

The Congress Academic Program: An Explanation of the Role of the Congress Committee

It is a principle of the International Congress on Medieval Studies that the academic program aims to be as diverse and inclusive as possible. In order to achieve this desideratum, the Medieval Institute has a Congress Committee whose composition is and has been mutable and confidential, mutable because of fluctuations in demands during the 15-month process of organizing each Congress and confidential in order to maintain fairness and consistency, as well as to shield these unremunerated scholars from work beyond that for which they have volunteered (e.g., fielding individually directed petitions, questions, and complaints). The job of the Congress Committee is (1) to evaluate session proposals for Sponsored and Special Sessions and paper proposals for General Sessions and (2) to establish Congress academic policy, the latter often in consultation with the Board of the Medieval Institute.

Vetting proposals for Sponsored and Special Sessions (in June) is a complicated and difficult task because of the sheer number of proposals submitted and the committee's desire to be inclusive. The number of sessions is finite due to constraints of space and A/V requirements.¹ Within these limitations, the committee takes into consideration:

- the intellectual justifications offered for individual sessions (of paramount importance)
- the balance of topics addressed
- the balance of sessions of various formats
- apparent redundancies among proposed sessions

While there have never been quotas on numbers of sessions permitted to be sponsored and/or co-sponsored by a given organization, the committee does look at the history of sponsorship in making its decisions each year.

The committee also creates the General Sessions (in October/November). The number of General Sessions is essentially determined by how many approved Sponsored and Special Sessions make (i.e., how many of the total sessions listed in the call for papers are realized). The

¹ As early as 2006, the sheer quantity of proposals led the Congress Committee to reject nearly 100 proposed Sponsored and Special Sessions (13%). Since 2011, when we deliberately reduced the number of sessions in each year's Congress to ca. 575 (largely in response to the unsurprising rapid growth in requests for presentation technology), the committee has rejected up to 28% of proposed Sponsored and Special Sessions (in 2014).

higher the yield in October of Sponsored and Special Sessions approved in June, the lower must be the number of General Sessions. Paper proposals for General Sessions are peer reviewed by members of the committee, with coherent sessions formed around the papers deemed the most promising.² In recent memory, earning a place in General Sessions has become very competitive, with the acceptance rate over the past five years averaging 23%.

John Sommerfeldt, founding Director of Western Michigan University's Medieval Institute, saw the Kalamazoo conference as an enterprise open to contributions by established and emerging scholars from the American Midwest who were and remain so well represented among Congress attendees, even as the Congress now attracts participants from across the globe. For the first time in 1974, scholarly groups were invited to "sponsor" sessions at the event, decentralizing the organization of the conference's academic program.³ In recent memory, Sponsored Sessions have constituted around 75% of Congress sessions, with Special Sessions (that is, sessions proposed by individuals and ad hoc groups) accounting for about 20% and General Sessions (those organized by the Congress Committee in Kalamazoo) for about 5%. The effect is that a global confederation of professional academics, independent scholars, and graduate students in the multifaceted and ever-changing field of medieval studies largely determines the topics of conversation and the people involved in those conversations at each year's Congress. There is also a long-standing tradition of understanding the subject of the conference to be medieval studies very broadly conceived and embracing aspects of late antique and early modern studies, as well as medievalism, and including topics historical, literary, cultural, societal, intellectual, pedagogical, professional, and practical, with sessions in a wide variety of formats.

The challenges of steering the Congress are many, and the Congress Committee has worked over the years to strike a balance between respecting tradition and encouraging innovation in the ever-evolving field(s) of medieval studies.

² For at least the last 14 years, around half of the paper proposals considered for General Sessions are submitted directly to the Medieval Institute, with the other half being forwarded to the Medieval Institute by organizers of Sponsored and Special Sessions who did not accept papers originally submitted to them.

³ The five sponsoring organizations in 1974 were the North American Patristic Society, the Ohio Renaissance-Reformation Forum, the International Center of Medieval Art, the Academy of Research Historians of Medieval Spain, and the Committee on Centers and Regional Associations (CARA) of the (then) Mediaeval Academy of America. Since 2014, more than 250 organizations each year have proposed sessions for the Congress, with 95-98% having been granted a session or sessions.