

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2023 JOINT DPS-EPSC MEETING IN SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS, WITH APPLICABILITY TO OTHER MEETINGS IN AREAS WITH PROBLEMATIC PUBLIC POLICIES.

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Introduction: As members of the American Astronomical Society's Division for Planetary Science (DPS) Professional Culture & Climate Subcommittee (PCCS), we believe the physical and mental safety of our community members is a critical aspect of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDIA). The 55th annual DPS meeting, joint with the Europlanet Science Congress (EPSC), took place in San Antonio, Texas, in October 2023. This was a hybrid meeting attended by 918 planetary scientists from around the world, in-person and virtually. Because of the concerns raised by numerous anti-LGBTQ+ (e.g. SB 14 LG88(R) [1]) and anti-abortion (e.g. SB 8 LG 85(R) [2]) laws recently introduced and passed into law by the Texas legislature, some people felt unsafe attending the meeting in person [e.g., 3]. These concerns have also been raised repeatedly within the NASA Planetary Science Advisory Committee (PAC) for meetings that take place in all such states that pass similar bills (e.g., Texas, Florida) [e.g., 4]. Unfortunately, meetings such as these must be planned many years in advance, so the choice of venue cannot be responsive to current political or health conditions. Given this restriction, what can we as a community do to ensure our colleagues feel safe attending these meetings? What can we do to maximize our impact in these locations to the benefit of those who live there? We do not have one single answer to these questions, but we hope the experience of holding a meeting in Texas might guide us toward some positive approaches other meeting organizers find useful.

Post-meeting survey results: After the end of the DPS-EPSC meeting, the AAS sent out an anonymous survey to gather feedback on the meeting. We present some aspects of the survey that include feedback about the hybrid meeting format, COVID safety precautions, accessibility, and local engagement. Survey response was ~17%: 132 of 770 in-person and 26 of 148 virtual registrants; all quantitative results presented here are from those survey respondents.

Hybrid meetings: One way that meeting attendees might feel safer is to attend remotely. Meeting aspects that enable virtual participation get mixed responses from attendees, with a strong bias towards how the person attended the 2023 DPS meeting (Figure 1). Few survey respondents prefer purely virtual meetings, but

there is support for hybrid formats. Among the many ways to make a future meeting “hybrid”, a focus on enabling remote participation with oral presentations is highly ranked: meeting format options supported by >50% of all survey respondents included (a) live streaming of plenary and parallel oral sessions, (b) real-time presentations and questions from virtual attendees, and (c) recordings of talks made available after the meeting. These priorities are consistent with recommendations by the DPS Meeting EXploration Team (DPS-MXT) [5]. The biggest challenge remains encouraging interaction between in-person and virtual attendees: 70% of the in-person attendees did not interact with virtual attendees. However, having cameras on the in-person speakers was an example of a low-investment improvement that was appreciated by 80% of the virtual attendees.

COVID precautions: One aspect of safety is COVID safety. A Statement of Care that prioritizes attendees' health and safety was adopted during the DPS-EPSC 2023 meeting [6]. This included the required use of N95 masks (unless actively drinking and eating) in the meeting venue and not attending the meeting in-person if feeling ill. Masks were encouraged outdoors, but not required. COVID vaccinations were not required.

Some members felt that the COVID safety precautions and measures planned to be taken during the meeting were insufficient. We were able to assess this with the meeting survey results. 45% of the survey respondents felt comfortable attending the meeting in-person due to the adopted COVID precautions (Figure 2). Among the in-person survey respondents, 30% were in favor of keeping a mandatory masking policy and 27% were not, indicating a continued split on this issue. We note that those who chose not to attend the meeting at all due to concerns about COVID were not surveyed.

Accessibility: The DPS-EPSC meeting organizers provided physical accessibility resources for meeting attendees, including wheelchair transportation services and scooter rentals. While most survey respondents (82%) reported that they did not see or experience accessibility issues during the meeting. However, some accessibility issues were reported by a few attendees, such as lack of captioning, sound issues for in-person and virtual attendees, and narrow passages in the poster

halls and seating areas. We should continue to try to do better at supporting full accessibility to meetings.

Local engagement: The PCCS guest speaker at the DPS-EPSC meeting was Robert Salcido, Jr., Executive Director of the [Pride Center San Antonio](#). He gave a well-received talk (slides [posted here](#)) about local issues, including barriers to healthcare access for LGBTQ+ patients in San Antonio, how to be an ally to our LGBTQ+ friends and colleagues, and tips for increasing inclusivity at our meetings and workplaces. The discussion afterward addressed the issue of holding meetings in locations that are challenging for members of our community. The speaker encouraged the DPS to continue holding meetings in states whose legislative policies foster discrimination and exclusivity, in order to support and include local scientists in those areas.

Conclusions: Several successful aspects of the 2023 DPS-EPSC meeting could be used as guides to improve other meetings, especially in those areas with policies that make members of our community feel unwelcome and unsafe.

(1) The DPS statement of care, masking policy, and enforcement of that policy, seem to have made most meeting attendees adequately comfortable. We acknowledge that there is no specific quantitative data on the effectiveness of this policy, but we seem to have avoided the illness outbreaks reported anecdotally after recent comparable science conferences that did not have well-enforced masking policies.

(2) Virtual options should always be offered to provide a more inclusive environment, allowing people to attend who would otherwise find in-person attendance difficult for reasons including mental and physical health and safety, family concerns, or financial issues. However, revised meeting formats are needed to address continued dissatisfaction with hybrid meetings [5].

(3) Engaging with the local community was successful, appreciated, and beneficial to our own community. More of this should be done to spread enthusiasm and support for science, particularly in areas where anti-science sentiments are known to be especially strong.

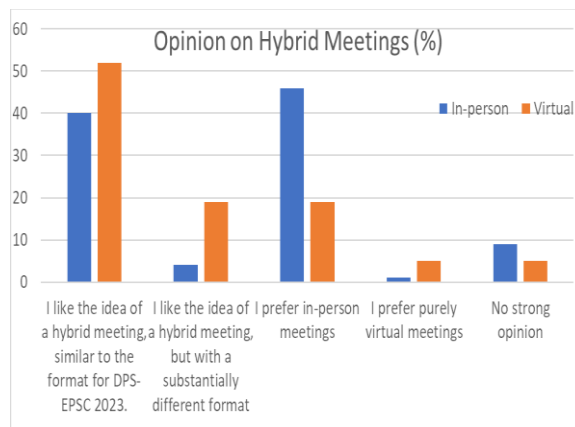


Figure 1. Survey question: “After attending the 2023 hybrid DPS-EPSC meeting, what is your opinion of hybrid meetings?” Total in-person/virtual respondents: 113/21.

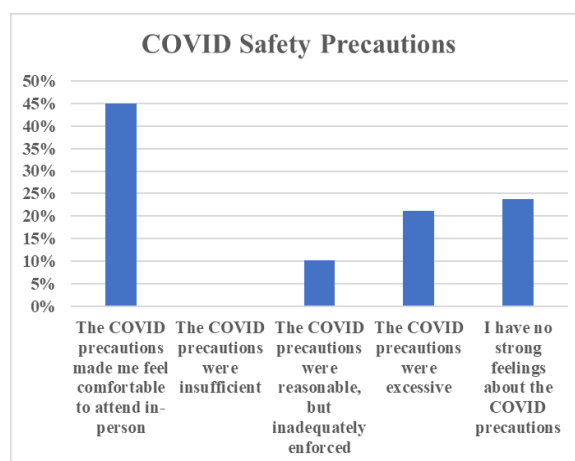


Figure 2. Survey question “How did you feel about the COVID safety precautions the meeting organizers instituted?” Total in-person respondents: 118.

References: [1]

<https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=88R&Bill=SB14> [2] <https://capitol.texas.gov/billlookup/History.aspx?LegSess=85R&Bill=SB8> [3] Elrod et al. (2023) LPSC, Abs. 2833. [4] VEXAG report, 14 Nov 2023, presented at PAC meeting. [5] [DPS Meeting EXploration Team \(DPS-MXT\) Final Report, 2022](#). [6] DPS Statement of Care and masking policy: [Statement of Care | American Astronomical Society \(aas.org\)](#).