On Conference Proposals

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1 Perspective of the Section Organizer

- Receive maybe 50 proposals of diverse types for say 7 panels

- Goals (in order)

    1. Attractive program that will be well attended
    2. Provide opportunity for serious scholars to present work

- Two selection criteria

    1. Fit with panel
    2. Quality of work

- Your letter can influence both of those judgments.

    Fit What you can do is do a really careful job of telling him/her what the paper looks like.

    This is more than topic: the organizer is looking for what kinds of papers can work on the same panel. That has to do with research style, using common data, and many other things.

    Very, very few are natural fits. The organizer really has to stretch to find commonalities. You can make that easier—and more likely—by knowing what sorts of papers are likely to be scheduled (last year's program) and by giving tips on what sort of papers yours would fit with.

    Quality The toughest part of organizing a section is judging quality when there is almost no information about quality.

    Some Quality Cues

Reputation Your own won't do you any good. But if UNC people are prominent in some piece of the literature, e.g., George and Stuart in directional modelling, then a proposal from a UNC grad student in that area will be considered probably state of the art. So if you are in a known local research tradition, it doesn't hurt to say so. For example, "This extends Gray and Lowery's work on interest groups in state politics ..." says a lot about the probable seriousness of your work.

Depth Is this an ongoing project, a serious piece of work that has a history and a future or is it a throw-together for the conference? So a letter that says, "This was originally a seminar paper which I am revising for eventual publication" is a serious cue about depth. Better yet, "I have previously presented this work to the American Politics Research Group at UNC." It says that the original work was good enough to merit further effort and that your own intentions go beyond merely presenting it as a paper. Contrast "I think this topic would make a good paper."

The worst conference papers are usually those designed for conference presentation, having no history or future. These come usually from young people who can claim travel funds only if they give a paper and so the purpose of the paper in the first instance is funding.

Completion The best work that is proposed has usually already been done (the research, if not the writing.) Thus "the paper will show" sends a cue that you are not just starting down the road. Contrast "the paper will test."

Importance Theory is everything. If the paper answers a question that people should care about, then it is important. The opposite of important is gap-filling. If a proposal starts out with "No one has ever looked at ...," I wouldn't read any further. This brings to mind a line I heard from Mike MacKuen, but can't attribute to its original source:

> *This paper fills a much needed gap in the literature.*

or my own response:

> *Filling gaps in the literature is like eating road kill. You can do it, but it isn't much of a lifestyle.*

2 The Competition

A crude estimate of what the mix of proposals will look like.

1. About 20% from established scholars, names you would know. These proposals will all be scheduled and the panels will be designed to find them a place.

   If you look at the program you will see more than 20%, but that is an illusion, because nearly all roundtable participants, chairs, and discussants are recruited to serve; they do not make proposals.

2. About 20% are obviously incompetent. It's hard to describe these, but you know them when you see them. These papers won't be scheduled unless there is a dearth of quality proposals. They tend to be gap-fillers.

3. The other 60% is where all the action is.
   These will be proposals from graduate students and from usually junior faculty without established reputations. That is basically an even competition. Having a title behind your name and not being known is not necessarily good. Grad students will be unknown regardless of talent, because they haven't had the chance. Faculty who remain unknown can be presumed to have not done good work.
   So don't try to hide your graduate student standing. You can't—you either have a professorial title or you're a graduate student by default. And it isn't necessarily desirable to run from that status. One of the more important things that conferences do is to give young people a chance to present their work that they would not otherwise have.

3   The Letter

I believe that it is customary for graduate students to use department letterhead for these letters. (But it's been a while since I was one myself.)

It needs to include first **exact** information that will be needed for the program. That is a proposed title, your name, as you want it to appear, and your affiliation.[1] Too many authors think there will be time later to fill in these details. But if you leave any ambiguity, you force the organizer to do clerical work to fill in the details, and that is not appreciated. Titles often change from what is in the program and that is not a big deal.

Second, it needs to have a paragraph or so that describes the paper. If this is written to be useful description for the organizer to know its look and feel, it helps. See above. The description should focus on substance. Graduate students, new to methodology, often err in thinking that it is more impressive than it is. So "I'm going to employ a two-stage negative binomial regression" doesn't tell the organizer what he/she needs to know. (Obvious exception: methods panels.) What ideas are to be tested, the logic of the design, and the flow of the analysis are the important things.

4   Your Responsibility

If your proposal is accepted, it will be at the cost of some other proposal not accepted. That means that follow-through is not optional. It is somewhat irresponsible to make a proposal

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[1]Affiliation doesn't include title, so it is University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

and then not follow through with a commitment to present when the proposal is accepted. It is very irresponsible to get your proposal on the program and then not show up.

When you make a proposal, you need to be serious, and that includes delivering a paper on time. We are a small discipline. Your reputation for doing good work will grow faster than you think—at least in your specialty area. Your reputation for being a responsible professional needs to be guarded.