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Results from the NOAO Telescope Proposal Process Workshop

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Abstract. The National Optical Astronomy Observatories hosted a Telescope Proposal Process Workshop in Tucson in mid-August in which representatives of several observatories met to discuss common issues and goals related to proposals for astronomical telescopes. The goals of the Proposal Process Workshop were to develop a shared understanding among observatories, including the National Gemini Offices and the Gemini Project, of the requirements and procedures for telescope proposals, and to encourage cooperation among the national observatories of the Gemini partner countries, STScI, and other institutions faced with similar issues and concerns related to the telescope proposal process. This paper will summarize the issues discussed at the workshop and the actions resulting from these discussions.

1. Introduction

Representatives of several observatories, including NOAO, Gemini, STScI, McDonald Observatory and the HET, the MMT Observatory, the CFHT, the National Research Council of Canada, the AAO, and JACH, met together in Tucson to discuss common issues and goals related to telescope proposals for astronomical telescopes. The goals of the Proposal Process Workshop were (1) to develop a shared understanding among observatories, including the National Gemini Offices and the Gemini Project, of the requirements and procedures for telescope proposals, and (2) to encourage cooperation among the national observatories of the partner countries, STScI, and other institutions faced with similar issues and concerns related to the telescope proposal process.

The primary motivation for the workshop arose from NOAO's plan to unify its proposal process which includes proposals and procedures for all its nighttime facilities (KPNO, CTIO, HET, MMT, South Pole, and Gemini) over the next year. We realized that many of the Gemini partner countries would be facing the same issues as NOAO—how to present a unified proposal submission system to its user community for Gemini and their other nationally accessible telescopes. The Kona SPIE meeting sparked an interest in a collaborative effort among other institutions as well.

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2. The Meeting Agenda

Broad issues and goals were explored during the first morning of the 2-day meeting, and the first afternoon was used to investigate the content of proposals in order to identify the complete set of information necessary to include in a telescope proposal. On the second morning we discussed the proposal process to identify in some detail the scientific and procedural requirements for the different phases, from preparation through submission, merit review, technical review, and scheduling. On the final afternoon we looked more deeply into specific implementation issues, with the goal of identifying a clear path to providing a set of tools for investigators and observatory staff to manage the proposal process.

3. Discussions

Prior to the workshop, participants were asked to provide URLs to proposal information at their respective institutions. Upon reviewing the posted URLs it was clear that most of the participants favored a LaTeX-based proposal form (not so surprising since LaTeX is the "publishing" language for astronomy!). Most proposal forms asked investigators for similar information although perhaps not in the same way (LaTeX keywords varied from form to form as well as descriptive information). The actual processing of proposals at the individual institutions varied as did the database systems used to track the proposal information.

During the discussions several key items were clearly identified as important issues in the proposal process.

- Some pre-proposal preparation tools should be available to the investigators to help them plan their proposals. Some tools that would be useful during this "Phase 0" are 1) exposure time calculators for the different instruments at each site, 2) a unit translator that would allow investigators to convert unfamiliar units, and 3) image quality estimators for determining the type of sky needed for queue observing.

- Observatories should use as similar proposal forms as possible. The participants felt that the proposal submission process should include an option for Web-based preparation and submission that does not require the distribution of software, similar to the system used at NOAO. The NOAO Web-based proposal form transcribes the information entered into the Web form into the standard NOAO LaTeX template for final submission.

- The proposal form should only ask for information that is truly needed to evaluate the proposal request. The process should be kept as simple as possible for users while allowing them to present their scientific case in a clear and concise manner. Information that is not needed for the initial submission (Phase I) should be left for the Phase II step (target stars, guide stars, etc.).

- Items on the proposal form should be requested in terminology common in the astronomical community. This improves the chances that what is requested is what you will get.

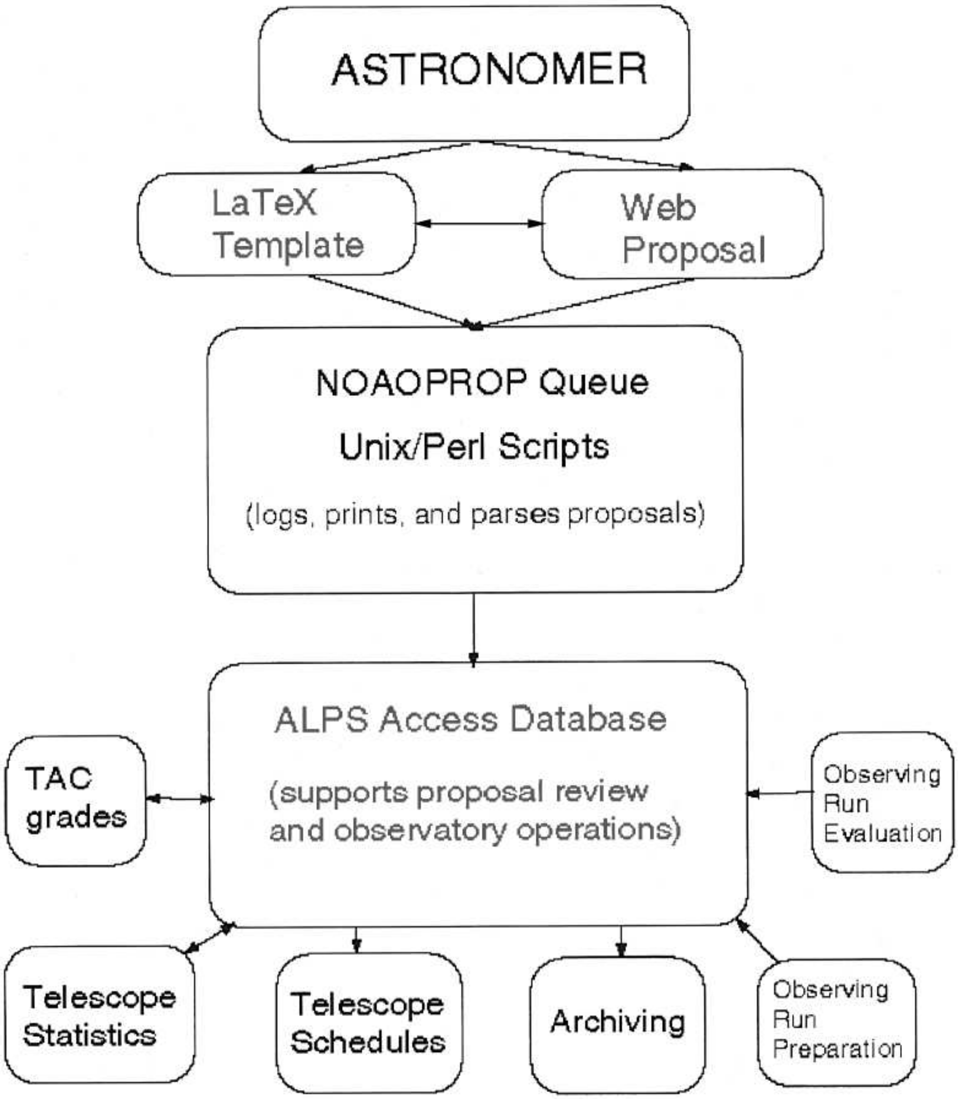

Figure 1. The NOAO Proposal Process.

- Proposals need to appear "professional" for the review process. The Telescope Allocation Committees prefer to review proposals on "paper" and it is important that the formatting is consistent from proposal to proposal. It is not enough to have a Web-based submission process, but the submitted proposals need to print in a consistent and readable format.
- Local procedures for processing need to be fast and efficient to minimize time between TAC approval and notification of time allocated. Some observatories receive hundreds of proposals and these need to be processed quickly so that proposals can be sent for review to the appropriate panels in a timely fashion. Observatories receiving large quantities of proposals found a well-formed database critical to the proposal process.

4. Action Items

At the conclusion of the workshop several items were identified as "action" items.

- The NOAO Web-based proposal form would be packaged up and made available to those sites that wished to evaluate and possibly implement it for their proposal process. At the time of this writing six sites had acquired the package and two had implemented it in some form.
- Gemini would continue to work on their Phase I tool that will be used by the AAO for their next proposal round. This tool would use XML for its markup language. Gemini will make their Phase I tool pages available for evaluation by the workshop participants. A subgroup was formed to review the page layout for Gemini and the NOAO Web pages to improve the overall usability of the Web-based form.
- A subgroup was formed to define LaTeX tags (and possibly XML tags) to find some common set that could be used by the different institutions. Some progress has been made in this area and a review of the initial set of tags was done during a brief session at the ADASS meeting in Urbana.
- All participants found the workshop to be useful and agreed that another similar workshop should be held in 1999 to follow up and review progress in reaching common goals for the proposal process.

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Additional information on the workshop can be found on its Web page at `http://www.noao.edu/scope/tpp_workshop/`.