

MaestroMeetings and LASA

By the MaestroMeetings Board of Directors: John Coatsworth, Carmen Diana Deere, Milagros Pereyra-Rojas, Timothy Power and Lars Schoultz

Along with the publication of scholarly books and journals, one of the principal activities of academic associations such as LASA has always been the organization of congresses, where the organization's members can present their research, discuss issues of common concern, and organize future activities. Over time, these congresses have evolved to include a large number of additional activities, such as book exhibits, film competitions, job placement, and, in LASA's case, even an enormously popular *Gran Baile*.

The organization of congresses typically falls upon each association's secretariat, as with LASA. This organizational task was not difficult in LASA's early years in the 1960s when the association had only a couple hundred members, but today's membership of nearly 13,000 makes the task enormously complex. In 2019—the year before the Covid pandemic—more than 5,600 members attended the Boston LASA Congress.

Fortunately, LASA's half-century of experience with ever-larger congresses has given the Secretariat what many other associations lack: a highly organized set of skills that the secretariats of younger or smaller organizations cannot be expected to possess. Some of the most important of these skills are:

- how to inspect and select a meeting's location;
- how to negotiate hotel and convention center rates;
- how to obtain hotel and travel discounts for congress participants;
- how to organize a congress within a university setting;
- how best to schedule plenaries, panels, meetings, and other activities; and
- how to organize a virtual and, increasingly, hybrid congress.

There are also dozens of less obvious tasks, from printing the congress program to choosing the best scheduling app, coordinating arrangements with host institutions to staffing registration desks, and securing childcare services, among many others.

Over the years, but especially during the past decade, other academic institutions have knocked on LASA's door, seeking to tap this expertise. Most often, these inquiries have come from smaller institutions that cannot afford to pay for in-house personnel devoted to congress organization, or from relatively young organizations—or both. Typically, commissions on hotel bookings, for example, go to travel agencies, not to the organizations that book them.

As the number of ad-hoc requests for assistance continued, the “burden” on LASA's Secretariat, especially during the time of executive director Milagros “Mili” Pereyra-Rojas, came to be seen as an “opportunity.” With her leadership, in 2014, LASA's Executive Council created MaestroMeetings, a meeting planner organization, as a social enterprise initiative with the objective of assisting these smaller or younger scholarly associations in the production of professional conferences while generating a new source of income for LASA.

Like LASA itself, MaestroMeetings is a non-profit 501(c)(3) institution, which exempts it from U.S. federal taxes. Its principal activity is to support LASA and other non-profit entities in organizing events and negotiating contracts with vendors, mainly hotels, convention centers, and universities. MaestroMeetings receives commissions from hotels and other vendors, which are equally shared with partners. It also provides meeting planning services for a fee.

These services are provided by three permanent employees, part-time employees, or contractors—an Operations Director, a Sales Director, and a Technology Coordinator—and MaestroMeetings contracts with others as needed for specialized tasks. MaestroMeetings is overseen by a four-person Board of Directors, made up of previous LASA officers and LASA's Executive Director.

In addition to LASA itself, in its first decade MaestroMeetings has partnered with 17 associations. Current partners include the Brazilian Studies Association (BRASA), the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS), the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEES); the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), the Red para el Estudio de la Economía Política de América Latina (REPAL) and the International Conference on Economics, Finance and Management (ICFEM).

MaestroMeetings is self-sustainable, and since its inception in 2014 has generated accumulated net revenue of \$443,276 for LASA. The Association uses these earnings to support its general operating programs and special activities.

To maintain its status as a meeting planner, MaestroMeetings has become an active member of the IATA, and for marketing and recruiting purposes, it also maintains an active membership with the Union of International Associations and the International Congress and Convention Association.

After working its way through a pandemic, which dramatically affected every academic institution and association, and leading the way in adopting post-pandemic technologies, the future of MaestroMeetings looks bright, given the demand for the services it provides. What is clear after a decade of operations is that LASA has benefited significantly from its operations, as have the sister associations it serves.

MaestroMeetings is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of three LASA past presidents (John Coatsworth, Lars Schoultz and Carmen Diana Deere), a past LASA treasurer (Timothy Power), and LASA Executive Director Milagros Pereyra-Rojas. //