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ABSTRACT

One of the indicators of the health of an organization is the number of individuals participating in its annual meeting. Factors influencing meeting attendance and the relationships between positive attendance indicators and registration were studied for the Mid-South Educational Research Association, using participant data for 1984 through 1992. Possible attendance factors considered were paper submissions, accepted papers, number of participants, proceedings listings, number of registrants, host city population, and recency. Changing the location of the annual meeting does not appear to cause major shifts in the geographic composition of those who attend. Site rotation does have a tendency to produce positive effects on participation in the host state both during the host year and the subsequent year. Initial attempts to predict registration on the basis of information available from previous years (numbers of submissions, accepted papers, participants, and individuals in the proceedings) were less than successful. Required advance registration of participants may provide the best indicator of meeting registration, while it minimizes on-site registration efforts and delays. Five tables present study data, and a map depicts meeting sites. (SLD)

Attendance Factors for a Regional Research Organization's Annual Meeting

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Attendance Factors for a

Regional Research Organization's Annual Meeting

The health of an organization can be measured in several ways. For the Mid-South Educational Research Association (MSERA), for example, some indicators of the health of the organization are the size of the membership; the number of members volunteering their time to serve on committees; the number of individuals participating in the annual meeting through presentations, chairing sessions, etc.; annual meeting registration/attendance; and the financial status of the organization.

MSERA consists primarily of individuals from the six member states: Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. For MSERA, the annual meeting is the major event of the year. It is the only organized event that provides members the opportunity to assemble. Annual meeting registration fees are the major source of income for MSERA, and the meeting constitutes the organization's major expense. The annual meeting also serves to promote membership, with a considerable number of individuals joining the organization for the primary purpose of participating in the meeting activities.

Some regional organizations meet in the same city each year, while others change sites (Griffin, 1989). Scott (1985a, 1985b) found that educational associations are more likely to rotate annual convention sites than to stay at the same site. Annual meeting site selection was considered highly important to attendance by 81 per cent of the executive directors or other representatives of 36 national educational associations surveyed by Scott.

Recommendation of a site for the MSERA annual meeting is the responsibility of a committee, with the official decision being made by the Board of Directors. During the early years of the association (1972-84), the annual meeting was in New Orleans in even-numbered years (1972, 1974, etc.) and in a city in one of the other member states in odd-numbered years. The Board of Directors, in the spring of 1986, initiated the current practice of rotating the annual meeting site alphabetically among the six member states in odd-numbered years, with the city (within the designated state) being selected on committee recommendation. Alabama became the first state in this rotation in 1987. In the even-numbered years,

the Future Site Selection Committee recommends a city (from any of the member states) to serve as the annual meeting site.

Previous research, studying the years 1984 through 1990 (Boser, Clark, & Trivette, 1991), showed an increase in annual meeting participation by members in the state in which the MSERA annual meeting was held. There also tended to be a residual effect: the level of participation declined in the year after the year in which a state hosted the annual meeting but tended to be higher than in the year preceding the host year. The number of participants and accepted papers increased every year during that period except 1987. Annual meeting registration increased every year except 1987 and 1988. Dramatic and unprecedented increases in the numbers of participants, accepted papers, and registrants occurred in the 1990, the final year for which data were available for that study.

When the data were extended through 1991 (Kennedy & Boser, 1992), similar findings regarding the effect of hosting the annual meeting on state participation resulted. The total numbers of participants, accepted papers, and registrants all declined in 1991 but remained above the level for 1989, preceding the unexpectedly large increases in 1990.

Aside from the financial concern of the organization for good attendance, those responsible for planning the annual meeting need a sound base for projecting attendance when requesting room sizes, available seating, and food. This became obvious with the 1990 meeting in which overall registration increased from 315 to 431. The purpose of the present study is to extend the previous studies (Boser, Clark & Trivette, 1991; Kennedy & Boser, 1992) through 1992 and to explore the relationships between prospective attendance indicators (numbers of submissions, accepted papers, participants, and individuals indexed in the annual meeting Proceedings) and registration.

Method

Procedures

A "participant" in the annual meeting was defined as someone who was the first author of a discussion session paper or display presentation, first author of an individual symposium paper, symposium discussant, or a trainer. Two authors, one using the annual meeting Proceedings (Petry, 1984-1991), and the other the annual meeting programs, independently created computer data files for

each year of the study. The files contained the names of the participants, the institutions they represented, and their states of residence. Entries for each year were alphabetized by last name. Each list was edited so that no individual appeared more than once on any list. The two lists for each year were compared for accuracy. Discrepancies were resolved by acceptance of the Proceedings documentation as the most accurate. The Proceedings is distributed at the meeting, whereas the program is completed at least one month prior to the meeting for advance mailing to members. Thus changes/corrections could be made in the Proceedings that could not be effected in the program. The lists were sorted by state in preparation for the final step of counting the number of participants from each member state for each year. The final step was to count the number of participants from each member state for each year. Those participants who were not from one of the member states were collapsed into a single category of "other." The numbers were verified by an independent count by a second individual.

The number of participants differs from the number of individuals indexed in the Proceedings, which includes all authors as well as session chairs. The total number of individuals in the index for each year was counted without reference to state of residence.

Data Sources

The official programs and the Proceedings of the annual meetings of the Mid-South Educational Research Association from 1984 through 1992 were used as sources for determining the yearly numbers of participants and their states of residence and for the total numbers of individuals in the Proceedings. The number of papers accepted, papers submitted, and registrants were obtained from the MSERA Researcher, the newsletter of the organization, the minutes and reports presented by committee chairs at meetings of the Board of Directors. Host city populations were taken from The World Almanac and Book of Facts, based on data from the 1990 census.

Analysis

Frequency data are presented. Kendall's tau correlation coefficients were computed between all pairs of variables: participants, individuals in the Proceedings, accepted papers, submissions, registrants, recency, and host city population. In addition, the Coefficient of Geographical Association (Smith, 1975)

was calculated for participants by state to provide an index of the similarity or dissimilarity of the spatial patterning. The coefficient's scale ranges from 0 to 100, with a high coefficient indicative of a high degree of change in the pattern of attendance from one site to the next. For the present study, high coefficients would indicate that when the annual meeting changes from one state to another, the state composition of those who attend also changes considerably.

Results and Discussion

Participant data by state from 1984 through 1992 are presented in Table 1. With the exception of the 1991 meeting in Lexington, every host state recorded an increase in the number of participants in the year in which that state served as the annual meeting host. and a decrease in participants in the subsequent year. In four states, Louisiana (1984 and 1990), Mississippi (1985), Tennessee (1986), and Arkansas (1989), the number of participants in the year following the host year was higher than in the year preceding the host year.

Table 1

MSERA Annual Meeting Participants by State

	New Orleans	Biloxi	Memphis	Mobile	Louis-ville	Little Rock	New Orleans	Lexing-ton	Knox-ville
	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
Louisiana	25	27	28	54	25	25	58	28	33
Mississippi	47	52	50	43	66	63	90	74	82
Tennessee	32	40	64	54	60	68	68	54	74
Alabama	71	69	67	69	43	50	65	66	59
Kentucky	9	15	9	18	23	14	16	16	16
Arkansas	6	16	10	5	6	26	24	23	20
Other	12	16	16	11	18	29	20	31	25

Note. Underlined numbers indicate participants from host state.

The largest overall shift in participants by the various states came when the annual meeting moved from Mobile in 1987 to Louisville in 1988, as shown by the coefficients in Table 2. With the scale range from 0 to 100, it can be seen that most changes in site did not cause serious changes in the state composition of the participants.

Table 2

Coefficients of Geographical Association

Site Change	Coefficient
1984-85 (New Orleans to Biloxi)	15.7
1985-86 (Biloxi to Memphis)	18.4
1986-87 (Memphis to Mobile)	26.4
1987-88 (Mobile to Louisville)	40.5
1988-89 (Louisville to Little Rock)	20.8
1989-90 (Little Rock to New Orleans)	24.6
1990-91 (New Orleans to Lexington)	19.8
1991-92 (Lexington to Knoxville)	15.4

Table 3 shows the data for possible attendance factors without regard to state of residence. The number of papers submitted for the annual meetings held in 1984 through 1986 were not available. The inexplicable increases in all factors (excluding recency and population) in 1990 for the New Orleans meeting were followed by decreases in 1991. The 1990 meeting might be considered something of a phenomenon. If it were to be considered an outlier and disregarded, the data for 1991 showed levels higher than those for 1989, the year immediately preceding the New Orleans meeting, supporting the overall trend toward increased participation in the annual meeting. The increases continued from 1991 to 1992.

Table 3

Possible Attendance Factors

	New Orleans	Biloxi	Memphis	Mobile	Louis-ville	Little Rock	New Orleans	Lexing-ton	Knox-ville
	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
Submissions	NA	NA	NA	246	259	264	342	292	330
Accepted Papers	175	211	231	230	242	250	326	278	299
Participants	202	235	244	254	241	275	341	292	309
Proceedings Listings	300	339	383	410	398	450	569	468	541
Registrants	248	282	316	313	295	315	431	326	436
Population (Rank Order)	2	8	1	5	3	6	2	4	7
Recency	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Kendall tau correlations between the pairs of variables are shown in Table 4. Population or size of the host city had little relationship to other indicators of attendance and participation. The perfect relationship between submissions and accepted papers is not unexpected. As the number of submissions increased, so did the number of acceptances, with no great fluctuation in the rejection rate.

To serve practical purposes, it was hoped that the numbers of submissions, accepted papers, participants, and individuals in the Proceedings might be used to project registration (attendance). The ratios of registration to each of the other variables were calculated and are presented in Table 5.

In an effort to determine projected numbers attending the 1992 meeting, ratios were computed between the number of registrants and the numbers of submissions, accepted papers, participants, and individuals in the Proceedings for each of the previous years for which data were available. The first

Table 4

Kendall Correlations Between Pairs of Variables

	Partici-pants	Proceed-ings	Accepted Papers	Sub-missions	Regis-trants	Popu-lation
Recency	0.78	0.83	0.83	0.73	0.72	0.20
Participants		0.94	0.83	0.87	0.83	0.08
Proceedings Listings			0.89	0.87	0.78	0.14
Accepted Papers				1.00	0.78	0.03
Submissions					0.73	-0.07
Registrants						0.03

Table 5

Ratios of Attendance Factors to Registration

	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
Registration/Submissions				1.27	1.14	1.19	1.26	1.12	1.32
Registration/Accepted Papers	1.42	1.34	1.37	1.36	1.22	1.22	1.32	1.18	1.46
Registration/Participants	1.23	1.20	1.30	1.23	1.22	1.15	1.26	1.12	1.41
Registration/Proceedings	.83	.83	.83	.76	.74	.70	.76	.70	.81

piece of information available to 1992 meeting planners was the number of submissions.

For 1987-1991, the registration could be estimated as being between 1.12 and 1.27 times the number of submissions. With a total of 330 submissions in 1992, the registration would have been predicted to be between 370 and 419, both underestimates. After the number of papers accepted (299)

was determined, another estimate of registration, based on acceptances, was between 353 and 425, again below the actual registration of 436. The poorest predictor was the ratio utilizing the number of participants (first authors, first authors of symposia papers, and trainers) (309), which projected registration to be between 346 and 402. The number of individuals listed in the 1992 Proceedings (541) would have projected registration between 379 and 449. Only the estimated range based on the Proceedings listings, the widest range, encompassed the actual registration of 436. For 1992, actual attendance was toward the upper end of that range.

Changes in procedures in 1992 may have had a major impact on the failure of the aforementioned efforts to predict registration. In planning for the 1992 annual meeting, registration procedures were changed. Although first authors had always been expected to register and to present their papers in person, there had been no enforcement of the registration requirement. Those whose papers were initially accepted for the 1992 annual meeting were notified that acceptance was conditional upon receipt of their advance registration fees prior to scheduling of papers. There were some program changes and substitutions after the deadline, but nearly all of the first authors did ultimately register for the meeting, probably increasing the number of registrants from what might have been expected under previous conditions.

This is supported by visual comparison of data from 1990, 1991 and 1992 in Table 3. The 1992 data (numbers of submissions, accepted papers, participants, and Proceedings listings) were between those for 1990 and 1991, yet registration for 1992 was higher than for either 1990 or 1991. It is thought that the pressure on first authors to register in advance may partially account for the record-setting registration figure in 1992. The number who register in advance (376 of the 436 in 1992, 86.2%) may prove to be the most efficient predictor of meeting registration.

In addition to aiding meeting planners in estimating copies of the Proceedings or other materials to be ordered and numbers to be served at receptions and food functions, having the bulk of meeting attendees registered in advance also benefited those in charge of on-site registration. The members who had registered in advance were able to pick up attendance packets and envelopes containing receipts and

badges quickly and with little assistance. Because the number of members needing on-site registration was small, those individuals were processed without waiting.

Conclusions

Changing the location of the annual meeting does not appear to cause major shifts in the geographic composition of those who attend. Site rotation does have a tendency to produce positive effects on participation in the host state both during the host year and in the subsequent year.

Initial attempts to predict registration on the basis of information available from previous years (numbers of submissions, accepted papers, participants, and individuals in the Proceedings) were less than successful, probably because of procedural changes in 1992 that impacted registration by requiring first authors to register. Required advance registration of participants may provide the best indicator of meeting registration while it minimizes on-site registration efforts and delays.

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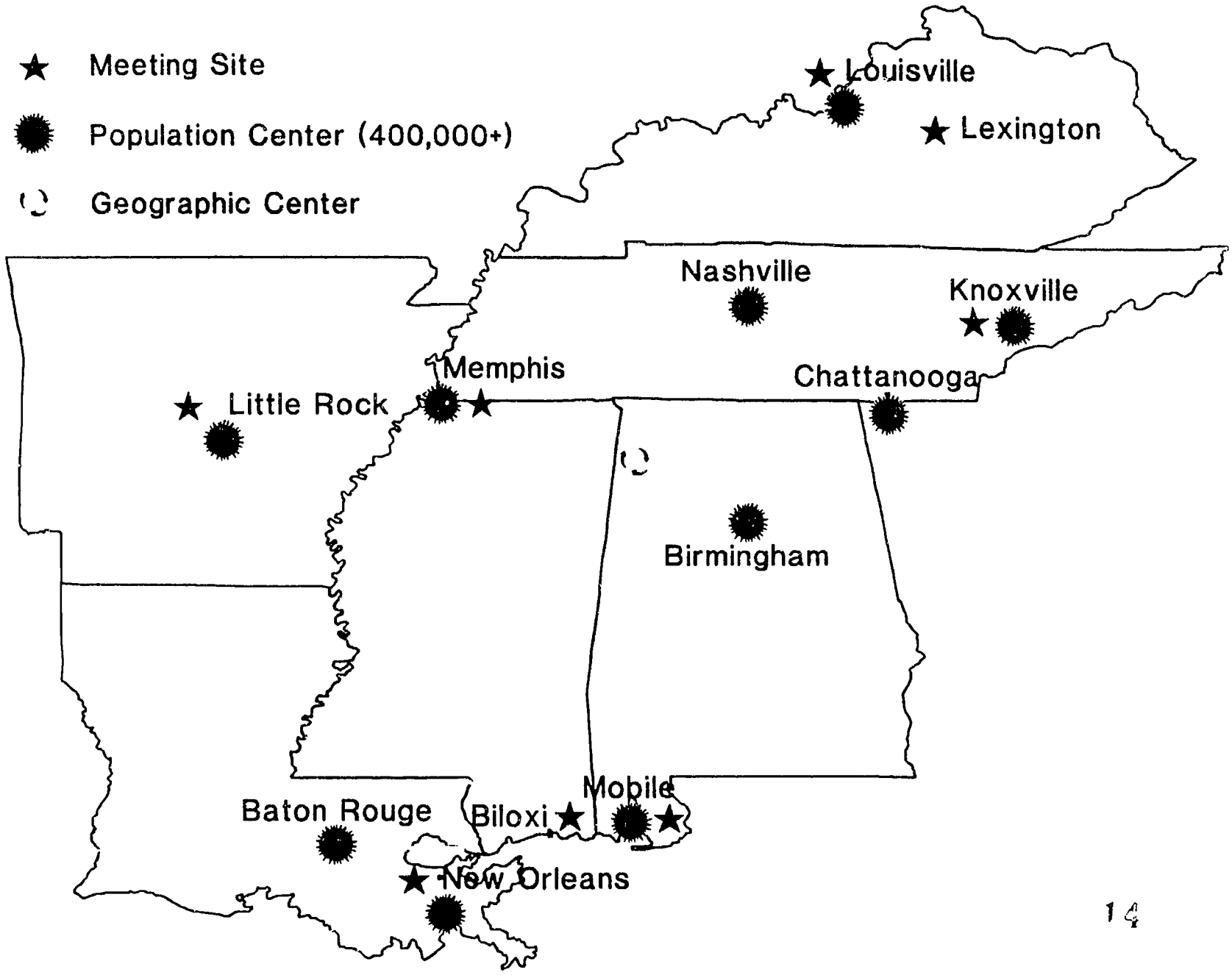
Meeting Site
Population Center (400,000+)
Geographic Center
Louisville
Lexington
Nashville
Knoxville
Memphis
Chattanooga
Little Rock
Birmingham
Mobile
Baton Rouge
Biloxi
New Orleans