# Call for WPSA Virtual Community Chairs

**Deadline: June 19, 2020**

The WPSA Virtual Communities Initiative seeks WPSA members interested in leading Pilot Virtual Communities beginning in Fall 2020. Details are below. This position might be compared to serving as a Section Chair or Mini-Conference Organizer for the annual conference, except that it is open to experimenting with a much broader range of possible "meetings" and will entail using a videoconference platform to schedule and host (or help host) meetings. We welcome people to lead communities in teams. If you're even potentially interested, please send us a few thoughts on your vision in response to the questions at the end of this call by June 19. If you have questions or would like to talk to someone about the project before deciding, feel free to contact Cheryl Hall at chall@usf.edu.

**WPSA Virtual Communities Vision:**

WPSA Virtual Communities will bring members together in virtual meeting rooms on Zoom or another videoconference platform to interact in real time at regular intervals throughout the year. Communities will be organized around a variety of academic specializations or themes, potentially including but not limited to existing WPSA sections. Each community will host meetings of various kinds depending on the vision and contribution of its leaders and participants. The primary goal of WPSA Virtual Communities is to provide additional opportunities for intellectual exchange beyond the yearly in-person conference. Such opportunities may be of particular benefit to WPSA members who find it difficult to travel to the conference because of distance, financial cost, time constraints, family obligations, holiday conflicts, personal and public health challenges, national and international travel restrictions, the carbon impact of air travel, or any other reason. But WPSA Virtual Communities can potentially benefit all members, regardless of ability to attend the in-person conference, by enabling forms of scholarly engagement beyond those possible during a 3-day annual conference, democratizing accessibility to professional networks, broadening participation in WPSA, and providing more time and space to deepen intellectual exchange. In time, we hope that WPSA Virtual Communities will be part of a set of measures that simultaneously advance the professional aims of the WPSA, reduce the extent to which WPSA externalizes the climate-related costs of its activities, and lead the way towards lower-carbon forms of scholarly life.

Although the Virtual Communities Initiative was conceived prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, the current need to radically limit travel and in-person gatherings in order to limit the growth of the pandemic makes it particularly relevant at this point in time.

**2020-2021 Pilot Program:**

To experiment with this new initiative, the WPSA Executive Council has approved funding to support several Pilot Virtual Communities for 2020-2021 using Zoom. Beginning in July of 2020, the WPSA Virtual Communities Committee will work with Virtual Community Chairs to help them flesh out their visions and put them into practice. Virtual Community Chairs for the pilot program will be expected to organize at least several events (about one per month) for August-December of 2020 or for January-May of 2021, or perhaps both if there is momentum from the first trial period. Chairs will be expected to provide brief

status reports on their Virtual Community's development by the end of December and by the end of February so that planning can move forward for expanding the program.

Possible kinds of online events that Virtual Community Chairs might organize include:

- Research presentation panels (just like conference panels, with paper presentations, discussants, and time for audience comments). These might include panels that were scheduled for the annual conference but disrupted by the Coronavirus pandemic.
- Continuing/follow-up discussions from fruitful panels or roundtables at the online conference
- Roundtables
- Author-meets-critics panels
- Work-in-progress colloquia
- Professional development workshops (on writing or publishing or teaching or job searching or public engagement)
- Teaching discussion groups
- Reading groups
- Writing groups
- Informal social hours (perhaps curated ahead of time to place participants with affinities together and/or making use of "break-out rooms" to allow people to chat in rotating small groups)
- Mentoring or "meet an expert" opportunities
- Book/paper prize discussions (committees assigned to select a prize winner might hold meetings to solicit contributions from others beyond the committee)
- Live discussions of academically relevant public speeches or debates, films, or online pedagogical games (participants might watch or play "together" online, using comment threads for discussions as when people live-Tweet events)

Possible starting points for Virtual Communities might include:

- Current WPSA sections
- Previous or current WPSA pre-conference and mini-conference communities
- Current working groups
- People with a particular interest in pedagogy in our field
- People interested in timely thematic topics that cross different subfields (e.g. authoritarianism, or citizenship and migration, or climate change, or politics in a pandemic age)

**We're looking for a few good people!**

We're hoping to find Virtual Community Chairs who:

- Are willing to collaborate but also want to take some leadership responsibility in successfully setting up a new initiative
- Are interested in innovating and experimenting with new forms of scholarly interaction
- Are committed to building virtual communities that are inclusive, accessible, respectful, and fun
- Are reasonably confident they can learn the basic skills of scheduling and safely hosting meetings using a videoconference platform

**Rewards and challenges:**

We believe this is an exciting opportunity to do something new and potentially quite valuable for academics in our field. We seek volunteers who share our excitement and are ready to work with us to shape this vision moving forward. In particular, we hope that scholars who enjoy engaging in new modes of discussion and exchange will take advantage of this opportunity. There are a range of new in-conference and in-journal formats now available to expand beyond more traditional professional activities, such as emerging scholar symposia, electronic (and interactive) poster sessions, and short-form articles. We hope that the WPSA Virtual Communities can help nurture and extend discussions beyond the traditional format of an annual meeting.

Having said that, we want to acknowledge that WPSA is currently run by a small staff of an Executive Director and Associate Director, whose time is already dedicated to organizing and running the annual conference. Future plans for the Virtual Communities will likely depend on finding ways to expand

administrative support for the program. For the time being, as we start with a pilot program, the success of this initiative will depend on WPSA members willing to devote some service time to experiment with it. As with any new initiative, there will also likely be early technological and recruitment challenges in getting the program off the ground. We seek partners who are willing to meet the challenges for the sake of the benefits this initiative can provide all of us.

**If this sounds interesting, please tell us more!**

1.  What are the parameters of the community for which you envision organizing online events? (see "Possible starting points for Virtual Communities" above for examples)

2.  What kinds of events do you envision organizing for this community? (see "Possible kinds of online events" above for examples). In cases where it's not obvious, please elaborate on how such events might serve to encourage scholarly exchange or community building.

3.  How do you think you might make your virtual community as inclusive as possible? (We may be able to help.)

4.  Do you have access to a Zoom account through your institution? (Not required, just useful if you do.)

5.  If you have any other ideas to share about your vision, or thoughts about why you're interested in participating, or questions or concerns to raise, please feel free to say so.

Please send your responses to Cheryl Hall at chall@usf.edu by June 19.