

## Michal Raucher, Northwestern University



*Michal Raucher is a doctoral candidate in religious studies at Northwestern University and she served as the Chair of Northwestern University's [Religion and Identity](#) graduate student conference. Raucher is currently on a Fulbright fellowship in Israel, where she is conducting ethnographic research on the reproductive ethics of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women in Jerusalem.*

The idea for a graduate student conference at Northwestern University first came to me and my fellow students one night as we were having dinner with one of our professors. We were intrigued by the idea, but we had no idea where to start. Sensing our hesitation, our professor grabbed a napkin and a pen and listed the various components of the conference and what they would cost, showing that we could indeed accomplish the task. A lot of time, energy, and hard work came between that first night of planning and the successful realization of the Northwestern University Graduate Student Conference on “Religion and Identity” in April 2009. I’m sharing what we learned from planning it in order to encourage other students to take on this challenging but rewarding task.

The single most important factor in the success of your conference will be the team of students, faculty, and staff that work with you to plan and host it. Work to involve as many people from across the university as you can in this process. What is essential is that everyone be committed to preparing for the conference, even when the process becomes long and arduous. Typically, the conference will be planned primarily by students from one or two departments, but it cannot happen without the support and involvement of faculty and staff.

Begin planning your conference about a year in advance. Once you have assembled a committed team, start by dividing into committees. Graduate students have a variety of commitments, so give them the opportunity to choose which tasks they are best suited for and the season of the year when they wish to work on their assigned duties. Some committees will work harder at the beginning of the process and others at the end.

Select a theme for your conference and choose a date for it to take place. Finding the right date can be a surprisingly difficult task. We knew we wanted our conference to be in the Spring, but this is an extremely busy season full of religious holidays, vacations, our visiting students' weekend, and exams. After selecting a specific weekend, begin contacting the keynote speakers you want to invite. In order to book two professors from other institutions, we made a list of our four top choices so that if one or two declined we would have more options. Ask students with connections to these professors to make the initial contact.

Since a conference cannot happen without funding, applying for grants from a variety of sources should be high on your priority list. Universities often offer professional-development grants, and your department likely has funds allotted to support graduate student activities. We applied for and received funding from the Department of Religious Studies, the Graduate School, the Humanities Center, and the AAR. Seek out cosponsorships from other departments. In our case, the program in Asian and Middle East Studies and the departments of History, English, Jewish Studies, and Communication provided us with generous contributions. Explain to the grant committees that your conference will foster dialogue among graduate students, encourage collaborative projects, and enrich the life of your department, your university, and the academy as a whole. We were able to secure almost \$12,000 for our conference. With this, we were able to pay our two keynote speakers, eliminate registration fees, and create a setting that rivaled many professional conferences.

The next thing your conference needs is presenters and attendees. Time your call for papers to give graduate students a sufficient opportunity to submit abstracts, but not so much time that they forget about the conference altogether. We sent out the call for papers seven months before the conference, and requested that the abstracts be submitted three months later. This is also a great time to begin publicizing the conference. Have some of your more artistic students design a poster, and print it in a few different sizes. After sending out our call for papers electronically, we also mailed out posters and a printed version of the call for papers for departments to hang in their hallways. The schools we contacted were a combination of those in our geographical area and those to which our faculty and students had connections. Don't forget about doing publicity in your own school; in retrospect, we wished we had done more of that.

You will need a committee to vet the abstracts when they arrive. Try to have representatives from many fields and subfields on your committee so that your conference is as interdisciplinary as possible. We gave each member of the committee about two weeks to read the abstracts and to judge them according to certain predetermined criteria. After a few hours of reviewing, we had created a list of panels and presenters and we then selected graduate students from our

department to preside over each panel.

The last two months of planning before the conference are mostly detail-oriented — making sure that the schedule is finalized, there are enough rooms for the sessions, food is ordered, flights are booked, and housing for attendees is arranged. Follow-up on the requests you placed for department cosponsorships. During the last six weeks before our conference, we received an influx of monetary support that enabled us to move the conference off-campus to a nearby hotel. This shift not only took some logistical pressure off of the planning team, but also made the conference feel more professional.

Hosting a graduate student conference undeniably involves a lot of hard work from all involved, from students to faculty to department staff. But the result can be spectacular. Our graduate students gained essential professional development skills, met scholars from many disciplines, and were able to discuss some of the most pressing issues in the world today.