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ABSTRACT

The question that I'll be addressing is, what can GSA do to make our association a more accessible and inclusive one? I'll consider this question from the perspective of my role, on the one hand, of a lifetime member of GSA, and on the other, as the full-time Executive Director of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and the former very part-time Operations Director of the GSA.

To answer this question, I want to address the very unexciting topic of how to finance accessibility and inclusion. In order to come up with some strategies, I would like us to think about who, and what, "the GSA" is, because it's not an anonymous entity run by a wizard behind a curtain. It is a 501c3 charity whose financials and other key data - right down to the average number of minutes per week its volunteer Board of Directors serve - can be found in 2 minutes with a quick internet search. Recognizing that we need to participate in this nonprofit like the charity that it is would help us do the really boring and necessary work of actually figuring out how to finance the work of this nonprofit association.

Position Statement

Financing Inclusion

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To answer this question, I want to address the very unexciting topic of how to finance accessibility and inclusion. In order to come up with some strategies, I would like us to think about who, and what, “the GSA” is, because it’s not an anonymous entity run by a wizard behind a curtain. It is a 501c3 charity whose financials and other key data - right down to the average number of minutes per week its volunteer Board of Directors serve - can be found in 2 minutes with a quick internet search. [SLIDE] Recognizing that we need to participate in this nonprofit like the charity that it is would help us do the really boring and necessary work of actually figuring out how to finance the work of this nonprofit association.

Nonprofit is a tax status, and not a financial strategy, and that difference should matter to you. If you have never heard of a 990, or don’t know what a 501c3 can and cannot legally do, or you want to claim that we are not the same kind of charity as the American Cancer Society, that’s ok. I didn’t know any of that either, and I definitely didn’t care to learn. But it was game changing - and empowering - when I began to realize just how nonprofit professional societies work. We all know that accessibility services cost money, but we probably don’t all know what we could actually do as individuals to find the money to ensure that we have a sustainable and practical plan in place that ensures a truly inclusive and accessible association. I propose that we educate ourselves about how nonprofits work in order to create a plan that will help this nonprofit work for all its members.

Of course, when we think about accessibility and professional societies, we don’t talk much about resources, specifically time and money. But we should, because if we did, we might all get a bit more serious about what we can and must do to bring about more inclusion and equity to our societies. Accessibility has a price tag, and it’s one that we as allies need to start paying.

Learned, professional societies hold 501c3 status, the coveted IRS nonprofit tax code that allows a group to collect membership dues and fundraise as a charity. And GSA, like all charities, relies on volunteer labor, and monetary and in-kind donations. We all claim that we want our colleagues with disabilities to be able to fully participate in the conference, but we also complain about membership dues and conference registration fees, and we don’t always feel comfortable donating to our professional societies, in part because we don’t want to think of them as charities who need that kind of support.

We can complain about capitalism and corporate mentality and even lament the loss of travel funds – if we ever had them. But as the full-time Executive Director of my own

society, and as a lifetime member of this one, I know that my wish list for more accessible conferences is far beyond most small- and medium-sized learned societies' current labor and financial resources.

Here is just a sample [SLIDES]:

High-end budget items [SLIDE]

- Accessibility companion travel
- ASL interpreters for plenary sessions
- Live Closed Captioning
- Speakers and microphones in all rooms
- True hybrid options – hardwiring + cameras

Mid-level budget items [SLIDE]

- Conference sites in main hubs
- 30-minute transit time between all sessions
- 9am start times
- Quiet rooms
- Hard walls (not airwalls) for breakout rooms

Modest budget items [SLIDE]

- Disability Studies Network
- Program committee disability advisor
- Accessibility copies of all presentations
- Tables in every breakout room
- Low-top and high-top tables at receptions

I think these measures fall easily under reasonable accommodations, as I'm sure most of you do, as well. But paying for these measures means significantly increasing membership dues, conference fees, and donations – double or triple for some categories. Just as important, organizing and administering them requires significant staff time – starting from the moment that an Executive Director submits RfPs for possible hotel sites, that is, 5-7 years before the actual conference.

[SLIDE] In sum, we need to center foresight in any discussion of accessibility and inclusion now, because now is when we start planning for 2030 and beyond. I want to use my list – for ASECS, and for GSA, and for the other academic spaces I have a voice in – as a set of milestones on a journey to a truly accessible and inclusive conference. I can calculate the per-person costs of each of those items, and I can sit down with other members in my societies to discuss target revenue increase goals and how to get there.

And I can look in the mirror and ask my colleagues to do the same and say, budgets are values. How much of my paycheck and how much of my fundraising time am I willing to put towards ensuring that everyone in this particular charity truly has a place at the table?