

# How a Regional Conference of International Scope Beat COVID-19 and Will Beat It Again



To begin our annual business meeting in July 2020, midst plague, an elephant sauntered into the Zoom room.

Patricia Garcia, our then-Present (and current Past President), eyed it with coolly disdainful resignation. "So," she lofted as the elephant vanished into cyberspace, "should we cancel 2021? Or should we try to do something online?" I have been the SCRC site's webmaster since September 2018. "Yes. We can do it. Piece of cake."

Not really—but I spoke upon two clear facts: 1) any web page could link to a Zoom room; 2) among our respective universities, we could easily accommodate 50 or so Zoom rooms. Develop an online program that links to Zoom rooms with one or more universities' Zoom infrastructures. Green light: *allons y!*

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We are not the Evergiven of conferences for early modern scholarship, nor a vast shrinking glacier. We're a modestly sized vessel that can carry a warm, mirthful party and turn course well short of an "Iceberg dead ahead!" In conversations with the Pennsylvania State University tech people, I learned that Zoom use for PSU faculty was unrestricted and free for groups of under 500 people—far exceeding our norm. We needed only PSU's Zoom infrastructure to hold our three-day conference: without cost for the technology.

We migrated the website to an independent .org URL and enhanced its tools to facilitate online payments and other operations that would support the event. I hired an

undergraduate in cybersecurity to instruct panel chairs and to troubleshoot during the conference. The three-day event cost SCRC \$650.00. Tangles? One panel was delayed 10 minutes. One plenary was presented as a webinar—a mistake, since the webinar format restricted the audience-presenter interaction that makes plenaries so enjoyable; for groups of our size, “Meeting” remained the perfect format.

Having distributed the CFP for our online conference, we saw a healthy flow of proposals level with most years. Unusual, however, was the extent of international representation. Participants joined from 14 nations; however much the online format constrained the conference experience, this diversity was unthinkable before the pandemic. We hosted three plenary speakers and 37 panels with 158 attendees over three days. (Mary Villeponteaux, our Program Chair at that time and Current Vice President, built her second program in two years; our stalwart Secretary-Treasurer, Tim Moylan, continued his inestimable, vital service.)

Attendees could use the program intuitively, as though it were paper. They clicked the panel title and were Scottied to a populating conference “room”: resembling, to the extent possible, what you remember from in-person three-paper chaired sessions. Given the general Zoom literacy by that time, features like images, sound, and video were easy to execute without cost. Beyond a trio of underused social rooms—only the Tavern will return if we must meet again in cyberspace—SCRC and its affiliate societies held their business meetings, and QEIS hosted a somewhat less revelrous Queen’s Revels. (We remain in plague time.)

SCRC continues to eye the global health crisis. We are prepared to switch online and will hold a robust event March 3-5 no matter the circumstances.

We thrived during the pandemic’s second spring because our size is moderate and because our constituency is loyal and

spirited. Among our new companions, may we share bread and beer and be with each other again, in Tuscaloosa this spring.

If you wish and are able to send stories or information about SCRC, its affiliate societies, or related things, please send me (bmp@psu.edu) a post of 500 or fewer words to publish on our blog. (Images are also welcome.) We would be thrilled to add your voice.

– Brendan Prawdzik