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Lessons To Be Learned: Awarding Travel Grants to Foreign Visitors from the International Relations Committee (DC Chapter)

Through the years, several SLA Divisions have selected information professionals from other countries and sponsored their attendance at the annual conference. Methods for selection of these individuals have varied. After 9-11, the process for obtaining visas into the United States has become more difficult, exacting, and time-consuming. This is particularly true for individuals coming from certain developing nations. Additionally, not everyone will hold a passport from their own country and getting not only the visa from the United States but a passport from their own government will require time. If you are planning to invite an overseas guest, our advice to you is, begin early, particularly if you will be soliciting papers from individuals from which you will select a "winner."

Making the offer

Once you have decided on an individual to sponsor to attend the conference, a formal letter of invitation should be issued. In order to expedite the visa process, it must be on official stationery. This is often difficult in that SLA Chapters and Divisions do not always have official stationery or even addresses. In any event, it is really the headquarters address of the association in which officials will be interested as this is what they can check to verify the legitimacy of any organization inviting individuals from abroad. SLA Headquarters can be helpful in taking the text from Chapters and Divisions and copying it onto SLA stationery so that the invitation carries the weight of the Association. Having the URL in the letter for both the Association and the Division/Chapter will facilitate the process.

As soon as your official letter of invitation has been composed, post a copy overseas, fax it to the individual and his/her organization, and email the letter of invitation to the individual as well. If you are sponsoring a library school student, for instance, send a copy of the letter to a professor or the head of the faculty department. For some countries, this increases the chances that your invitation will arrive by at least one means.

Specify the nature of this conference as an educational opportunity and highlight a few of the session titles that you feel will be of particular interest for this individual to attend. While they may ultimately choose other sessions, this will provide additional information for the official reviewing the document and bolster the case for admitting the individual into the country. Be sure

to attach a link to the conference Web page, even if the final program is not yet posted there. Officials will need to know where the individual will be staying in the country. This year, you should specify that the 2004 Annual Conference of the Special Libraries Association will be held June 5-10 at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Conference Center in Nashville, TN, and that reservations will be made for this individual at the main conference hotel, Gaylord Opryland at 2800 Opryland Drive, Nashville, Tennessee 37214-1297 (Tel. 615-889-1000; email info@gaylordhotels.com).

Part of the thrill of attending an SLA conference is participating in the events. Some years, the high cost of a conference hotel precludes these individuals from being housed there and alternative housing arrangements will be made (i.e., a smaller hotel in the area or even the residence of a local chapter member). This can be done as the conference draws closer, but it's good to have the hotel information in the initial letter. Also, since this is the named hotel on the conference Web site, it will be easier for officials to recognize.

Finally, outline how you plan to deal with airline reservations. Will you ask individuals to make reservations themselves and reimburse them the cost of the air ticket? Will you make the reservations for them and pay for the air ticket? If so, how will they get a copy of the ticket for travel?

Estimating the cost

The invitation letter should contain a clear statement that you will be responsible for all costs related to the individual's stay in the United States. This is terribly important as many overseas governments will not issue passports to individuals unless they know that they will not be held responsible. If you will not be covering all expenses for the trip, outline how other costs will be handled, apportioning the responsibility to the individual or third-parties.

For many being invited to attend the conference, this may be their first trip outside of their country. Coming to the U.S. could be particularly daunting for these individuals. They will not have a great deal of extra money to spend, so the more breakfasts, lunches, and evening social events you can arrange, the better. Perhaps you can pre-register the individual for a few of these; alternatively, asking members to meet these individuals and take them to eat will be an

enjoyable experience for SLA members and assure that the person coming from abroad eats throughout the trip without worrying about how to pay for their meals.

Shepherding the visitor

Since many of these invitees will be coming to the States for the first time, it might be helpful to have an individual from the sponsoring Chapter or Division meet the plane on which they arrive and ferry them to the conference hotel, assisting with registration. Even if they wrote the perfect paper in English, and feel confident that they will be able

to comprehend the sessions, they may not be comfortable speaking the language to the casual stranger, particularly when not concerning library/information center-related topics.

Pre-registration for the conference will have been done ahead of time, but navigating the registration hall that first day can also be tricky, so you might want to pick up the registration packet and meet the invited guest early that first morning, escorting him/her to the opening session. Taking care of what may seem minor details will help to make the process of getting here easier and the experience once at the conference more enjoyable.