

A Letter to Future CMS Meeting Organizers

Contributed Articles

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Dear future organizer,

Your first instinct at being asked to help with a CMS meeting was, most likely, "NOOOOOOooooo!"

This was certainly my first response when asked about co-organizing the 2021 CMS Winter Meeting in Vancouver. After all, I'd sworn to *Never Organize Anything Big Ever Again*. But, you're organizing the meeting, and I figured I should write to you.

I was still recovering from the co-organization of a meeting several years ago. I had to: deal with our university, sign room contracts, negotiate rates, hunt for vendors of poster boards, build our own website, manage the abstract submission, figure out how many cookies per person per coffee break, book hotel rooms and blocks, write grants... While the mathematical event itself went smoothly and was a success, the experience behind the scenes was exhausting. (Did I mention we dealt with universities?) The inevitable complaints (and there are always some) stung more than the overwhelming positive feedback.

Like you, I was about to respond, "No way!" to the CMS invitation, but I took a deep breath. This was in December of 2020. We'd all just lived through the first of many months of a devastating global pandemic. Schools had been shut, and many regular activities suspended. There was fear and fatigue to spare. (I remember, around then the news was fretting about toilet paper supplies in the stores.)

In the midst of this, I remember reading the year-end CMS Notes, in which the CMS Executive Director summarised many of the activities which the society had continued to run. It was inspiring – and humbling! – to read that fellow mathematicians and students continued to dedicate their time to mathematical activities, and keeping some form of connection alive. The CMS launched its inclusion initiative that summer. Thanks to generous support from sponsors, the CMS was able to run Math Camps for Indigenous communities in Whitehorse, and the first-ever all-girls training camps for the 2021 EGMO and IMO. Canada's 2020 EGMO team did really well, even though the event was held in April 2020 – online! In the midst of troubling times, to contemplate the energy and heart displayed by the organizers and participants is truly to celebrate the best among us.

Given these difficult circumstances for our community, and the continued efforts of many to continue to create some semblance of normalcy, I felt motivated to do my part, and agreed to help out with the CMS Winter Meeting. You cannot imagine my relief to learn my colleague, Nils Bruin, would be co-organizing the meeting, and that the CMS staff would take care of all that scary stuff (the contracts, the scheduling, the negotiating, the websites, the coffees, the "I need to leave early on Saturday"...).

Within short order, we had a wonderful Scientific Organizing Committee: Anthony Bonato, Chantal David, Sara Faridi, Terry Gagnon, Alexandre Girouard, Patrick Ingram, Lilia Krivodonova and Liam Watson. We discussed possible plenary speakers and sessions, and I remain profoundly grateful to this group of people for their wisdom and deep disciplinary knowledge. We agreed early on that the meeting should reflect mathematical activity in all its facets, and the expertise of this group helped make this possible.

At this juncture, we were all hopeful that the meeting would be held in person in Vancouver in December 2021. To our collective dismay, Covid-19 showed no signs of abating. We had to discuss plans with a great deal of uncertainty around the format of the meeting, and consequently, the scope. This was a challenging time for me personally. The Delta variant was devastating for my home country, and thinking about the CMS meeting was simultaneously hard and a welcome relief.

It was clear the pandemic presented unique challenges to any form of participation. By the time it was confirmed that the meeting would be online, we had but a few months to ensure there would be a stimulating and exciting program. The Scientific Committee steered us through a difficult patch here, with creative ideas and suggestions.

The CMS community responded generously through proposals for sessions. And kudos to the CMS staff! They were absolutely the stars of the moment. Sarah Watson and Jessica Wallace kept track of bajillions of emails, following up with organizers and speakers. And Termeh Kousha would

'Zoom Bomb' our meetings even during her maternity leave, to remind us of the importance of having a lot of vibrant activities.

I'll note the CMS staff ended up organising the physical iteration of the Winter meeting, had to cancel it, and then pivot to organising the meeting to be entirely online. The amount of time and energy this must have taken is hard for us to imagine. The online meeting was a lot more time-intensive for them to run.

The meeting itself featured mathematical activity in a range of subdisciplines. It was especially great to see the strong presence of math education, and history and philosophy of mathematics. I hope this will continue.

In closing: yes, organising a CMS meeting will be work. Yes, it will at times be thankless, and there will be errors, and complaints. We are human, and can only strive to do our sincere best. On the bright side, dear future organizer, hopefully the pandemic will soon be 'over', or at least we'll have learned to live with it. You'll have the support of a wonderful team of CMS staff. You'll have colleagues from around the country who will selflessly help you. And most of all, you'll know the CMS – and this means each of us – will be grateful that you didn't just say, "Noooooooooooo!"