

Letter from the President regarding the LASA2020 Virtual Congress

Bogotá, April 18, 2020

Dear and esteemed members of LASA

After some institutional communications from LASA (two bulletins and one virtual “online” session on Facebook) related to the decisions made in relation to the Congress, I would like to address you more personally, to share in detail how the decision was made to have a Virtual Congress and the implications this has had on the life of the Association.

I know that some of our members have felt that LASA has not expressed the solidarity merited by the crisis situation caused by COVID-19 among its members, and there has been a lack of communication between LASA directors and its membership. Other people have not fully understood the reasoning behind organizing a conference in such delicate circumstances as these. At all times, the secretariat, the entire Executive Council (hereafter EC) and I, myself, as president, have tried to explain to different people, when asked, the reasoning behind the decisions. I very much feel that it has not been clear to everyone, and therefore I find it necessary to better explain to you our internal process, which has been very challenging for everyone.

The first bulletin was sent on March 11 and written three days before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic; this was a time when it was possible to imagine holding a congress partially in person in mid-May in the warm and welcoming city of Guadalajara, Mexico. At that time we thought it was worth the trouble to transmit a bit of optimism, indicating that the Congress would move forward, although in a hybrid manner (in-person and virtual), “due to the importance of this encounter to the revitalization and strengthening of our academic community”. At the same time, it stated “our commitment and responsibility, as a professional association, is to the health, safety and care of our members”.

That same March 11, the evidence was undeniable. In this globalized world, the level of contagion of this disease was causing all macro- and microsocial certainties to fall, like dominoes. We all had to respond to this public health imperative, and the priority was the safety and health of our conference attendees.

The option to reschedule the conference was considered, but after weighing the pros and cons, both the members of the Ways and Means Committee (hereafter W&M —of which I am a member, as well as the past president, the president elect, the treasurer and the executive director of LASA, with voice—) as well as the LASA EC (11 democratically elected members) voted unanimously to hold a totally virtual Congress. The LASA2020 academic Program could not be rescheduled for 2021 since LASA2021 has its own academic board that had been working on that congress and which, according to LASA’s constitution, would have to take over the institution as of June 1, 2020.

There are also operational considerations that that are not know to the full membership, and the only date in 2021 on which the LASA congress could be held were on dates already booked for the next congress, in Vancouver. In turn, Guadalajara, much to our regret, was no longer a possible option. The size of the LASA Congress means there are few places where an in-person congress can be held, and many of the required contracts are signed years in advance. For these reasons, the only option left to the W&M and the EC was to cancel this congress or to hold it virtually. We chose to hold it virtually, to protect the work performed by more than 400 people (professors, students and staff) and to preserve, as much as possible, the purpose of the LASA2020 program; as a way to contribute not only to sustaining LASA's academic life, but also to safeguard the bond of thought, reflection and solidarity we all require to get through this global crisis together. Financial considerations were never relevant in this decision.

Thus, we sent a second bulletin on March 19, lamenting “the difficult situation caused worldwide by the COVID-19 epidemic” and expressing “our support and solidarity with those affected and their families.” We also stated, with some humility, that we were “learning as an organization, how to manage the global public crisis created by this pandemic” and we responded to it “with the implementation of a new form of dialogue.”

Since the beginning, we have been aware that this virtual Congress proposal is not a perfect solution and, in fact, it has caused us both uncomfortable and unavoidable emotions. Despite our efforts in trying to offer the best possible responses, not everyone who wanted to participate in this Congress could do so. The pandemic has overcome all of us and found us as we are, unequal. Its impact differs by region and by all the factors if inequality that characterize our societies.

Making this decision leads to many practical changes, too, and that was why we decided to have a virtual session on March 28 to answer, live, the questions that were arising for the Association, in relation to different subjects: the platform that will be used for remote Congress sessions and the reasons for choosing said platform; the manner in which the Exposition and book presentation would take place; the Film Festival; the transformation of the Schedule to adapt to the virtual environment; the cost, payment options for registration in the congress, “at the amount each member can pay” -to ensure that money would not be an obstacle- and the registration modes for this virtual Congress; the policy to return money to those who do not wish to participate in this format; the effect on LASA travel grants that had already been assigned an the new options and limits for the grantees; how panels and meetings of the LASA Sections would function; and other more specific matters.

Since then, the questions, doubts and concerns have not ceased, which is understandable due to the unprecedented nature and uncertainty of the situation. In some cases, people have seen their doubts resolved; in others, on the contrary, concerns have arisen and increased, and even dissatisfaction with the Association not directly linked to the crisis have been presented, which cannot be resolved in the short one-year term of the Presidency of LASA.

As president, I feel the need to respond and address your concerns. Those that are short term, which can be solved in this short period of time, have been getting resolved, and I cite two as an example: it was confirmed to the sections that, given the circumstances, LASA will relax the regulations governing section meetings, opening the possibility of holding them when their members are available, as long as it is during this year, and in the manner they prefer (by email or as they deem appropriate). Likewise, the panels pre-selected by the Section which were cancelled this year can be maintained in the next congress, with the implication that these panels will not be evaluated by track chairs. The consideration of the number of panels each section can put forward, which depends on the number of members, would be a subject for discussion in the next EC meeting.

A second example, which displays LASA's willingness to support the membership participating in the LASA2020 Virtual Congress, to give and consider the financial impact of COVID-19 on its members is, as shown on the website, the offer for financial support for childcare services for registered participants who need this service during their active participation as a session organizer, coordinator, moderator or speaker in the Virtual Congress.

LASA, as an association in full development, must mobilize discourse that seeks to strengthen its mission of "fostering intellectual discussion, research and teaching on Latin America, the Caribbean, and its people throughout the Americas, promoting the interests of its diverse membership, and encouraging civic engagement through network building and public debate," and the commitment of its members to this mission. The challenge consists of doing so in such a way that the challenges consider the growth and diversification of the membership in an association of LASA's magnitude as a source of transformation and strength for the association, without creating ruptures, decay and accusations that polarize its members.

The context in which we are currently engaged teaches us that we cannot think just one way about what the congress in a virtual environment offers or fails to offer. While, as stated, it affects colleagues who do not have access or have limited access to the Internet in their countries or regions within their countries, in other cases, holding a Congress in this way has permitted access to people who had not considered attending the Congress, due to financial, time or physical mobility limitations. This is also an opportunity to try a new way of meeting, more compatible with the environment and which will perhaps become more common in a not so distant future. It attempts, then, not to view technology, necessarily, as a synonym for exclusion. As of now, more than 40% of the people who had originally registered have subscribed, and we continue to receive new applications, with close to 2,500 people registered, which indicates that there are a large number of people interested in participating.

The pandemic has brought to the forefront, sometimes dismally, the need to strengthen communities and maintain proactive bonds. I would like to end by citing a paragraph I wrote for the last LASA Forum I hold have as president: "The imperfection of this or that current decision gives me hope that the virtual format of this next Congress contributes to eroding the isolation and withdrawal we feel due to the COVID-19 situation, and invites a connection of worlds and knowledge and an interweaving of personal, collective and planetary hopes".

An affectionate greeting



Mara Viveros-Vigoya

President of LASA

LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION

416 Bellefield Hall
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
lasa@lasaweb.org
Tel: 412-648-7929
Fax: 412-624-7145

