Organizing Academic Conferences: An Overview

Life in the academy is organized around three activities: research, teaching, and service. Depending on an academic institution’s priorities, either research or teaching comes first, but service (almost) always comes third in terms of what the institution values. That may sound surprising, even in the academy, since in so many areas of life we hear about client service. In the academy, even if service is never recognized (in terms of tenure, promotion, or even modest annual pay raises) as significant, bad academic service is avoided when possible. In the theology academy, there are roughly four kinds of academic service: (1) to one’s department (including one’s colleagues and students—think of directing masters programs or writing lots of recommendation letters), (2) to the larger organizational units of one’s institution (college or university committees or higher administrative positions), (3) to the Church or other faith communities (at Notre Dame, the Institute for Church Life would be a good example), and (4) to one’s colleagues in the wider academy. This last kind of service includes several different activities: reviewing books, editing or reviewing articles for professional journals, editing journals, organizing sessions or interest groups at conferences, and (the topic of this overview) organizing academic conferences. In what follows, I have listed the elements of conference planning and execution and a very rough timeline based on a small to medium scale regional conference, either recurring or planned as a one-time event.

1. Selecting a Theme, Securing a Location, Drafting a Budget, and Obtaining Funding
(24-12 months prior to the conference)

Most regional conferences begin with completion of two tasks: drafting a short (one page) document setting the theme or themes of the conference, and securing a location. This happens as soon as you can identify enough energetic people to begin the process and establish a conference title.

Themes: The challenge in setting the theme for a conference is balance between broad appeal and sufficient focus. For example, a conference in “history of Christianity” will likely generate many paper proposals (maybe even some really promising ones), but it is not sufficiently narrow to allow the conference papers to hold together as an academic offering. Looking at focus issues of recent professional journals is a good source of inspiration for conference ideas, or you could look at interest group sessions for recent national conferences. You should also consult websites of major academic institutions to see which topics have already been examined through conferences. Talk with colleagues and former professors to see if they have ideas. Once you have sufficient materials, try to write a single page to describe what the conference will examine. It is helpful to include, if you can, several interrelated questions to which the conference will provide tentative answers. Also list the various academic fields that might have something to say about your topic. This document will be the basis for the conference description that you send with your letters requesting funding and will also form that basis for your call for papers.

Location: Typically, academic institutions with conference centers (such as McKenna Hall at Notre Dame) require reservations a year ahead of time, although sometimes there are open spaces in the calendar and conference centers want to book space as fully as they can as early as they can. (To give a wider perspective on this, large national conferences such as the American Academy of Religion secure hotel and convention center space five years or more in advance.) Often conference centers at universities have conference planning departments if the school hosts conferences frequently enough to justify these services, although sometimes these services are not available for graduate student conferences. If you do not have access to these services, list possible venues, contact persons, and phone numbers. Ask about the cost of the venue, the availability of dates you are considering, whether catering is available and if so how much it costs, whether or not the conference center has accommodations on site or arrangements with nearby hotels, and their deposit and cancellation policies.
**Budget:** A good conference planning department may have people to help you with a draft budget, but if not you need to research conferences of similar size to establish a basic working budget. This budget should include the amount of income you need for the expenses you project, but also the likely sources of that income—each under a separate line item. Your budget should also have columns to compare budgeted to actual income and expenses and the differences between budgeted and actual (this will be very important for recurring conferences, especially if you plan to appeal to the same funding source year after year). You need to set the conference registration fee, if you plan to charge one, in which case it is helpful to show some variations in funding level depending on the level of registration. In terms of income lines, this can be as general as “internal” and “external” sources, but more specificity helps when you are putting together funding requests. In terms of expense lines, you need lines for travel and lodging, meals, conference site fees (room space and catered breaks), honoraria (if you plan to invite keynote speakers), publicity, and conference supplies (including postage). If you expect this will be a recurring conference, it may not be too early to start thinking about design of a conference website and so you will need to budget for that as well.

**Funding:** You will need, at minimum, a conference description and a rough budget in order to obtain funding. As soon as you have these together, you should assemble a list of possible sources. Be as specific as possible as in listing these sources, and think as widely as possible—you never know when a person or institute with deep pockets will be inspired by an academic conference topic. As you draft your funding letter, make sure to summarize briefly the topic of the conference and the projected date and location, briefly indicate its importance, and briefly state why you are appealing to that source and for how much money. If the source has supported similar initiatives in the past, it is best to acknowledge their generosity. Ask for as much as you judge reasonable based on what you know about the source’s funding record. Increments of $500 and $1000 are best since they fit tidily in the financial records of donors. Try to come up with 20 funding sources, while realizing you will be lucky to get between five and ten donations. When asking for money from multiple units within a single organization (such as Notre Dame), make sure to include the other sources to whom you plan to make requests so that the donor does not think you are asking her/him/it to shoulder the entire financial burden of the conference. If you expect there to be a publication venue for the conference proceedings, mention this in the letter so the donor will know that their generosity will be acknowledged in print.

2. **Selecting Keynote Speakers, Drafting the Call for Papers (and Obtaining More Funding)**

   **(18-12 months prior to the conference)**

The next major task is organizing the conference which is usually divided among several smaller focal themes that support the larger theme. These small focal themes will be the basis of what you write in the call for papers. Think about this in terms of how you map your own academic field, and how the various elements on that map fit (or could potentially fit) together. If you plan to invite keynote speakers, you’ll need to notify them well in advance—the calendars of religious leaders and well-known academics fill up quickly (some even have agents that work with their administrative assistants!). You can use your funding letter as your basic model for your letter requesting a keynote speaker, but instead of asking for money insert the title of a talk you would like them to give at the conference and then tell them how much you will pay them for giving this talk. If your budget allows for it, schedule a keynote speaker for each smaller focal theme for the conference, or a keynote to open and close the conference. As soon as you have secured enough funding to cover the keynote lectures, then send the letters of invitation. At the same time, you’ll need to be working on the call for papers which involves two tasks: drafting the call and assembling the list of people and places where you will send the call. The call for papers should be a slightly more detailed version of the conference proposal, including of course the date and location. Be sure to indicate a range of topics or questions that relate to the title of the conference and the main themes you have set forth. Be explicit if you want papers from outside your primary field since many people tend to ignore conferences where they do not already know the basic contours of the conversation.
If you have secured keynote speakers, list them. Be detailed about the length of paper proposal, the date of submission, the place of submission, and the date by which those who submitted proposals will receive a reply. Timing for sending out calls for papers varies, from roughly 10 months prior to the conference to five months prior. Six months is probably a fair time, but try to select a time when people are not likely to have many other pressing commitments (so for example, try not to ask for paper proposals near the end of a semester). If you will be able to offer a travel subsidy, please indicate this in the call.

3. Preparing for the Conference: Selecting Papers, Setting the Program, and Advertising

(12-3 months prior to the conference)

Assuming you have secured a location, funding, and commitments from keynote speakers, you can begin planning the conference events in more detail. If you have not already established clear responsibilities for the members of your conference planning committee, now is the time to make those decisions. You’ll need one person to coordinate review of paper proposals, one person to keep the budget (and contact the funding sources if they have not sent the money), one person to be in contact with the conference center, one person to coordinate meals (if that is not being done through the conference center), one person to work on advertising, and one person to coordinate travel. In addition, you should have a committee chair to monitor everything, so we are talking about a committee of roughly seven people. It is likely that all will participate in review of paper proposals unless you have made other arrangements.

You need to make a draft of the conference program spanning the conference dates and setting forth how the themes you have selected will structure the days of the conference. Once you have received the proposals, you need to make your paper selections, notify those who submitted proposals of your decisions, and then you need to distribute those papers over the days of the conference according to the themes you have established. (Please note: If you invited panel proposals in your call for papers, then you are saving yourself some work organizing sessions.) If you expect to have respondents, you might consider inviting internal respondents or even external respondents if you have funding (sometimes those whose proposals were not accepted but who still want to be involved in the conference will agree to serve as respondents on panels, since any form of participation may qualify them for expense reimbursement from their home institutions). Although advertising is sometimes done early to accompany a call for papers (for example, one poster announcing the conference and call for papers), often advertising happens after the conference program is established in more detail. Advertising through a department or university website, targeted emails to academic institutions or religious communities, mailings to these same targets, and local news media are all appropriate, depending on your budget.

4. Hosting the Conference: Last Minute Advertising, Welcoming Guests, and Attending to Details

(3 months prior to the days of the event)

Nothing makes or breaks a conference like the feel of organization and attentiveness (even better if organization and attentiveness are actually present). All attendees should have conference packets with name tags, conference schedule, lists of local places to eat and/or exercise and/or worship, area map, and blank paper and pens—maybe even a lists of participants and their email addresses if it group is small enough. In a smaller conference, it is a good idea to assign members of the conference committee to check in with presenters a week or so in advance and then the day prior to their scheduled arrival to make sure everything is on schedule. Speakers should have one or two contact numbers on the conference committee to phone in delays or any other issues of concern. One member of the conference committee should be assigned to review the location the day prior to make sure everything is in place. One member of the conference committee should be assigned to greet those guests who are not presenting, directing them to the conference center sessions and facilities and answering questions. Make sure that the conference committee members have clear name tags so the guests know the people to whom to direct their questions. Make sure that those who will be reimbursed expenses know where to send receipts and how long before they will receive reimbursements and honorarium payments.
If any events will be held away from the main conference location, make sure participants have directions and contact information if they get separated from the group. If the conference will be arranging transportation back to the airport, please notify people where and when to meet their rides and get full travel information. It is always a good idea to distribute a survey either in the registration packet or at the last session of the conference, with a mailing address included if people forget to complete the survey before leaving.

5. **Academic Conference Aftermath**
   **(in the uncertain future)**

Within the first week of the conclusion of the conference, the committee should meet to take stock of how the event unfolded, review surveys, and begin planning for the next conference, if there will be one. Most importantly, you need to make sure that those needing expense reimbursement have their expenses processed in a timely way, and thank you notes should be sent at least to keynote speakers, ideally to all presenters. The committee member in charge of the budget should begin running budget-actual calculations as expenses are received and processed. Some funding sources, such as foundations, will require budget-actual calculations along with a final report of how the funds were used. All funding sources should receive thank you notes and a copy of the conference program. One member of the committee should assemble notes for the next conference and, if appropriate, the conference space should be reserved for the next year. It is never too early to determine the theme of the next year’s conference (this frequently happens at recurring national conferences) and to begin the process again. If conference proceedings will be published, contributing authors should be contacted by the editor.