MPSA Statement Regarding COVID-19, March 11, 2020

We want to bring MPSA members up to date on planning for the annual conference. As we are sure you know, MPSA faces a difficult set of choices regarding whether and/or how to proceed with the conference that is scheduled to begin in Chicago at the Palmer House Hilton on April 16. Our foremost priority remains the health and safety of the MPSA community and their families.

This is a challenging time for all of us, especially with the fast-changing nature of the situation and the cascading bans on professional travel announced by numerous colleges and universities. MPSA leaders have been following guidance from the US CDC, the City of Chicago, and the State of Illinois, and have been consulting broadly on the best route forward. As of the morning of March 11th, the State of Illinois has reported 19 cases of coronavirus and declared a state of emergency. However, there are currently no federal, state, or local bans on large gatherings that would require us to cancel the conference.

Many are wondering why the MPSA has not yet made a final decision about whether to cancel the conference. The legal and financial obligations of MPSA inevitably weigh on our decision-making, given MPSA contracts with hotels, vendors, exhibitors and others. MPSA holds conference cancellation insurance, but insurance does not cover losses if MPSA proactively cancels the conference without governmental intervention (such as a ban on gatherings of a certain size). The financial hit to MPSA would be considerable (over two million dollars), and that cost will be felt in future services to members, including travel grants, awards, and so forth, for years to come. Should the federal government, the State of Illinois, or the City of Chicago prohibit large gatherings or similar activities, MPSA’s financial losses will be largely abated. We are consulting with attorneys on our options.

Still, public health and safety remain our utmost and paramount concern, even as we weigh financial considerations that are part of our fiduciary duties as MPSA leaders. If the conference goes forward, we will provide numerous opportunities for virtual participation. Attendees may present their papers and attend virtually, either through live-streaming or pre-recorded presentations. Virtual participants would be expected to register for the conference. For those registrants who are no longer able or willing to attend in person and who do not choose to participate on-line, we will refund registration fees (most likely after the conference due to significantly increased MPSA staff workload). Should the conference be cancelled altogether, MPSA will refund all registrants’ fees.

MPSA leaders continue to monitor the situation closely, and we will provide frequent updates as the situation develops. We will also update and expand a curated list of resources on COVID-19 and health and safety while traveling.

Please be in touch with either of us if you have particular questions that are not answered by our updates.

Sincerely,

Sarah Binder
MPSA President, 2019-2020

William Morgan
MPSA Executive Director