

THE MEDIEVAL ACADEMY



OF AMERICA

# GRADUATE STUDENT COMMITTEE

# NEWSLETTER

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## **Chair's Message**

Greetings, fellow medievalist grad students! We at the GSC wish you a healthy rest of the semester.

Even though our major conferences this year have been canceled, the GSC will continue its mentoring program virtually. Mentors and mentees will be invited to connect electronically as they see fit with the hope of meeting in person at later conferences.

We are also continuing to provide our newsletters, which we hope will offer inspiration as you continue your studies. Our Twitter and Facebook pages will continue circulating CFPs and funding opportunities too. It is our wish that these resources will help you both in the present and in the future.

As always, we are looking for submissions from you for the GSC newsletter about your experiences as graduate medievalists. We would love to hear from you!

Sincerely,  
Jillian Bjerke  
Chair, Graduate Student Committee

## **GSC Mentoring Program: A Reflection**

By Hannah Weaver

I have participated in the GSC mentoring program several times as a mentee. Each time I have been able to participate, I have been paired with a scholar further in her career who shared wisdom about publishing, strategies for time management, and encouragement. Several years ago, I met with a scholar on the alt-ac track who now works in publishing. She offered a constructive critique of my CV and a picture of what alternatives to teaching might look like. In 2019, I graduated from my Ph.D. program and started my first tenure-track job. Just when I most needed advice about the transition from graduate school to the professoriate, the GSC paired me with a fellow comparatist at Kalamazoo—a dynamic young scholar whom I had been hoping to meet. She offered much-needed tangible advice about teaching, research, and work-life balance that I could apply right away. For example, thanks to her advice to clump teaching together on certain days of the week, I urgently revised my teaching schedule from the conference, and my new schedule really smoothed my first semester at my new institution. She not only made time to meet with me, but also generously introduced me to other colleagues at the conference, who in turn offered advice for the first year on faculty. And after the

conference, she sent resources such as course policies, assignment structures, and syllabi for me to peruse.

If you are on the fence about trying the GSC mentoring program, I really encourage you to give it a shot. It is a great chance to network with colleagues who have self-selected into a pool of helpful people. I look forward to giving back as a mentor in the future.

*Hannah Weaver is Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. She received her Ph.D. from Harvard University in 2019. She is currently working on a monograph about interpolation in vernacular histories.*

### **Series on Teaching and Mentoring**

For the following few issues, the GSC Newsletter will feature a series on teaching the Middle Ages and mentoring students, drawn from the varied perspectives of medievalists at different points in their academic careers and in different fields. We hope these stories will offer insights into how we can create more inclusive classrooms, thoughtfully foster student development, and effectively inspire interest in the fascinatingly complex and wonderfully surprising medieval world. Our contributor for our second installment, Alexa Sand, was to be one of the speakers on the GSC panel at the MAA Annual Meeting. We are pleased to present some of her ideas here.

### **Teaching Mentorship through Group Work: Applying STEM Practices in the Humanities Classroom**

By Alexa Sand

In my capacity as a teacher, I am always looking for ways to get students excited about the course material and about medieval art history more broadly. Some students come to the experience already equipped with a delight in and hunger for learning new things, but others are simply checking off a box on their degree requirements. The latter group are obviously much harder to engage, and I have tried so many things. Some are moderately successful. For example, in a course I teach on Islamic visual cultures before 1250, we study a lot of ceramics, glass, and metal wares that were made for serving food and drink. So, at the end of the unit on the “arts of fire,” I have students team up to research and produce a food or drink that could have been served in one of these dishes, and if I’m lucky enough to have some ceramics BFA students in the class, I have them create or provide appropriate vessels (otherwise I just bring some of my own). This is always a big hit—food, with its social-bonding function and its satisfaction of a biological imperative, makes the students feel good. However, when I do

assessments (such as quizzes or reflections), I do not always see that they have made a connection between the assignment and the preparation and eating of the food.

I give this example because it involves the “group work” element that so many students dread, but that is essential in preparing them for the collaborative skills that most employers demand. Engaged, talented students seem to hate it even more than the ride-alongs, largely because those passive group members shift the burden so heavily to their more conscientious peers. I have struggled to come up with a way to make group work, with its obvious benefits, more appealing. And the answer lies in the practices of our colleagues in the STEM disciplines. For decades, STEM researchers have involved undergraduates at every level in their lab, field, and clinical research. A first-semester college student can already find work as a research assistant. At first they are performing menial tasks, but they are also attending weekly group meetings, listening to more senior undergraduates, graduate students, and post-docs make their contributions, and building a network of relationships that will often endure throughout their college years and beyond. This is the chain of mentoring. Gradually, the novice becomes more experienced and can mentor new novices, while still receiving mentorship as they progress.

How can we translate this model of sequential mentorship and mentoring to the humanities classroom and to the group-work setting? Pretty early on in any academic term, you start to get a sense of who your strongest students are. So, recruit them: when you form groups, make one of these students the node of each group, and explicitly assign them a mentorship role. Define what the expectations are for the group mentor—do this in the context of a class discussion, and let the students refine the definition of both group mentor and group member expectations. Build in frequent opportunities for self and peer assessment, so that nobody has the option of just sitting to one side.

While the natural leaders benefit from this first iteration of group work by having an opportunity to exercise their strengths and mentor others, the less engaged and less confident students also get a chance to be mentored by a peer. The efficacy of mentoring by peers has been the subject of numerous studies, and across the board, it seems to provide two chief benefits to both mentors and those being mentored: it increases the sense of belonging and integration into the learning community and it reduces stress and anxiety.

For medieval studies in particular, the fact that the initial group of mentor-students likely do not have all the advanced language skills, technical competencies, and disciplinary knowledge of a trained professional sets an important precedent: even a relative beginner who is passionate about the subject, engaged in critical questions, and willing to share that excitement with others, can be an important contributor to the field. This allows more tepid students to see a space for themselves. They may not have Latin, Greek, or Arabic, but they can become the

group or classroom resident expert on trebuchets, or astrolabes, or the spread of the Black Death.

Once the strongest students have had an opportunity to serve as mentors, it is time to hand the baton over to a new cohort, drawn from the group of students who were group members in the previous cycle. The iterative nature of the group work, and the opportunity for each student in the class to step into a mentoring role, means that everyone develops skills and comfort both with mentoring and with being mentored. Weirdly, although both of these skills are critical to success in academic research, we do not typically get much explicit training in them.

I direct student research programs at my university, and one thing we regularly offer to participants—faculty, grads and undergrad students—are workshops on how to mentor and be mentored. Unsurprisingly, the one thing that constantly emerges as central is communication. Fundamental to mentoring relationships are learning to communicate expectations and boundaries on both ends, to ask for help, to ask if someone needs help, and to listen to others. These skills would also help us, in medieval studies, be better colleagues, more supportive of a diversity of views and experiences, and broader in our thinking. Building mentoring into a course syllabus not only helps the students, but it also helps you become a better teacher, a better researcher, and a more connected human being.

*Alexa Sand, Professor of Art History and Associate Vice President for Research, Utah State University, is a specialist in later medieval book illumination in France and francophone Europe. She is the chair of the Division of Arts and Humanities for the Council on Undergraduate Research.*

### **An Invitation from the Editor**

In response to the diverse needs and interests of graduate students in Medieval Studies, the GSC plans to continue expanding the variety of content offered in the newsletter. We hope to feature more narratives spotlighting the diverse experiences in which graduate students participate in their higher-ed journeys (conferences, events, workshops, travels, organizations, etc...) and when beginning their forays into the job market, whether on traditional routes, in alternative academic positions, or compatible careers.

If you have an interest in sharing your experiences and ideas as a graduate student or early career scholar, please send queries and contributions to GSC Newsletter editor Natalie Whitaker ([natalie.whitaker@slu.edu](mailto:natalie.whitaker@slu.edu)).

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