After investigating the question with extensive information provided by ISA staff on past costs and likely costs at alternative international venues, we conclude that it is financially infeasible to hold ISA annual conventions outside of North America for the foreseeable future. To hold a large conference such as ours outside North America would require substantial changes in the size and format of the meetings or significantly higher registration costs to offset the costs of paying for space at convention centers. We explain this assessment below.

We begin with a bit of background and our charge, summarize briefly our investigation, and then explain this conclusion.

BACKGROUND

At the annual meeting of the Governing Council in Baltimore in 2017, the question was raised about the possibility of holding the ISA convention outside North America. The question was raised most forcefully in the context of the “travel ban” then recently proposed by the U.S. Government, which might prevent some ISA members from traveling to the United States to participate in the annual meeting. This concern was – and remains – real. Coupled with increasing non-North American participation in our meetings, this concern prompted a lively and important discussion.

The ad hoc committee was approved at the annual meeting of the ISA Governing Council in 2018, and we were invited to serve on an ad hoc committee in July by Incoming ISA President Patrick James. Our remit was to evaluate and recommend possible alternative models for the annual convention that will help maximize access and perhaps even expand international participation.

ALTERNATIVES

Based on preliminary discussions with Executive Director Mark Boyer, Lake circulated a memo and questions for discussion in September 2018 (Appendix 1), and we held our first international conference call on September 18. During that call, we requested additional materials from the ISA staff on costs for different international venues, attached here as Appendix 2. We held a second and final conference call on January 31, 2019.

The information generously compiled by the ISA staff included the current draft ISA siting policy (outside our remit), a summary of siting challenges faced by the staff in looking at international locations, a comparison of nine different international venues, and then finally a “head-to-head” comparison of the costs for the last three ISA meetings and possible meetings in London and Prague. The “head-to-head” comparison is the most informative and important and is provided in Appendix 2.
In our present model, ISA reserves room blocks at 1-4 large hotels, which then provide meeting space for free – recouping this cost, presumably, by filling hotel rooms at the negotiated conference price. The key problem revealed in the nine country study and head-to-head comparison is that non-North American hotel venues do not provide meeting space sufficient for our current conference format. Rather, ISA would have to dramatically alter its format, reducing participation to that which could be provided in small hotels, or it would have to rent meeting space at a convention center at substantial additional cost. Presuming that we do not want to reduce participation in ISA meetings, we focused on the alternative convention center model.

The rental fee for convention centers varies, but is approximately $225,000 in London and $450,000 in the Czech Republic (the lowest cost city venues). With additional required minimum food and beverage costs and AV costs, it is estimated that the ISA meetings would run deficits of between $363,000 and $533,000 if held in London and Prague, respectively. Though less specific at this stage in the information available to ISA staff, these costs appear to be quite similar to those found at other international venues in Europe and Asia. Thus, quite directly, holding our meeting in cities that require renting convention centers would either come at considerable cost to ISA’s annual budget.

One alternative, of course, is to charge higher registration fees for the annual meeting. It does not appear, however, that hotel costs are typically cheaper in non-North American cities. If the costs of convention center space were offset by lower hotel rates, this might mean that the total cost of attending ISA for participants might be similar. Unfortunately, while such a scheme might be possible in some non-North American cities, where hotels are a bit cheaper, this would certainly not to possible in most cities. Hotel rates in London, not surprisingly, are already substantially higher than what ISA has been able to negotiate at recent U.S. cities. We also believe that many ISA members would find significantly higher registration fees unacceptable, even if these fees were offset to some extent by lower hotel rates.

A second alternative, which we endorse but have not specifically investigated, is the current model that ISA is developing with summer regional meetings held outside North American (e.g., Hong Kong 2017, Quito 2018, Belgrade 2019 and more) alongside the history of smaller section meetings that allow for greater international participation. In our view, this appears the more viable route for enhancing international participation over the long run and insuring against changes in U.S. immigration policy in the short run.

A third alternative, building on the second, would involve switching from an annual to a biennial ISA convention, as some other associations do (IPSA), and holding more regional meetings during the years between the conventions. There would be substantial revenue implications from such a move, however, and this option would necessitate amending the ISA Constitution. Significant research would be necessary on these and other points before bringing this alternative to the Governing Council for discussion.

As a final parting point, in discussing the policy issues that gave rise to this committee, it has become increasing evident that U.S. immigration restrictions may cut “both ways” for ISA members. While the U.S. government ban on travel from certain countries may, no doubt, impinge on ISA members attending the annual convention, ISA members within the United States who are not U.S. citizens may experience difficulties returning from international travel, and thus may be hesitant to leave the United States for a meeting held outside the United States. We do not know how large of a problem this may pose for members, though there have been some concerns expressed by some members about traveling to Toronto. ISA HQ continues to receive anecdotal data for all of these issues. Overall, ISA must remain aware of U.S. immigration policy and may want to revisit its siting policies if restrictions become even tighter in the future.
APPENDIX 1:

Colleagues,

We are collectively the ad hoc ISA committee charged with evaluating alternative models for the annual meeting. Thank you for agreeing to serve. This should be both interesting and important – and perhaps even fun. I want to take this opportunity to propose an agenda for our committee. Your comments and feedback are welcome as we define the issues and topics we will address. As I was not at the Governing Council meetings where the siting issues were raised, and some of you were, your input is especially important.

The background, as I understand it, is concern by GC and ISA members generally with access to the annual meeting and, more generally, the current political environment in the United States which is not welcoming to all ISA members. This precipitated a larger concern with the association’s siting policies and whether they still serve the best interests of our community. Given that the GC has revised the siting language each of the past two years, that specific task is not the primary focus for this group. Rather, it is to evaluate and recommend possible alternative models for the annual convention that will help maximize access and perhaps even expand participation.

At the same time, ISA faces constraints on its choice of sites and hotels. ISA is medium-to-large association meeting. Only a relatively small number of cities have sufficient space for a convention of our size. Conferences are booked 7-10 years in advance, which means that association cannot be very nimble in responding to political developments in the host country, state, or city. Most hotels will not agree to contracts that allow the association to change venues due to government policies, especially on short notice, further reducing the association’s ability to respond to changing political environments. In addition to the travel ban that prompted this discussion, other policy issues of accessibility must be considered. The United States is hardly the most restrictive country in granting visas (e.g., consider holding the meeting in China); some U.S. members (on student visas or other uncertain statuses) might be as restricted from leaving the country as others are from entering. Policies toward LGBTQ members should also be considered, which will often reduce the number of potential host sites.

In our unsettled world, it is difficult to predict the state of policy in many countries or cities many years in advance. Who would have predicted in 2007 (before the Obama election) that Trump would be elected in 2016 and immediately aim to ban Muslims from visiting the United States? Or who would have predicted as recently as a few months ago that a right-wing coalition would be elected in Italy? Social scientists that we are, prognostication is a tough business. Even when hotels are willing to negotiate cancellation clauses, usually on labor issues, there are substantial fees required for actual cancelations (e.g., when APSA canceled its conference in San Francisco over a labor action and moved its convention to Seattle, the association paid over one million dollars in cancelation fees).

Beyond political constraints, though, is general access and affordability. International membership in the ISA has grown in recent decades, with about 45% of members now from outside North America. This might imply a need for holding annual meetings outside of North America, at least on an occasional basis. This concern may be offset, though, by cost considerations for U.S. members. Relations with sister-International Studies associations should also be considered, an issue that roiled the ISA and affiliated groups in the 1990s. As you know, these issues are a primary impetus for ISA seeking out collaborations with other organizations around the world, such the one in Quito, Ecuador just last month with 900 attendees.

In addition, ISA has traditionally used a hotel-based convention model (affirmed by the GC in approximately 2012) in which when the hotel guest-room block is satisfied, meeting space is provided free of charge to the association. A convention center-based model, whether with one hotel or many, requires that the association rent the convention space, adding substantially to the overall cost of the meeting. There are hybrid models as well: a convention-centered based conference with receptions, etc., held in the hotel; a university-based convention with multiple hotels, etc.
Moreover, due to recent consolidations in the hotel industry (Marriot now controls 44% of hotel rooms in the United States, Hilton an additional 22%, meaning we are increasingly in a seller’s market), ISA does not have a great deal of negotiating leverage.

Finally, ISA has been committed to keeping membership dues and annual meeting registration fees as low as possible. ISA dues and registration fees are on the lower end of those charged by comparable associations. Many of the issues above could be substantially mitigated by higher fees, but would likely induce a backlash by members.

With this as context, I propose the following questions

1) Where should ISA annual meetings be held? This committee or any other membership committee cannot practically negotiate a contract for the annual meeting. What are the principles that ISA staff should use in selecting venues?

2) What model should the association use in selecting sites? Hotel-based convention, convention-based meeting with one or few large hotels (allowing for some receptions, events, at hotel), convention-based meeting with many hotels (no hotel-based events), a university-based model? What are the costs and benefits of these respective models?

3) What are the policy constraints that should guide the ISA in selecting sites for the annual meeting? Should these be limited to policies implemented at the time the contract is signed, on the policy agenda but not enacted at the time the contract is signed, or that might be adopted at some future date?

4) What cancelation clauses should the ISA try to negotiate? Which cancelation clauses are “hard limits” for the association such that no contract can be signed without them?

Please feel free to add additional issues to this list. I propose that we schedule a conference call to begin discussing this or a modified agenda. This will be difficult given the time zones we occupy, so please try to be flexible. ISA staff will be in touch shortly to schedule this meeting.

In the meantime, I have asked ISA staff to work up financial models for different location models (hotel-based, convention center-based, and multiple hotel/convention center-based models in both North America and in Europe). These will take some time so we will not have these available in our initial discussions. We can refine the scenarios we want examined in our first conversation.
Three most recent North American Convention Venues and Two Least Expensive International Venues - All rates shown in US dollars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Hotel Rates</th>
<th>Room Rental</th>
<th>Enough Space?</th>
<th>Other Expenses (AV, F&amp;B, etc.)</th>
<th>Net real or projected revenue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>$162 single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes, 2 hotels, 86 breakouts</td>
<td>$100,081 F&amp;B – no minimum required</td>
<td>$152,236.00</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$126 double</td>
<td></td>
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<td>$46,047 AV and Internet – 2 venues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>$179 single/double</td>
<td>$279,590*</td>
<td>Yes, 2 hotels and part of convention center, 86 breakouts</td>
<td>$162,385 F&amp;B – no minimum required</td>
<td>$133,272.52</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Convention Center only</td>
<td></td>
<td>$142,975 AV &amp; Internet – 3 venues</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>$189 single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes, 2 hotels, 82 breakouts</td>
<td>$176,893 F&amp;B – no minimum required</td>
<td>$133,272.52</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$269 double</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$148,000 AV &amp; Internet – 2 venues</td>
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<td>London, UK</td>
<td>Starting at $225 as of Dec 2018</td>
<td>$235,000 at convention center</td>
<td>Yes, at convention center only, 80 breakouts</td>
<td>$200,000 required minimum food &amp; beverage spend, 204,000 estimated AV spend Internet not requested*</td>
<td>$(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prague, Czech Republic</td>
<td>Averaging $90 to $125 as of Jan 2019</td>
<td>$450,000 for 5 days (51 rooms)</td>
<td>Yes, but approximately 15 fewer rooms than normal, 50 rooms at Centre and a maximum of 15 meeting rooms at nearby hotels. Would be smaller annual or 5 panesl/day.</td>
<td>No min F&amp;B at Centre, uses outside contractors. Average ISPA F&amp;B convention spend is $126,450</td>
<td>$(333,000)</td>
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*At the time of this report, JPA was not offering meeting-wide internet, so costs were not requested. ** Discounted meeting room rental for 10 breakouts, 62% off retail rental via offer from Baltimore Visitors Bureau. Center rooms needed to reach minimum panel slots.