the Medieval Institute of Western Michigan University, conversed via email from November 2018 through January 2019. We discussed several topics regarding the session proposal and selection process for the International Congress on Medieval Studies.

In addition to the recommendations below, the members of this working group wish to affirm our commitment to improving inclusivity in the field of medieval studies and our desire for the International Congress on Medieval Studies to foster that inclusion. We encourage the Medieval Institute to adopt a philosophy of pursuing structural and procedural changes that will improve the welcoming nature of the Congress. Several of the points below address this, but in general, we hope that whenever the Medieval Institute is presented with an opportunity to improve equity and accessibility of the Congress for all medievalists—particularly those who have historically been underrepresented in the profession due to race, disability, gender, sexuality, national origin, language, socioeconomic background, professional status, etc.—that the Medieval Institute will seriously consider pursuing such opportunities, and adopt all possible policies and protocols that would make the Congress a welcoming environment for all medievalists.

The following recommendations identify concerns about each topic, followed by suggestions for how the Congress and Medieval Institute should change the current process.

Itemized Recommendations

1. Regarding the proposal process.

a. Concern: The current method of submitting session proposals does not track themes, co-sponsorship, or historic panel acceptance data. The review process is also dominantly analog; that is, proposals are printed and reviewed without the ability to easily cross-reference sessions proposed by other groups or individuals.

Recommendation: We recommend the development of an online session proposal database, in which both individuals and professional organizations have accounts that record previous proposals. The online proposal process would permit the proposal of multiple sessions without repeatedly completing the same form for each section. The review of proposed sessions online would also permit reviewers to more easily compare proposals on similar topics and track the overarching thematic distribution of session being accepted for the conference.

b. Concern: The current proposal form does not accommodate clearly submitting information about co-sponsorship, core themes of the proposed session, and why the session would be valuable in the coming year.

Recommendation: We recommend adopting a new session proposal form, which includes the following:
1. [Auto-fill from account] Sponsoring organization
2. [Pull-down menu of registered organizations] Co-sponsoring organization
3. [Text box] Contact person information
4. [Multiple choice] Number of sessions (which opens up the appropriate number of session proposals) ranked by the sponsoring session in order of interest.
5. For each proposed session:
   6. [Text field] Title
   7. [Select from choices and “Other” with text entry] Keywords
   8. [Text field] Why do you or does your organization believe this topic to be important?
   9. [Text field] Does the panel propose a particular methodology or encourage a specific discourse?/What, if any, particular scholarly methodology or discourse is encouraged in the papers/session?
10. [Text box] What is the expected audience for your session? Are there other, potential audiences you would like to reach? What ways do you plan to reach that audience?
11. [Text box] (If session is not being co-sponsored.) Have you or your organization considered co-sponsorship? Or would you be interested in co-sponsorship?
12. [Drop-down menu] What organizations might be appropriate co-sponsors for cross-listing your proposed session?

2. **Regarding the distribution of sponsored sessions among organizations.**

   a. **Concern:** The number of sponsoring organizations has grown dramatically in the last decade, while the number of available meeting rooms with appropriate technology has remained the same. Based on the data for the past ten years, from 5-10% of organizations proposing sessions in a given year have not had any sessions approved.

   Recommendation: All sponsoring organizations who submit proposals in a given year should receive at least one session. The online form should allow sponsors to rank their sessions, so that the reviewers know which session seems most urgent to a given organization.

3. **Regarding co-sponsorship of sessions.**

   a) **Concern:** One of the presumed rationales for the rejection of any particular panel proposal is that the topic is being covered in similar ways by other organizations.

   Recommendation: We believe that increased co-sponsorship should be fostered by the ICMS, as it has great potential for building coalitions among scholarly organizations, helping individual sessions to be more diverse in both content and audience makeup, and help guarantee the success of a session by encouraging sufficient submissions. Thus, through the use of the keyword function added to the online proposal form, we
recommend that the vetters of the proposals match rejected proposals (ones rejected on this criteria alone) to accepted proposals and recommend co-sponsorship. This would require an extra, brief stage after the notification stage in which organizations can through an online process accept or reject co-sponsorship options (both the accepted and rejected proposers would have to accept co-sponsorship).

4. **Regarding the diversity of topics represented.**

   a. Concern: The current selection criteria takes into account “the balance of topics represented” and “apparent redundancies among proposed sessions.” The term “redundancies” is a bit slippery in this context, since different members of the selection committee may disagree on what is “redundant” and what is important.

   Recommendation: Some of these concerns may be resolved by providing feedback for rejected proposals (see 5 below). However, it would be helpful if the ICMS could provide more specific examples of the “balance of topics” and the problems with “redundancies” as part of the information provided on the proposal form.

5. **Regarding transparency in decisions to accept or reject proposed sessions.**

   a. Concern: Conference participants are not broadly aware of how the criteria for session acceptance are applied.

   Recommendation: Rationale should be provided for rejection of particular proposals. This could be done through a published rubric, such as 1) similar topic proposed by this organization, 2) similar or same topic proposed by another organization (co-sponsorship recommended), 3) did not complete rationale, 4) organization requested more sessions than can be accommodated and this was ranked lowest, etc including all types of rationales that the vetting committee applies.

   b. Concern: Sponsoring organizations and individual participants are not broadly aware of data such as the number of sessions proposed/accepted/rejected in a given year, or the number of new/established sponsoring organizations submitting proposals.

   Recommendation: Data on the history of submissions, rejections, and acceptances should be made available to conference participants. This might be accomplished through a page on the conference website “Historical Data.”
6. **Regarding who reviews session proposals and makes decisions to accept or reject proposals.**

   a. **Concern:** Presently, the review is conducted by anonymous individuals whose areas of specialty and affiliations within the profession are kept confidential, both from broader stakeholders in the Congress, and from this working group. Moreover, the recruitment process for these reviewers is not transparent, and the Working Group was not provided full information about the current configuration the reviewers or the specific stages of the review process.

   **Recommendation:** The changes recommended on the issues of the reformatted application (Item 1), the distribution of sponsored sessions among organizations (Item 2), and co-sponsorship (Item 3), should be tracked for two years, and the outcomes of those changes assessed by this Working Group or another like it. At that point, additional review should consider whether the changes have effectively addressed the stated Concerns, or whether the vetting process needs more comprehensive restructuring.

Sincerely,

Jessica A. Boon, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill  
Christina Gutierrez-Dennehy, Northern Arizona University  
Carissa Harris, Temple University  
Matthew Heintzelman, Hill Museum and Manuscript Library  
Afrodesia McCannon, New York University  
Karen Overbey, Tufts University  
Leah Pope Parker, University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Ellen Thorington, Ball State University