

# SCIENTIFIC SOCIETIES FIGHT TO STAY AFLOAT AMID PANDEMIC

Scientific organizations dealt financial blow as conferences move online.

By Diana Kwon

**W**hen the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA) called off its annual meeting in March because of the coronavirus pandemic, it faced a potentially devastating financial blow. The costs associated with the decision, which included venue-cancellation penalties, registration reimbursements and meeting-planning expenses, looked as if they would add up to more than US\$1 million.

The society runs its meeting on a break-even basis – so this would have put its operating budget in jeopardy for the next one or two years, says Anne Grauer, president of the volunteer-run AAPA, which has about 2,200 members. In addition to meetings, the AAPA's funds cover payments to its journal's publisher and grants for early-career investigators. "It was tremendously stressful," says Grauer. "I lost many, many hours of sleep."

A number of scientific societies have faced similar situations as meetings worldwide have been called off, postponed or moved online because of the pandemic. Organizations are trying to weather the cost of cancelling meetings while grappling with the long-term effects that the pandemic could have on their activities and on the research community.

"We'll have to adjust to a new normal," says Lars Kristiansen, executive director of the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies (FENS), Europe's main organization for neuroscientists.

## Cancellation costs

It is the smallest societies that are most vulnerable. Although the AAPA avoided a destructive hit to its finances, it is expecting to be hundreds of thousands of dollars in the red this year, which, says Grauer, still leaves the society with cash-flow issues.

The 2,500-member Society for the Study of Evolution (SSE) and two other similar-sized US societies ended up owing tens of thousands of dollars for cancelling their joint annual conference, which runs on a break-even basis. Andrea Case, the SSE's executive vice-president, says the societies were lucky, because they were able to reschedule with the venue



Conferences provide cash for many societies.

months ahead of their June meeting, which meant avoiding penalty costs of hundreds of thousands of dollars. But they are now facing the possibility that their 2021 meeting will need to be cancelled or moved online as well. Although they were able to cover the cancellation costs for the 2020 meeting, "being

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relatively small societies, we can't do that too many more times", Case says.

Larger societies with more diverse sources of income are better positioned to weather the costs of cancelled conferences. But some are facing huge losses. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), which has more than 150,000 members, generates about one-third of its revenue from conferences and face-to-face educational programmes. The pandemic has meant that more than 25 of these in-person meetings have had to be cancelled, postponed or moved online – and similar changes might be necessary for the rest of the gatherings planned for 2020 and early 2021. As a result, the society expects to lose more than \$1 million in revenue for this fiscal year. This has meant

implementing measures such as making membership-related calls, which were previously outsourced, in house, and evaluating which programmes can be moved to next year, says executive director Thomas Smith. "We're only spending money on things that we absolutely need to right now, because the revenues are not what we have budgeted for."

## Going virtual

Still, many scholarly societies have managed to rapidly shift activities such as conferences online – a move that has some benefits and might yield lasting change.

George Mangun, head of the governing board of the US-based Cognitive Neuroscience Society (CNS), which held its annual conference online in May, says the event drew 1,900 attendees, making it the society's largest-ever meeting. Although the organizers had already paid some of the costs for the planned meeting in Boston, Massachusetts, they were able to refund 30–35% of the registration fee to those who attended virtually. Other online meetings have also attracted a record number of attendees – the American Physical Society (APS) had more than 7,000 registrants for its virtual meeting in April, 4 times the usual number.

The CNS is now making plans for its 2021 meeting, which is scheduled to take place in San Francisco, California, next March. "I think everyone is eager to be able to attend physical meetings again, but we imagine a new future for our society and its annual conference," Mangun says. An online component is likely to be a permanent fixture of future meetings, he says, given the advantages. These include greater accessibility to scholars – for example, through lower costs and removing obstacles associated with visas – and reducing the carbon footprint from travel. The CNS uses all the revenue from its annual conference to fund future meetings, so although going virtual might mean that some details of the operation will change, the underlying business model will remain the same, Mangun adds.

But unlike the CNS, some societies depend on the profits from their meetings to finance other activities. FENS uses the profits from its biennial forums to support initiatives such as its career-development programmes. In April, the society faced the possibility of large financial losses from cancelling its in-person meeting, says Kristiansen. Now, it expects to end the fiscal year with a balanced budget – mainly because most registrants didn't cancel after learning that the conference would be moved online (registration fees remained the same, but the period for early-bird rates was extended for several weeks). This means that the society will be able to maintain its activities with buffer funds and profits generated from its journal, Kristiansen says. "We dodged a bullet."