

Michael Pritchard's Commentary on "Travel Funds"

Commentary On
Travel Funds

Insofar as an annual meeting is supported with taxpayers' money, it is important to keep the costs as moderate as possible. A further consideration in favor of moderate expenses is that at least some representation from each center is *required* by Edward's agency. In this case it seems that the government is paying a large part of the costs of the annual meeting, either directly or indirectly. In addition to covering costs of at least some of the participants' travel and lodging, Edward's agency has to pay for using the meeting facilities themselves. It seems that some of the participants will have their way paid by the research centers they represent. However, since the government generously supports these centers, it could be argued that, at least indirectly, the government is subsidizing the attendance of these representatives. Finally, unless each center is sending 15-20 representatives, it seems that there are many other attendees who will either pay their own way or seek support from someplace other than Edward's agency. Taxpayers' money may still be involved, as public university travel funds might be used as well.

Whether holding the meeting at a four-star hotel incurs immoderate expenses very much depends on the terms of the contract Edward has accepted. Discounts for the use of the facilities and group rates for lodging could add up to considerable savings. It is also possible that, in order to keep down the costs wherever the meeting is held, it is necessary to have several hundred in attendance. Having an attractive facility may be an important way of attracting those who are not required to attend. A similar argument might be used to justify holding the meeting in Washington, D.C., a rather expensive locale in general, rather than a less popular location.

Good hotel service is an important ingredient for a successful meeting, particularly when it involves hundreds of participants. If it could be shown that anything less than a four-star hotel could not provide good service for such a large number, that would support staying at a four-star hotel. In this case it is asserted that there are

several more "economical options" around D.C. Assuming that these options can provide good service, that is an argument in favor of Edward's decision to change the meeting location. However, he should make sure that that is the case. Further, Edward needs to consider transportation costs to the "more economical" options.

Another factor to consider is the proximity of the meeting location to other places attendees (and those who may accompany them) might find of interest during their stay in D.C., including places to dine, places to visit, and other interesting activities or events. Although not part of the meeting itself, these features can weigh heavily in determining whether attendees will be satisfied with the total experience of coming to D.C. for the meeting.

After taking all relevant factors into consideration, if Edward can find satisfactory accommodations at less cost, the decision to change locations makes good sense, both economically and ethically. The change may be desirable even if, all things considered, expenses associated with the four-star hotel are not actually immoderate, but only somewhat more costly.