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Electronic or Paper? Comparing Submissions to MWERA–98

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The World Wide Web is being used by many professional organizations and societies to provide general information, details of upcoming meetings and events, and membership specific resources. A recent addition has been to provide the means to submit proposals, and view upcoming meeting programs, as a part of the web site. This past year's efforts by the Mid-Western Educational Research Association (MWERA) have taken this concept one step further. In addition to static program information (i.e., basic program details, host city information, and invited speaker profiles), the MWERA–98 conference web site supported both traditional paper and on-line submission of presentation proposals. An on-line database allowed proposers to query the review and scheduling status of their submissions. This same database provided the entire meeting program, including paper abstracts, in an on-line search mechanism designed for locating both sessions, and individual presentations, of interest.

Did proposers for the MWERA–98 conference take advantage of the electronic submission option? Were there differences in the kinds of people who submitted electronically versus on paper? Were certain kinds of presentation types, or certain divisions, more or less likely to receive proposals in a certain format? Finally, was the method of submission related to when the presentation was submitted, the completeness of the proposal package, or its acceptance or rejection? These questions were framed as part of a research study connected with MWERA–98.

Background

The Mid-Western Educational Research Association (MWERA) is an organization of scholars and practitioners, researchers and instructors, and educators from all level and perspectives. Each years MWERA hosts a four-day conference where participants share research findings and opinions in a collegial atmosphere. Like most regional professional meetings, MWERA's annual conference provides a variety of presentation formats (traditional paper presentation, roundtable/poster, symposium, workshop, and alternative format) interspersed with invited speakers, special events, and socials.

In the past individuals interested in presenting a paper at the annual meeting were required to submit their application on paper. The packet typically consisted of: six copies of the official submission proposal form, three copies of a 100 to 150 word abstract, six copies of a two to three page summary (three with author identification and three without), two 3 by 5 index cards with certain information, and four postage-paid, self addressed return envelopes. These materials were used by the Program Chair, Associate Program Chairs, and Division Chairs for the proposal's blind peer-review, and the preparation of the meeting program and abstracts book.

The MWERA Board of Directors decided to allow proposals to be submitted either on paper, in the traditional way, or over a World Wide Web site for the 1998 conference. For a variety of reasons it was decided not to allow e-mail proposal submissions (the most important being the inability, through e-mail, to insure a uniformity of submission materials). Instead, a web form was created (and tested in both Netscape Navigator version 4 and Internet Explorer version 4) to be used as the primary means of proposal submission. This form was linked (via ODBC) to a Microsoft Access 97 database, the result being that electronic submissions were entered directly and immediately by the web server into the appropriate fields in this database. This process, it was hoped, would greatly reduce the need for reformatting, retyping, and the bulk (but not all) of the error checking typically associated with processing paper submissions. Microsoft's IDC/HTX technology, using under Internet Information Server (IIS) version 4.0 on a Windows NT 4.0 server, was used for this purpose. This technology provided a straightforward and efficient means of entering and retrieving information between the database and the web browser. Active Server Page (ASP) technology was added later for database searching and program retrieval.

The Call for Proposals, circulated on paper and on the web site, provided information about both methods of submission, and interested parties were encouraged to try using the electronic submission alternative. Electronic submissions were enabled 120 days prior Call deadline (April 1, 1998). This deadline was eventually extended to the end of April, with the final proposals being received by the Program Chair in early May.

Method

The on-line database contained all of the information submitted by each proposer, including: the principal presenter's name and address, the names and institutional affiliations of any co-presenters, the title of the proposed presentation, detailed information about the proposed presentation, and the proposal abstract and summary text. Proposals submitted electronically were automatically entered into this database; those submitted on paper were typed into

the database (all items except for the longer summary text) by the Program Chair's staff. The system automatically recorded the date of initial proposal receipt, how the proposal was submitted (on paper or electronically), and whether or not the proposal was eventually accepted for presentation at the conference. Additional data fields detailing the paper and session scheduling, chair and discussant information, and presenter information was added later to the database, allowing the single data file to contain the full information for the entire conference.

Selected fields, minus any personal identifying information, were extracted from the database in mid-July immediately following the finalization of the meeting's program. These data were transferred to SPSS for Windows (version 8) for analysis.

Results

A total of 193 proposals were submitted for the MWERA–98 conference: 108 (55.9%) on paper and 85 (44.1%) electronically. Slightly more than half of proposers still preferred the traditional paper method of submission, although a sizable number had opted for the electronic form.

Cross tabulations were run to see if differences existed between the on-paper proposers and the electronic proposers on a number of characteristic proposal elements. The first of these considered the division to which the proposal was submitted. Division K received the largest number of proposals both on paper and electronically, while Division F received the fewest. There was not a statistically significant different between the rates of submission to the different division ($\chi^2 = 10.208$, $df = 11$, $p = .512$). The desired format of presentation (paper, roundtable, symposium, workshop, or alternative session) was also examined. Traditional paper presentations were the most desired format, forming 72.5% of the total submissions, although there were also no statistically significant differences related to method of submission ($\chi^2 = 4.477$, $df = 4$, $p = .345$).

The status of the proposer, whether a member of MWERA or a student, was next examined. More non-MWERA members (38.8%) than members (27.8%) submitted proposals electronically, although this difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.639$, $df = 1$, $p = .104$). The number of student electronic proposers was split, with 52.1% preferring the paper format and 47.9% using the electronic format ($\chi^2 = .389$, $df = 1$, $p = .533$).

Statistically significant findings were only discovered in two of the comparisons that were made. The first examined proposals by state address of the principal presenter. MWERA–98 received proposals from principal presenters residing in 20 different states. Only electronic proposals (14 total) were received from individuals living in Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas, while only on-paper proposals (16 total) were received from individuals in Kansas, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Virginia. Proposals were received in both formats from the remaining seven states. This difference is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 33.512$, $df = 19$, $p = .021$). One possible explanation for this is the location of the MWERA annual conference, held for the past several years in Chicago, Illinois. The electronic only states tended to be those the furthest geographically from Chicago, while the paper only states are located somewhat closer. Why this geographic distance should matter to proposers is puzzling, given the number and reliability of overnight mail services available.

The second statistically significant finding concerned the date the proposals were received. The first proposal (which was submitted on paper) was received 55 days before the Call deadline. Two distinct peaks of proposals were then received at eight days before the deadline (7 proposals) and two days before the deadline (20 proposals). Additional proposals were received on paper over the five days following the deadline, with most coming in the next day (16 proposals) or five days later (17 proposals). There was then a sharp drop-off of paper submissions until the 29th day after the call (the day before the extended call deadline) when another group of submissions arrived (7 proposals). This is in contrast to the electronic submissions, 29% of which (25 proposals) arrived on the deadline date. Only six additional electronic proposals were received as the largest group on the 26th day after the original call deadline. This difference was significant ($\chi^2 = 139.723$, $df = 333$, $p < .000$).

Length of proposal titles, number of words in the abstract, number of co-authors, proposal descriptor(s) selected, and proposal acceptance rate were also compared between proposals submitted on paper and those submitted electronically. No other statistically significant differences were found.

Discussion

The experiences of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association 1998 Program Planning committee show that electronic submission is a viable means to receive proposals for a regional meeting. While it required additional work to set up and maintain the web site used to collect the electronic submissions, the results seem well worth the extra effort. A large number of the MWERA–98 proposers chose to use the electronic proposal format, a method that saved meeting planners considerable time as these submissions' critical information did not have to then be hand entered into the meeting database. The electronic submissions were essentially indistinguishable from those submitted on paper, except for the states from which they came from and the dates on which they arrived. These two significant differences may have some implications for future program planners as they consider both marketing their regional meetings outside of their traditional geographic boundaries, and scheduling the staffing of the processing of received proposals.

An additional benefit to the program committee was evident at the production of the Program (a special issue of the *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*) and Presentation Abstracts book (a compilation of all abstracts accepted to the conference). In prior years the information for these two items had to all be typed into a computer, or cut and pasted together by hand, by program committee staff. This year due to the number of electronic submissions, which went directly into the database, that work was cut almost in half. Further, since the information was in a database (as opposed to a word processing file) it was very easily sort, selected, and merged into the necessary formats for both printed items. It is estimated that this alone saved almost four weeks of production effort by the program committee staff. This also allowed the final production of these items to be put off several additional weeks each while still meeting their respective deadlines, resulting in fewer changes necessary for the Program Addendum handout.

Unsolicited comments concerning the electronic submission process received from electronic proposers were uniformly positive and encouraging. Most indicated that they enjoyed being able to "cut-and-paste" from their word processor directly into a web form, not having to type cover sheets and index cards, and being able to use the web site to check on the status of their proposal. Only one person reported experiencing a difficulty in submitting electronically, and that was eventually tracked down to their use of an extremely old version of a web browser (one that did not support form processing completely). Comments from paper proposers were also positive. Many reported having used the web site to check on the status of their proposals even though the original submission was made on paper. During the months following the close of the Call for Proposals the site has received over 4,600 "hits" of users searching the database for locate sessions and papers of interest.

Other state and regional organizations will be considering providing electronic proposal submissions in the years to come. The results of this research should reassure those meeting planners of the popularity of this alternative to traditional on-paper submissions. Its relative ease of implementation, time saving features, and power to provide additional on-line information will make electronic submissions and databases more popular in the coming years. Program Chairs and committees, and Association Boards of Directors, should be reassured that proposal quality appears not to be affected by the type of submission medium, and that the rates of submissions by different constituencies to different divisions are likewise not different. There are numerous reasons why electronic submission would be inappropriate as the sole means of proposal submission; however, a parallel system of web-based and paper-based proposal submissions does seem to meet the needs of many MWERA members while simultaneously easing the burden of program production (for the Program Chair and Committee) and providing additional immediate, up-to-date information for potential meeting attendees.

Mid-Western Educational Researcher

Call for Special Editors

The Mid-Western Educational Researcher is a scholarly journal that publishes research-based articles addressing a full range of educational issues. The journal also publishes literature reviews, theoretical and methodological discussions that make an original contribution to the research literature, book reviews, and feature columns. There are four issues of the journal published annually. The Summer issue is the program for the Annual Meeting.

Recently, the editorial advisory board recommended that the Autumn issue each year should be devoted to a special topic. Specifically, all articles in the Autumn issue should explore a topic of general interest in education and research, each focusing on a different aspect of the topic.

The journal is now seeking individuals interested in serving as special editors for Autumn issues for 2000–2002. In order to be considered as a special editor, please provide the following information in a 1-2 page proposal.

1) The special topic you wish to explore, and different viewpoints or perspectives which contributed articles may take. Include an explanation for why this is an important topic for the journal to explore and why it would appeal to the readership.

2) How you plan to solicit manuscripts for the issue. If you expect to invite manuscripts, from whom will the manuscripts be solicited? Do you expect to run a call for manuscripts in an issue of the journal?

3) Your background experience in authoring educational research and in editing, reviewing, and publishing journal manuscripts.

Each special issue should contain 40 typeset pages of copy, or about 6-8 manuscripts depending on length. Final manuscripts should be submitted to the editorial team in hard copy and on disk no later than July 15 of the year of publication for processing and printing.

The editorial team, in conjunction with the incoming editors, will make final decisions on the appointment of special editors. Questions regarding the journal or the roles of the special editor should be directed to the current editors.

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