

Final Report from the Program Chairs

by JAVIER CORRALES, *Co-Chair* | Amherst College | jcorrales@amherst.edu
and NINA GERASSI-NAVARRO, *Co-Chair* | Tufts University | Nina.Gerassi_Navarro@tufts.edu

In this final report we review some of the best features of the LASA2010 Congress, and reflect on some of the shortcomings. We begin with the positive.

Splendid weather, splendid facilities, and splendid company—that's how we will remember LASA2010. Plenty of sunshine and mild temperatures accompanied us from beginning to end. A Cuban jazz band, courtesy of the Cuban consulate in Toronto, provided the musical number for our opening reception. All meeting spaces, without exception, were equipped with a top-notch laptop and projector, and very few technical problems were reported. Most participants stayed at the convention site or within walking distance, which allowed people to spend more time in the common areas, even to return in the evening for more gatherings. There were few lines at registration and concessions. Given our central location in downtown Toronto, one of North America's culinary capitals, people had plenty of choices for meals, in terms of menus and budgets. The common areas were busy and alive without feeling crowded. People were able to work—privately or in groups—as well as to laugh and have a good time without disrupting LASA activities.

Academically, LASA2010 featured an impressive program, with 673 panels, seven presidential panels, eleven featured panels, and three distinguished keynote speakers: Ambassador Jon Allen from Canada at the opening reception, a keynote address by Mexican civil rights leader Sergio Aguayo and a discussion with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Arturo Valenzuela. LASA members and guests hosted 28 receptions. We were able to offer 306 travel grants. And the film festival—always free to members and non-members—attracted almost 700 daily visitors.

LASA2010 also featured some well-received innovations. We offered three pre-Congress workshops, each attracting more applications than expected. The Political Economy workshop received approximately 32 applications (for 20 seats), the Film workshop received 49 (for 15 seats), and the Independence Bicentennial workshop received more than 20 (for 10 spots). The publishing symposium, which this year was moved to the pre-Congress part of the program, attracted the largest attendance in recent memory. Our three Cultural Dialogues demonstrated that there is interest in having a few sessions throughout the program in which panelists are interviewed—by moderators and audience members—rather than asked to deliver papers. Another important addition was child daycare. We received many positive comments even from people who did not take advantage of the daycare. It is an expensive addition for LASA, but we hope that Congresses continue to offer this service and that more members take advantage of it.

Despite these successes, not everything went flawlessly. First, there is no question that a smaller LASA Congress is financially risky. LASA2010 was intentionally designed to be smaller than recent Congresses. Individual submissions were discouraged, selection criteria were raised, and panelists with fewer than two pre-registered participants were canceled. Smallness afforded convenience and selectivity, but it also led to financial restrictions. Halfway during the summer of 2010, we were getting an insufficient number of confirmations from participants, which prompted us to cut the budget. While we were able to protect most key components of the program, we had to cancel some projects. Perhaps the two saddest casualties were a fabulous exhibit of photographs from the Mexican Revolution that we were going to bring from the United States, and an image-based system to make

announcements for participants during the course of our meetings. While the number of confirmations rose eventually, the Association needs to take into account that smaller Congresses can be financially precarious.

Second, we were disappointed that a number of our members were unable to appear because they failed to receive visas from the Canadian government. The Canadian government was indeed a pleasure to work with, and the vast majority of LASA attendees were able to clear immigration and customs quickly and hassle-free; yet we know of perhaps three visa problem cases that LASA was not able to resolve. It was equally disappointing that one of our invited guests, Cuba's award-winning journalist Yoani Sánchez, was unable to attend because her own country denied her an exit visa. We had invited Sánchez to be one of the speakers in the Cultural Dialogue II, "*El impacto de los medios en la cultura*" (which regrettably appeared mistitled in the program—another glitch). Sánchez accepted our invitation immediately; we secured the necessary permits from both the Canadian and the U.S. governments, but in the end the Cuban government did not come through. LASA must strive to ensure that LASA members and guests can freely travel to future meetings.

Third, and in line with past meetings, LASA2010 experienced a complex no-show problem. The Secretariat launched a serious effort to collect data on no-shows in LASA2009 and continued it for 2010: since each attendee was required to check with LASA staff to collect a badge and program book, this is a check on attendance. For the Toronto meeting, the no-show rate was 19 percent, based on the number of pre-registered individuals who committed to participate in panels, were listed in the program book, but did not check in and

CORRALES and GERASSI-NAVARRO *continued...*

were thus presumed to be absent. That nearly a fifth of participants did not show is worrisome indeed! While a few individuals were kind enough to give notice to their colleagues or the Secretariat of their pending absences, the vast majority of no-shows did not do so.

Needless to say, a significant number of no-shows is a huge problem. Panels can shrink to as few as one or two presenters. Organizers, chairs, and other remaining participants are disillusioned. Perhaps more seriously, if those to come to hear the presenters and discussants and expect rich and diverse discussions on their fields of interest do not find what they have bought into, this is the most serious kind of adverse publicity for LASA. It certainly can have an effect on attendance at future meetings. In addition, panels that simply disband are also abandoning a space that could have been used to allow more panels to meet; LASA members who were denied acceptance because of space constraints could have participated after all.

We urge all LASA members admitted to the program to consider these costs in the future. We also urge the Executive Council to consider policies to minimize the incidence of no-shows. For next year, the Executive Council approved our suggestion to institute a wait list. This list should help somewhat with this issue of last-minute cancellations and create opportunities for more LASA members to participate. But we still need to address the problem of very high no-show rates. If panelists and audience members lack firmer guarantees that LASA will offer what appears in the program, interest in returning to future LASAs will no doubt diminish.

Finally, despite the fact that most tracks had a healthy number of panels, some very valuable tracks this year were too thin:

Agrarian and Rural Life
Cities, Planning, and Social Services
Law, Jurisprudence and Society
Linguistics and Linguistic Pluralism
Technology and Learning

Increasing the relative number of submissions for these tracks will require strong efforts. Although some of these tracks, such as Linguistics and Linguistic Pluralism are very new, we program co-chairs could have done a better job encouraging more applications for these tracks. There are mechanisms that could be set in place to address the low submission rate of these tracks, such as asking relevant Sections and future track chairs to stimulate applications, but we realize that this is a difficult enterprise.

In the end, even though we had to work fast (we had only 15 months rather than the usual 18 months to plan the Congress) and there were financial constraints, the pluses far exceeded the glitches. The reason is simple: we had an amazing team to work with. Our 65 track chairs, representing 18 countries, worked under tight deadlines and with utmost professionalism, always ready to answer any questions we might have had. Having two chairs per track was one of the many superb ideas that we inherited from our predecessors, Evelyne Huber and Cynthia Steele. LASA's Executive Director, Milagros Pereyra, was brilliant, patient, creative and resourceful—always giving us practical advice and alerting us to potential mistakes. Melissa Raslevich, who helped with the selection and panel scheduling process, was phenomenal in trying to reconcile the multiple and conflicting demands coming from different quarters of LASA, including ours. The on-the-ground team in Toronto, including the 19 student volunteers, put in long hours in an effort to provide assistance for all. And our president, John Coatsworth, granted us full autonomy and support from day one.

We enjoyed serving LASA. While we faced a bit of a financial panic before the meeting, in the end, the Congress made us proud. LASA2010 offered everything that previous Congresses offered, and a bit more. We apologize to those who may have experienced inconveniences. Tim Power and Gabriela Nouzeilles, the program co-chairs for 2012 have already been in touch with us, and they are committed to fixing as many of these glitches as possible. We are confident that they will do a great job. We hope to see you in San Francisco in 2012 for an even more splendid LASA Congress. ■