

“THE FIVE OBSTRUCTIONS” OR “WHY SOMEBODY’S PANEL HAS TO MEET ON SUNDAY MORNING”

Michael Hickey, Bloomsburg University

Each year some presenters at the AAASS conference give their papers at a time that they consider inopportune—say, the first session on Thursday or the last session on Sunday. Each year people get frustrated when panels they want to attend meet during the same session. “Why,” we’ve heard more than once “can’t ‘they’ find a better way to schedule the conference?”

We sympathize. Each year the conference planners strive for a rational schedule that considers AAASS members’ needs. Even the most rational efforts at planning, however, are fraught with limitations. Without sounding like Gosplan officials complaining about how hard it is to set heroic targets, we want to explain why panels on the same topic inevitably run simultaneously and why you might end up presenting during a session that you do not consider “prime time.”

Here is how the scheduling process works: in December and January, we all rush to get our paper and panel proposals in before the deadlines. Some of us ignore proposal instructions, which creates extra work for the Program Committee and especially for AAASS Convention Coordinator Wendy Walker, who spends weeks cleaning messes that result when people ignore instructions. But we don’t want to sound like a bunch of complainers... The Program Committee reviews and approves proposals in February. The scheduling then is left to the committee’s chairperson, with invaluable and constant assistance from Wendy Walker.

The trick is creating a schedule that fits over four hundred panels into twelve sessions spread over four days, with the fewest possible conflicts. This requires that two sessions meet on Thursday afternoon, before some of us have arrived at the conference, and two sessions must meet on Sunday morning, when many of us are already off for the airport. Beyond that, the task is complicated by several obstructions.¹

The first obstruction: conference hotels do not always make the same number of meeting rooms available on each day. In Philadelphia, for example, we will have fewer rooms per session on Thursday and Friday than on Saturday and Sunday. Scheduling would be simpler if we could distribute panels equally across twelve sessions, but real estate dictates that some sessions have more panels (and thus, more potential conflicts) than others.

Our second obstruction: AAASS affiliate associations and groups meet during the conference. Some associations share members, so their meetings need to be scheduled for different sessions. Some associations request specific meeting times and days. Our main concern is preventing concurrent meetings of associations and thematically-related panels, so that (for example) a panel on nineteenth century Polish musical culture does not run during the Polish Studies Association meeting and a panel on Catherine the Great does not run during the Eighteenth Century Russian Studies Association meeting. Ideally, in 2008 we also would avoid scheduling any of the fifty-some film-related panels simultaneously with the meeting of the Working Group on Cinema and Television, but that brings us to our third obstruction.

Whenever possible, we must avoid running panels on closely-related topics during same session. Consider, however, that this year there will be over fifty panels on cinema, over eighty panels with Gender in their title, and nearly two dozen panels on Tolstoi and/or Dostoevsky. (These, by the way, are not the only topics on which there are more than twenty different panels.) Without bending space-time, we simply cannot avoid sessions with at least seven or eight gender-themed panels, four film panels, or two Tolstoi/Dostoevsky panels. So, apologies in advance: the odds are that two or more panels that you really want to attend will meet during the same session.

Some of those panels might include audio/visual presentations, which raises our fourth obstruction: cost restrictions on the number of rooms that can have AV setups during any one session. Putting a slide projector and a screen in one meeting room can cost as much as \$170 per day. Other equipment is more expensive; LCD projectors for computers often cost more than \$500 per room per day—which is why the proposal instructions explicitly say that the AAASS will not provide such equipment. In 2008, we expect to have eight AV-equipped rooms for each session. So far, ninety-six panels have asked for DVD/VCR/CD equipment, slide or overhead projectors, or some combination of these. Ensuring that everyone who needs AV gets an AV room complicates efforts at scheduling panels around the organizational meetings and preventing clusters of related panels in the same session.

At last, our fifth, and greatest obstruction: no one person can be in two places at the same time. We lay out the initial draft schedule so as to distribute panels rationally by topic, prevent conflicts with association meetings and accommodate reasonable requests from panelists who have asked that their

panels meet (or not meet) during a specific session. Inevitably, this yields a schedule in which several people are on two panels during the same session. Our conference database picks out such cases and we then reschedule so that no one has to engage in astral projection to give a paper. This sometimes requires ignoring one of the other obstructions and disturbing the equilibrium achieved in our draft schedule. Incidentally—and now we really are whining—checking for the fifth obstruction is the only scheduling function handled by a database; everything else is done by humans. Humans with very patient families.

We finish the initial schedule in early Spring, but that does not end the process. Membership on some panels inevitably changes. Imagine that Professor X drops off of a Friday morning panel and is replaced by Professor Y, but Y already has a panel at the same time. We can move one of Y's panels to a different session, but we must do so without creating conflicts with the schedules of the other panelists.

In sum, even the best of all possible conference schedules will leave someone unhappy on a Thursday afternoon, someone sour at 8:00 AM on Sunday, and someone caught in the quandary of which panel on utopian planning to attend at session six. We hope, however, that you'll enjoy the convention nevertheless.

Michael C. Hickey, 2008 AAASS Program Committee Chair, is Professor of History at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, where he teaches courses on Russian, Modern European and Jewish History and courses on historiography and historical methods. With much help from: Elizabeth Wood, 2009 AAASS Program Committee Chair; Rex A. Wade, 2007 AAASS Program Committee Chair; Ronald Linden, 2002 AAASS Program Committee Chair; Wendy Walker, AAASS Convention Coordinator; Dmitry Gorenburg, AAASS Executive Director.

Notes:

1. In the 2003 documentary *The Five Obstructions*, Danish filmmaker Lars Von Trier challenges his mentor Jørgen Leth to make a film and then remake it five times under the limitation of certain "obstructions." For instance, he must film in Cuba, with no shot longer than twelve frames. Leth does so, but only by occasionally circumventing and subverting the obstructions. ñ