

# President's Report

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With LASA's 2009 Congress having taken place June 11-14 in Rio de Janeiro, the Secretariat already is moving full speed ahead with planning for the October 6-9, 2010 Congress in Toronto. Every effort is being made to learn from experience in Rio, and we are surveying both those who attended and the broader membership in order to elicit as much feedback as possible. Pending results of that inquiry, what follows are some preliminary reflections of my own assessing our first ever Congress in South America, which was also the first in decades to have been held on a university campus rather than in conference hotels.

The intellectual dynamism of diverse currents of scholarship across fields of Latin American Studies was evident throughout the meeting. Panels, workshops and featured speakers covered a remarkable range of topics, and several sessions that I attended stood out as timely, innovative and attentive to nuance. I was particularly gratified by the sophistication with which many panels grappled with the conference theme of "Rethinking Inequalities," and by the degree to which the topic seemed to resonate among students of the humanities as well the social sciences, and among scholars who study the past as well as the present.

The Rio meeting was by far the most international in LASA's history, with roughly half of all participants hailing from Latin America. The Congress thus afforded an unprecedented occasion for the Association to highlight research being undertaken in the region. Not surprisingly, Brazilian scholarship was especially prominent, but researchers from the Southern Cone were also much better represented than is usually the case. Unfortunately, just as the cost of meeting in North America prevents many Latin American researchers from attending Congresses in the United States or Canada,

the number of North Americans taking part in the 2009 meeting declined in comparison with the record levels of 2006 and 2007. Most strikingly, the rate of cancellations was unprecedented: 5,100 people had pre-registered for the conference, leading us to anticipate a record number of participants. Yet only 4,066 of those who had prepaid for registration actually showed up at the Congress (an additional 421 registered onsite with 192 of those being new registrants, for a total number of 4,487.

While the frequency of cancellations may in part reflect the exceptional economic circumstances that have occasioned sharp cutbacks in university travel budgets, the expense of traveling to Brazil and the inconvenience of such a long journey surely were contributing factors. Clearly, decisions about where to hold future Congresses must take into account both the cost and the ease of travel to potential locations. It will also be important to ensure that the Congress is held in a location where it will be possible to set up the book exhibit. As I indicated in comments published in earlier issues of the *Forum*, our inability to organize a book exhibit at the Rio Congress constitutes the greatest disappointment of my LASA Presidency.

Holding the Congress on a university campus was a calculated risk, and overall I think that the experience was positive. Feedback that I received both during and after the conference has been overwhelmingly in favor of the decision, with dozens of participants telling me that the academic venue was preferable to the standard hotel complexes and with only two people, so far, opining differently. There were glitches, of course, ranging from the long lines to pick up registration materials to the inability to provide a supply of water for participants in quite a few sessions, but these were relatively minor, and other potentially



problematic aspects of the enterprise worked out nicely. In particular, transportation from hotels to the university campus, which had me quite worried, seemed to function smoothly.

One additional conclusion that I have taken from the experience in Rio is that LASA should endeavor to return to its traditional format of three-day Congresses, rather than the four-day schedules we introduced for the 2006 and 2007 meetings and the three and a half days that we allocated for activities in Rio. Consistently, the final day's sessions are less well-attended than others, and extending the Congress beyond three days adds to the cost of participation and the administrative burden of managing the event. Although a restoration of the three-day format may require the conference organizers to be even more selective in evaluating proposals for panels and papers, I believe that this is a price worth paying for a more streamlined program. ■