Melinda Colón | American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy

In February of 2015, MaestroMeetings had the opportunity to converse with the Director of Governance Programs and Meetings for the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, Melinda Colón. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

MaestroMeetings: How do you accept, prepare or organize what abstracts or speakers will be featured in your conference?

Melinda Colón: Our organization has an open call for two sets of abstracts. One for our individual members, with research/education abstracts. For our institutional members, we call for school poster abstracts.

Our research and education abstracts are submitted through an online portal called All Academic. We have what is called sections, which are kind of like committees, and they provide the reviewers for the abstracts. We have three reviewers per abstract who decide whether to accept or deny that submission. We don't have a resubmission process – I know some other organizations do, but we don't; it's either accepted or denied. For our school poster abstracts, we automatically accept them; they're not reviewed, but they must fit a theme selected by our Program Committee.

MaestroMeetings: How do you decide what speakers will be featured in your conference?

MC: Let me clarify: the abstracts only take place in our annual meetings – we don't have them at all of our other meetings. At our annual meeting, we have special sessions that are 90 minutes long, and mini sessions that are 30 minutes long. Members can be submitted to either one of those categories. We have a program committee that reviews all the sessions and selects the ones presented at the annual meeting. The program committee also decides the themes for our opening general session, science symposium and our Tuesday general session, and then the subcommittee works on finding the actual keynote speakers.

MaestroMeetings: Could you tell me a little bit about your pre-sessions?

MC: Sure. For our annual meeting, we usually have a teachers' seminar, which is a full-day program to help our pharmacy educators learn how to be good teachers. It's usually based on some specific topic. We hold it before the annual meeting. Because some of our members are research-based, we have a pre-session on writing grants to NIH [National Institutes of Health] and other facilities. We also have a pre-session on admissions, which is a two-day workshop. And this year, we are instituting a pre-session on best practices on how to write an article for a journal.

MaestroMeetings: How do you decide how your conference will be scheduled and which speakers will present in which rooms, etc.?

MC: A group meets about a week or so after the program committee meets to lay out the schedule of events around the specific time blocks, like the keynote speaker. We give our presenters the option of requesting a day and time, but we tell them that the times aren't guaranteed. We do try to accommodate them.

First, we try to make presenters happy. Then we also take a look at if we have too many sessions in the same time block. We try not to go over ten concurrent sessions. We try not to have too many similar topics in one specific time block. We also ask our speakers how many people they anticipate would be interested in attending their session and

their preferred meeting room set. We then ask our program committee to review the estimated attendance number to see if the program is really a hot topic. This helps us determine room size. Then we lay it out, making sure speakers aren't double-booked, and that there is enough space for the estimated interest in the program.

MaestroMeetings: How do you register conference-goers once they're onsite for the event?

MC: We have a form for them to complete. A team from our accounting department is responsible for collecting any funds, whether that be checks, cash or credit card. Conference-goers just have to complete a form and then pay.

MaestroMeetings: I noticed on your website you had a discount for first-time faculty members. Is that for the entire conference?

MC: Yes. We've found if we can get someone to attend our annual meeting once, they find the value in AACP membership and the annual meeting. So, as soon as someone is a faculty member, we try to give them a substantial discount. That gives them the opportunity to come to the meeting and, hopefully, get hooked.

MaestroMeetings: Tell me a little about the CEU credits you offer.

MC: Those are Continuing Education credits. Pharmacists have to have a certain number of Continuing Education credits in order to keep their license. It's a very enticing thing to come to our annual meeting if they can get all, or even most of their CEUs, so that they don't have to worry about getting them throughout the year. All receive a code at the end of the session, and then go online and evaluate the session. It all links to their record at the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy.

MaestroMeetings: The next question is about attrition risk management. What happens if you don't fill the rooms you reserve?

MC: We normally have about a three to five percent drop rate, which usually keeps us way in the black in terms of room attrition.

MaestroMeetings: How do you manage your volunteers at the conference?

MC: We have about 30 to 35 volunteers a year. They're responsible for getting to their sessions no later than 20 minutes before that session starts and making sure that the room is set up properly. They check in with the speaker to see if there's anything that they need, and they let the speaker know how they will issue time warnings for the end of the session. Then the volunteers also get invited to our President's Reception, which our VIPs attend.

MaestroMeetings: Are there any other volunteer benefits? Do you waive their admission fee?

MC: No, we don't do any waived fee. We give them an embroidered polo shirt or fleece vest – which they are very excited about – the recognition in our program, website, and then the President's Reception.

MaestroMeetings: Are you using any new technologies to make your conference more efficient?

MC: We use a web-based application called Pathable. We can do announcements there; people can set up appointments with each other. We run our Twitter feed through the app. It has our schedule with up-to-date room changes and time changes, which we try to limit because that's always a pain. We upload our presentations there. We have keynote speaker bios and program descriptions.

MaestroMeetings: Do you have any other new things that you've tried that have worked or haven't worked?

MC: We tried a Learning Lounge that did not work. That was a couple years ago, and we did it for two years, where we played member submitted educational videos. It really just bombed. But I think a lot of that was that our members really come to interact with each other. Going into a Learning Lounge to watch these videos just didn't appeal to them.

So, we turned that Learning Lounge into a relaxation room, called Recharge & Reconnect. We put a bunch of really nice couches there. We hired someone to come in and do massages, and we had fruit-flavored waters and power stations everywhere for people to charge their devices. That was so popular. We thought some people would like it, but we were really surprised at how many people enjoyed just getting away and going somewhere quiet where they could answer emails and not have to worry about, you know, chit-chatting. We're always into trying new things, and are especially happy when they work out so well.

MaestroMeetings: Thank you for talking with me. This has been very informative.