

CONVENTION

What Makes a Successful Special-Session Proposal?

Editor's note: As chair of the Program Committee, I answer the inquiries from members whose special session proposals are declined. The acceptance rate in 2003 was close to 50%. In anticipation of submissions for the 2004 convention, I asked a Program Committee member to share some insights into how the committee evaluates proposals. Cora Kaplan offers the following analysis and advice. For a full description of how to propose a special session, consult "Procedures for Organizing Meetings at the MLA Convention," which appears on the MLA Web site and in the September (Directory) issue of PMLA.

When members ask questions at the Open Hearing of the Program Committee at the annual convention, the lion's share is always about why special session proposals succeed or fail. The selection process is a very competitive one, and we hope it will be helpful to proposers of special sessions to review the kind of advice we give at the convention.

The committee looks for proposals in which the originality of the session's contribution to scholarship in the field is both situated and sufficiently spelled out for nonspecialists. Go for concision and clarity. We need to know why a particular topic is especially relevant or groundbreaking, but since each member of the committee reads hundreds of proposals, you should be succinct. (It is worthwhile also to look at programs from the last few years to be sure that your proposal doesn't duplicate or too greatly overlap with a recently held session.) The papers in the session need to relate centrally to the original topic that you've defined. Gathering together a tenuously related set of papers under a catch-all heading does not make for a viable proposal. It is important for the session organizer to integrate the rationale for the special session with the individual papers and not simply to add the paper abstracts to a preformulated précis of the session. In the best panels, as I'm sure you all know, the papers have a strong connection to one another. However the relation is made among papers, the session becomes more than the sum of its parts and triggers a discussion that engages the ensemble of speakers. Proposers need to consider carefully how narrowly or broadly they define their topic. Many proposals that come to the committee try to cover too much ground or are too vague or

general. A modest proposal that focuses on a specific set of issues, themes, or questions, albeit ones that open up to wider issues, has a better chance of succeeding than a topic that requires a conference of its own to address it! A panel must nevertheless win an audience, so it is also important that proposers ensure that the session has enough breadth to do more than appeal to the five scholars who are working on one little-known text. A good proposal is one that is both specific and focused but, potentially at least, addresses and interests members outside a particular period or field as well.

It is too often assumed that a proposal that contains a list of several well-known scholars along with their paper titles will get through on celebrity alone. Don't believe it! Adding a "famous" senior scholar as commentator will not save a poorly conceived proposal either. A proposal is judged on the strength of its overall rationale, including its description of individual papers. This said, the committee looks for variety in topic, scope, and shape for the special sessions—after all, it is in the special sessions that MLA members can advance new areas of work and try out new constellations of scholarship.

Finally, two simple steps to ensure that your proposal doesn't get derailed. Make sure all the speakers (and the session proposer) are listed on the MLA membership rolls by 7 April. You can now check the current roster of members online at www.mla.org. Numerous proposals are declined each year because one or more of the speakers is not a member. Too few speakers is a problem, but too many is as well. If you do not leave at least fifteen minutes for discussion, your proposal will not be accepted. Special sessions that list four speakers plus a respondent have a tough burden of proof that they will indeed allow for a question and answer period without running over the allotted time.

As you can see, there is no magic formula for ensuring that your special session is accepted. Nor should there be. The Program Committee welcomes a diversity of proposals, both in form and in content. We are always pleased to see the creativity of the members whose efforts go to making the convention "special" in many ways. □