

Plenary Meeting Minutes

November 12, 2019, 6:30 PM | Philosophy Hall 301 | <https://council.gsas.columbia.edu/>



ARTS & SCIENCES GRADUATE COUNCIL

Upcoming Plenary Meetings
December 10, 6:30 pm
January 28, 6:30 pm
February 25, 6:30 pm
March 31, 6:30 pm
April 28, 6:30 pm

Guest Presentation

1. Presentation: Mark Hawkins & Jane Hojan-Clark
Mark Hawkins, VP Financial Operations & Compliance attended along with Jane M. Hojan-Clark (jh3574@columbia.edu), Associate VP for SFS. The Student Financial Services (SFS) is responsible for compliance, financial aid, accounting, and business management.
 1. Mark clarified that salary payments, payroll, are available on my.columbia.edu. On the website, students have access to W-2 forms and can find more information regarding the payroll.
 2. Jane highlighted in her presentation that SFS is responsible for financial aid purposes, but is also responsible for operational support and upfront services. The office enhanced quicker access to balance and account history, expanded payment plan options, expanded partnerships for veterans (Columbia was recognized as a military-friendly school by [GI Jobs Magazine](#), University Life, Columbia College, and created a new platform for Columbia suggested private lenders. The platform (ELM Select) includes a more comprehensive, user-friendly private loan and comparison tool. The office is also implementing a financial wellness / literacy program, redesigning the website to improve user-ability (scheduled for the winter and spring), and is developing a new Student Information System (SIS).
2. Question & Answer Period
 - a. Q: PhD students receive stipends. In August, there was an email stating that it would arrive soon, but arrived much later, which caused issues with rent payment. What is SFS doing to improve this issue?
A: Many systems and data exchanging was likely at cause. To ensure it won't happen again, there are multiple sources monitoring the situations. School offices will work with Jane's office to mediate.
 - b. Q: The contact email was directed to a cashier, who was not helpful as they were not properly equipped to answer the questions. Is there another email / number?
A: The cashier's email has been replaced with another line. In the past, the Cashier's office hasn't been responsible for higher-level problem resolution, which may have caused an issue. Additional training is also taking place.
 - c. Q: For tax season in spring, it is difficult to get both disbursements of stipends, as you don't get a W-2 for stipends, which comes from personal finances. Is it possible to facilitate this?
A: SFS will look into the possibility of this
 - d. Q: Are there tax resources for students?
A: SFS will put together an email. Unfortunately, this is a tricky situation, as the law prevents giving tax advice. Furthermore, the IRS does not give tax advice. David Austell (ISSO Director) will be coming to the next plenary on December 10 for international issues as well.
 - e. Q: What does the Office of Mitigating Risk and Managing Finance assets entail? Who is managing it?
A: financial assets are the endowments and physical assets, such as the campus, that is overseen by the Board of Trustees. There is an investment banking company managing the real estate and the physical assets. All financial processes carry some risk, ie. international operations, traveling

risks, employees from other offices around the world, the university's research portfolio, etc. The investment policy and endowments are managed by the Board of Trustees, but the facilities operation group manages the physical assets.

- f. Q: When do the stipends get distributed? After registration?
A: See the Office Financial Aid at GSAS for the adjustments; they wait to make sure the money is used properly. Additionally, he notes that the method of payment may affect the payment duration.
 - g. Mike Ford (ASGC VP External Affairs, asgc.vpexternalaffairs@columbia.edu) comments that Brown University gives part of the first stipend earlier, which is certainly a possibility.
 - h. An attendee commented that students want more financial aid!
3. Jane Hojan-Clark followed up to ASGC on November 26, 2019 with the following information (cited verbatim):

Tax Withholding: Domestic students expressed a desire to be able to opt in to withholding on their non-payroll stipend. Unfortunately, the IRS does not provide a way to withhold in this situation. Non-qualified scholarships are not required to be reported by the University and there's no commensurate tax form to reflect withholding as there is for wages and independent contractors. Students could make estimated payments directly to the IRS during the year if they so desired. This process is fairly straightforward and we do plan to provide more information via a build-out of our website(s) regarding how students may do this.

Tax filings: Some students shared that the tax experience can be challenging and that there are pieces of information in multiple locations. It is true that tax information can be found in multiple sites, e.g., Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (<https://gsas.columbia.edu/student-guide/financing-your-education/stipend-and-salary-payments>); Student Financial Services (<https://sfs.columbia.edu/tax-info>); and International Students and Scholars Office (<https://isso.columbia.edu/content/taxes>). To provide more comprehensive information and easy access, we plan to create a page that links to all existing information and evaluate the need for additional information and resources.

Timing of stipend disbursements: Some expressed a desire for earlier disbursement of a small amount for international students as they first come to the U.S., citing Brown as an example. Speaking with Brown, it is our understanding that their students receive their first monthly stipend disbursement at the end of September, after classes have begun. Beginning last fall, their Graduate School disburses a small transitional stipend in early-to mid-September to help offset moving and relocation costs. Newly matriculated students are also eligible to take a short-term interest-free loan of a maximum of \$500 with a 60-day repayment period but Brown indicates this option is infrequently used. At Columbia, newly arrived Arts and Sciences doctoral students have their checks waiting for pick-up in the Payments and Deposits Office and may retrieve them as soon as they register. We encourage students to create bank accounts in advance or at the time of arrival (and have an on-campus bank that will do so) so that the check can be deposited immediately (see <https://isso.columbia.edu/content/your-first-week-students>). GSAS will continue to explore ways to expedite payment to students once they have registered.

I [Jane] had shared at the plenary meeting that a new initiative related to financial wellness was going to be launched soon. We're pleased to share that the new, free to use web-based financial literacy platform has been rolled out by Student Financial Services and University Life to provide all Columbia students with financial education and wellness resources, scholarship information, and student loan management resources in a tool that students can use now and after they graduate, for as long as

they want it. Please visit Columbia.igrad.com today and use your Columbia University email to set up a free to use account with iGrad. After answering a few voluntary questions about financial interests or habits, iGrad will recommend resources that are personalized to you.

Announcements

- Open Officer Positions: The The Media Chair position on the ASGC Executive Board will up for election at the December plenary.
- David Austell (ISSO) will be visiting the December Plenary, department representatives were invited to prepare questions.
- Following the December Plenary, there will be a department representative appreciation party at Arts & Crafts.

Advocacy Updates (Alex Cuadrado, ASGC President, asgc.president@columbia.edu)

- Clarification regarding Dissertation Progress Meetings: these are a tool implemented by GSAS to help students meet with faculty, not a way for departments to intimidate students. Compliance falls on faculty, not students.
- There is a form through which students can let Columbia Residential know about the double payments. In turn, Columbia Residential will reduce that amount from the student's next rent check. The form is included in the weekly ASGC newsletters.
- Ethernet in Columbia Residential buildings is currently live. However, the email notification will not be sent until the end of the semester. Tenants still need to purchase a router and set it up to have wireless connection.

Committee Updates

1. Tea Crnkovic (ASGC Finance Chair, asgc.finance@columbia.edu) encouraged department representatives to advertise travel grants in their departments and reminded the plenary that ASGC Travel Grants are distinct from GSAS Travel Grants (one can apply to both). 50% of the budget for the year has been used.
2. Pierre Devlaminck (ASGC Events Co-Chair, asgc.events_cochair1@columbia.edu) called for volunteers for a Wine & Cheese event sponsored by ASGC on 11/15.
3. The MA Affairs Chair notified the floor that the Masters Committee is seeking new members. Students that are interested should contact Salihah Evans (asgc.mastersaffairs@columbia.edu).

External Representative Updates

4. Health: Flu shots are available for the students at different locations. For more information, students may refer to the website. <https://health.columbia.edu/flu>
Columbia Health is a Registered Opioid Overdose Prevention Program, recognized by New York City and the State Departments of Health. As part of this work, Columbia Health offers Naloxone training to members of the Columbia community. To request training, students may submit the form online: <https://health.columbia.edu/content/naloxone-training-request-form>
5. Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC)/Union
The representative announces the upcoming bargaining dates, open to any of the GSAS students: November 13; November 24; November 29; December 13
For more information, specific dates, and times, contact Amelia Spooner (ajs2144@columbia.edu). Amelia also noted that Columbia will continue to bargain. There is also an extension to the comment writing deadline to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The framework agreement is also being negotiated. The history department will be holding a comment writing session in their department lounge on Friday, November 22, from 6 PM - 9 PM called "Soups, Sips, and Solidarity".

6. IGB: The Interschool Governing Board held their first meeting on October 21. They are currently seeking more members, and the next meeting is tentatively on November 18. For more information, students may contact Mike Ford (asgc.vpexternalaffairs@columbia.edu) or Frank Gutierrez (fg2462@columbia.edu).
7. Senators' Updates
 - a. Weitao Zhu (PhD Mathematics, wz2453@columbia.edu) has officially been introduced as the new Natural Sciences Senator. Weitao's goals are to improve interschool and interdepartmental relations.
 - b. The Student Affairs Committee announced the recognition of Indigenous Peoples Day, advancement of voting rights, and that the Pharmacology department has changed its name.

New Business: Open Forum

- There was a request for more support for MA students writing their theses. The GSAS Writing Studio was initially for PhD students working on their dissertations, but ASGC will discuss the issue during the meeting with the Deans. However, there is also a University Writing Center, located in 301 Philosophy across the Graduate Student Lounge, open to all students and faculty.
- It was brought ASGC's attention that people with degrees from abroad may be required to check their transcripts, ie. need to send sealed copies, but some universities are given the sealed copies. Unfortunately, Columbia only accepts sealed copies directly from the schools. For further information or thoughts, contact Alex Cuadrado (asgc.president@columbia.edu).
- There was interest on the status on Uris Hall. However, there are no updates yet.
- A student expressed their interest in the Food Pantry. For more information, see <https://thefoodpantry.studentgroups.columbia.edu>

Meeting Adjourned