

History Graduate Student Association Annual Report *2016-2017*

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During the past year, the History Graduate Student Association offered more programming than ever before. We continued to host our popular weekly happy hours, and also began organizing joint happy hours with other graduate programs to strengthen our connections with students in related disciplines. Information sessions were another returning feature of HGSA offerings. These events occur approximately biweekly in the fall and into the spring, bringing together panels of graduate students to speak to their more junior peers on topics such as making the transition to graduate school, exam prep, writing the prospectus, teaching, tools for note management and research organization, and other important topics. As in years past, the HSGA put on its annual book sale, an important source of revenue for our organization in addition to the funds generously provided by the department. We also continue to maintain the grad student lounge as a welcoming space for studying, covering the cost of tea and coffee and supplying printing for graduate students. The HGSA maintains an online presence as well, collecting valuable resources on our website including reading lists from past general exams and resources for graduate students who are parents.

In addition to this core programming, the HGSA vastly expanded its event offerings this year. Many of these events met needs raised by new uncertainties that arose both within and beyond the university. Due to widespread confusion about the new funding policies rolled out by GSAS in the fall, the HGSA organized an information session with Financial Aid Officer Emily Burns. In response to political upheavals more broadly, the HGSA was instrumental in organizing a new event series designed to bring historical perspective to discussions of contemporary issues. Notable events included a panel discussion on “Women in Academia” with professors Genevieve Clutario, Alison Frank Johnson, and Mary Lewis; “The Crisis of Brazilian Democracy” with professors Sidney Chalhoub and James Green; “Social Justice in Brazil” with congressman Jean Wyllys of Brazil; “Between the Archive and the Public Sphere” with professors Khaled Fahmy, Caroline Elkins, and Kirsten Weld; viewing parties for the presidential debates; and a talk with former President Dilma Rousseff of Brazil. High attendance (ranging from 30-60+) at all of these talks demonstrates the strong interest of graduate students in events of this kind.

Additionally, the HGSA launched an annual invited speaker event, first soliciting nominations from the graduate students in the department, and then opening the nominations list for a vote. The graduate students selected Professor Raymond Craib of Cornell University, who gave two talks, “Libertarian Noir: Anarcho-Capitalists on the High Seas” and “Subversive Santiago: Anarchists, Students and Workers in Early 20th-Century Chile,” discussions which also spoke to our goal this year of uniting novel historical research with contemporary problems.

The HGSA also established a new mentorship program that matched incoming students with current graduate students. Our hope is that this program will help facilitate the transfer of relevant information and serve as a source of social support.

The HGSA continued its mission of serving as an important liaison between graduate students and the Department to facilitate the spread of information about available resources and to advocate for issues that matter to graduate students. While there are many areas and topics that graduate students care about, we chose to focus our energies this year the issues of diversity in graduate admissions to our program and increasing graduate student representation in the civic life of the Department. In December 2016, the HGSA sent a letter, co-signed by many graduate students in the department, to the faculty requesting more continuing and augmented efforts to admit more diverse cohorts, and to reform the recruitment and application processes to make it easier for applicants who are also members of marginalized and underrepresented groups (people of color, low-income applicants, and so forth to apply). This letter included the particular recommendation that graduate students participate directly in reviewing applications on the admissions committee, as they do at History Departments of peer institutions like Stanford, Duke, and CUNY.

A series of conversations involving the Department Chair, the DGS, and the faculty ensued, culminating in a March faculty meeting in which two graduate student representatives made the case for the admissions committee representation. It became clear that there is significant resistance among the faculty to the idea that graduate students participate directly in the application review aspect of the admissions process. Many faculty also expressed the desire to separate the question of graduate student participation and of department policy regarding diversity and related matters, suggesting that on the latter front, policies that have positively affected admissions in the past two years could be retained and built on.

However, faculty were in general highly favorable to the idea of graduate student participation in the department more generally, at faculty meetings and/or on other panels. (Some liked the idea of graduate students being involved in shaping admissions procedure, if not in participating directly in reviewing applications.) On this basis, the DGS made a motion at the subsequent faculty meeting to have two elected graduate student representatives who could attend every faculty meeting to have direct access to those conversations, convey grad student opinions on these matters, and advocate for further grad representation on particular committees as seems possible and/or necessary. The motion passed, and HGSA reps will elect their two representatives (and alternates) to attend these meetings in the coming academic year.

Beyond pursuing greater graduate student representation in the admissions process and in department meetings more generally, the HGSA also conducted a review of the History Department Graduate Program website and application to propose reorganization and changes in wording in order to make the website more accessible to a wider variety of potential applicants from diverse backgrounds, including those from nontraditional college backgrounds or those who did not attend highly selective colleges and universities.

Elections for representatives for the new academic year, including the new representatives that will attend the departmental meetings, will take place over the summer. We thank the department both for its financial support, which enables us to have a regular schedule of events; and for its active engagement with graduate student concerns. We are grateful to department chair Daniel Smail, and Director of Graduate Studies Alison Johnson, as well as to the wonderful History Department staff who have all been so helpful on countless occasions.