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AEJMC's mysterious chip process ... Or, 'Why didn't I get that panel I wanted?'

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AEJMC's mysterious chip process...
Or, "Why didn't I get that panel I wanted?"

By James Simon
SPIG Head

So there I was in San Antonio in December '04, completely bewildered. Everyone else seemed to have been through this convention planning process before. And I had a lot of SPIG members counting on me to get their panels approved. Yipes!

Welcome to the world of the AEJMC mid-winter meeting, where leaders from each division and interest group get together for a whirlwind, 20-hour schmoozing and bargaining session that determines what programming will be held the following summer.

This year the mid-winter session was in the same Texas city that will host the August convention, and I had big plans to visit the Alamo, see the Riverwalk and even grab a Spurs game. I went zero-for-three ... but I did learn enough about the process to come back with approval for seven of our priority panels.

Do you have any interest in getting more involved in convention planning? Here an inside look of what it's like.

SPIG members generated over 20 ideas for panels, and SPIG vice head and program chair Jack Zibluk and I whittled them down to nine priority items. As an interest group, SPIG received seven half chips (think poker chips); the larger divisions like Newspapers receive seven whole chips. It takes one whole chip to sponsor an event, so usually we find a co-sponsor and put our half-chip together with their's and get approval for our desired events.

In the weeks before the meeting, Jack and I sorted through 200 panel ideas from other groups, considering what would be good events for SPIG members, then contacted our long-time allies in the Community College Journalism Association and other groups that we felt would be interested in our specific proposals. This year our allies included the Magazine and Mass Communication and Society divisions, plus the Graduate Education and Civic Journalism interest groups.

If you can put four half-chips together, you can sponsor a mini-plenary event, during which few other events are counter-programmed against you. Terry Dalton's proposal for a Hot Topics panel, in which we would wait and then build a panel around a current topic in the news, received strong support from many other

groups and could have been a mini-plen. But each division and interest group can only co-sponsor one such mini-plen, and SPIG has a long-time association with the GIFT (Great Ideas For Teaching) program,, which we decided to retain.

My efforts to line up support for Hot Topics taught me a big lesson: in return for their support, other groups may want a big say in your programming. In hindsight, it would have been impossible to get four AEJMC groups to agree on a single issue for the Hot Topics panel; it may be hard for Terry to find a topic that will interest both SPIG and the eventual co-sponsor, Mass. Comm and Society.

Then comes the Sunday morning showdown. A detailed description of the chip process on the AEJMC website describes it as “an endurance contest, a chess game, a war.” Representatives of 31 groups sit around a huge table, armed with their chips. A large empty convention grid is projected on a screen, with dozens of open slots ranging from Tuesday through Saturday, 8:30 a.m. through the early evening.

Using a random start, one representative calls out the name of the event and the timeslot they wanted. Midday slots and those on Wednesday and Thursday started going quickly.

Finally it was SPIG’s turn. John Hanc produces strong programs year after year for SPIG, and we went with his proposal first. I called out, “Motivating Students To Love Journalism, co-sponsored with Graduate Education Interest Group, Thursday at 3:15 p.m.,” thereby grabbing one of the most coveted time slots.

The bidding continued around and around the table. On the next round, we won approval for a panel on “Balancing Teaching and Research,” followed by the “Hot Topics” panel in the third round. We agreed to co-sponsor the GIFT program with one half-chip, plus a CCJA panel that will showcase SPIG’s “teachers of the year.”

We used our remaining chips to win approval of our SPIG research session (the first in years), and a panel on media convergence.

Does any of this wheeling and dealing interest you? Any desire to become a SPIG vice head or head? We are always looking for new people and new ideas. The SPIG membership is a very supportive group. We all face similar issues in our jobs and in our lives. And as a SPIG officer you might just make a difference in the field of journalism education well beyond your own campus and classroom.

If so, I invite you to consider running for one of the top officer spots when we get together in San Antonio this summer.