ASGC Plenary Meeting Minutes
December 21, 2021, 6:30 PM
Zoom Link | password: 827954 | https://council.gsas.columbia.edu/

ARTS & SCIENCES
GRADUATE COUNCIL

Dates of Upcoming ASGC Plenary Meetings (third Tuesday of each month, 6:30 pm):
January 18, February 15, March 15, April 19

1. Welcome (President)
2. Guest
   a. David Austell, Director of ISSO, assisted by Samantha Lu, Assistant Director of ISSO
   b. The presentation began with an excerpt from “To Sail Beyond the Sunset” by Alfred Lord Tennyson. The next slide discussed the values and benefits of the ISSO, like increasing understanding and mutual cooperation between the U.S. and the world. The next slide discussed international education as a market commodity. While the U.S. has the largest percentage of that commodity, its percentage is going down each year as other countries increase their international education programs. Columbia has the 4th largest international faculty and research scholar community in the U.S. with 17,000 international students. The SEVIS system is the federal system all higher ed. institutions use to communicate information to the federal government, mostly demographics information. The ISSO is considered the in-between place in this sense and works for the students, not the federal government. With COVID-19, Columbia experienced a 17% drop last year, but this year, we have recovered to back above 2019 numbers. Services provided by the ISSO include advisory staff (virtual), immigration and document services, orientation, and others. The famous Columbia statue, Alma Mater, has “the owl of wisdom” protected within her robes, much like the university is meant to serve as a safe place for students to come and share ideas.
   c. During COVID-19, ISSO has developed many alternative ways for communications with international students and potential international students. For example, to increase the timing of email responses, 15 different advisers have access and can respond to the main email handler. There is also a new system where students can schedule advising appointments via phone calls or online platforms. Students can also go into the website to request documents. The ISSO is very excited about a call center project being launched within the office, where students can call and talk to a staff member rather than getting the runarounds. During COVID-19, the DHS allowed electronic I-20 forms with electronic signatures, etc., which is helping to streamline efforts and allow for more timely processing. Additionally, the DHS is allowing electronic I-765 documents for students applying for OPT. The ISSO has also been in close communication with the Social Security administration working to get SSNs for students who need them. Additionally since the pandemic, the ISSO is doing a test of having advisers in-person in
the schools (began with SEAS, SPS, and GSAS advisers) to see whether students prefer having the in-person option. During the fall semester, not many students used the in-person option, but the experiment will continue in the coming months so the ISSO can collect additional data on what students want.

d. David wanted to know whether the ISSO is doing what students need for quick, excellent service at all times or if there are other things they need to be doing. The ISSO is remaining open during the holidays with advising staff from senior leadership still available.

e. Feedback and Q&A:

i. Student reps commented that they appreciated the broad perspective in David’s presentation, including the poem.

ii. Question about whether the DS-2019 (J1 status folks) will become electronic
   1. Answer: There is no indication at this point that that form will go electronic. It’s frustrating, but so far there is no change and no guidance from the state.

iii. Question about the ISSO’s connection to I-House
   1. The ISSO office has been located in International House North for many years, but during COVID-19 much of the office moved online. David and some other staff members are back in the office. There is a symbiotic relationship due to the history

iv. Question about the ISSO’s contingency plans to help support international students in the event that the current or future surges interrupt in-person classes. Will students be prevented from coming back to states if they’ve gone home for the holidays, and what preparations have been made?
   1. Even though ISSO is currently in return-to-campus mode, they have implemented a hybrid system with both in-person and online resources for students. They have been working on contingency plans and are ready now to flip the switch if needed. They can get documents for students very quickly. For example, the Social Security Administration still requires hard copies, so the ISSO is FedExing it at the office’s expense, so documents should be received next day or PDQ. Additionally, staff is available anytime by email. Additionally, David shared his cell number (xxxxxxx) with students at the Plenary Meeting. He is committed to being at students’ disposal.

v. Question asking for clarification on whether there are any government employees in the ISSO office. There are rumors that ICE reps are somehow attached to ISSO (but this is not the case).
   1. We don’t have any ICE representation in the ISSO. Perhaps those rumors might have stemmed from confusion about the SEVIS info, which shares some demographic data or other form information. David asked those in attendance at the meeting to please hear him loud and clear that the ISSO has no federal employees on our staff - no ICE, no FBI, no other federal offices. FERPA rules apply to the ISSO so that information can’t be shared with these agencies without student permission, so staff does not give out that information. There is no connection that is untoward
with USCIS or other agencies. The ISSO is able to print I-20 documents because they have been given permission for that, but there is no intelligence sharing.

vi. Question about the status of international students who go to their home country during this break if Columbia goes online, particularly will they be able to come back in January, etc.
   1. The safest and most conservative thing to do right now is not to travel. However, if travel is necessary, it’s hard to know what is going to happen if Omicron seriously goes south. The experience in fall 2020 was harsh because the state department closed down and a lot of people quit during the pandemic. We really don’t know yet what is going to happen, other than flights are becoming more difficult and the list of countries that are barred from travel into the U.S. is growing. Unfortunately, we are still at a state of unknown. Travel is still up in the air, but as far as documentation, etc., that is remaining the same and electronic I-20s can serve as travel documents, which the ISSO can get to students quickly.

3. Sign-in Instructions (Mariah Noble, Communications Chair: asgc.communications@columbia.edu)

4. Updates
   a. President (Ashley Wells: asgc.president@columbia.edu)
      i. Things we have accomplished recently
         1. Updated Position on Unionization
            a. On the website
         2. Signed off on Letter in Support of Renaming Building
         3. Crafted SWC-UAW Strike Statement
            a. Published in the newsletter

4. Exec Board follow up meeting with Columbia Residential
   a. Renewal process for 5th-8th year PhD students: https://residential.columbia.edu/agreements-renewals
      i. This site will include updates
   b. Working to establish recurring meetings with Columbia Residential
   c. The website does not yet address the 8th year, but the office has said that will be coming out in January.
   d. Question from Anna Schirrer (aks2217@columbia.edu) re: terms of renewal request?
      i. Ashley Wells (President; asgc.president@columbia.edu) will send Columbia Residential an email about the specifics for that and keep Anna in the loop.

ii. January plenary meeting still to be in person as long as it’s possible under Columbia food/gathering policies
    1. The consensus is that plenary meetings will begin to be in-person if possible. The Executive Board will keep everyone in the loop on that.
    2. Question: Could you discuss the possibility of a hybrid for people who don’t want to attend in person?
       a. The executive board hasn’t discussed that yet, but we can discuss that going forward.
3. Students recently received emailed guidelines for a revised policy, so we will review that to make sure we’re compliant for the next meetings.

b. VP, Administration (Laura DiNardo: asgc.vpadministration@columbia.edu)

c. VP, External Affairs (Bhargav Gopal: asgc.vpexternalaffairs@columbia.edu)
   i. Senate Elections
      1. Working with Suzy to meet with Geraldine at the earliest available time; ideally this will happen by the end of January.
   ii. Working to share positions with other student councils and compare -

d. Finance (Tea Crnkovic: asgc.finance@columbia.edu)
   i. Travel Grants
      1. Update: These have been processed. Out of 17 applicants, 13 were eligible, and the details for this information is available on the website at [this link](#). Those who were denied had either already received the grant or weren’t part of GSAS.
         a. There are mainly restrictions on international conferences right now, so make sure to get approval prior to attending if you’re counting on funding.
      2. Thank you to the committee for helping to process these applications.
   ii. Student Initiative Grants
      1. Applications are due in February, and there is plenty of money, so please promote this option.
      2. Will also be lenient regarding max funds available to each student group/department, so if they have already spent out their max $1,000 this semester, they can still apply for a new grant next semester with a fresh max of $1,000

e. Quality of Life (Megan Reddy: asgc.qualityoflife@columbia.edu)
   i. QoL survey is in the planning stage

f. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (Arden Lee: ga2448@columbia.edu)
   i. Diversity Initiative Grants
      1. We received two diversity grant applications, but Arden has emailed the applicants back requesting more information.
      2. Again there is plenty of money available, and applications are accepted on a rolling basis, so please encourage groups to apply so we can spend these available funds.

g. Events (Thu Pham and P.J. Robinson, events.asgc@columbia.edu)
   i. Upcoming Events
      1. December events have gone well, but given the current guidelines, no events have yet been planned for next semester.

5. External Representative Updates (VP, External Affairs, Bhargav Gopal, asgc.vpexternalaffairs@columbia.edu):
   a. Health (Pragya Gupta, pg2705@columbia.edu)
      i. No updates
   b. Libraries (Rahim Hashim, rh2898@columbia.edu)
      i. No updates
c. ISSO (Anzhen Tang, at3399@columbia.edu)
   i. No update after the presentation

d. Student Workers of Columbia (UAW)/Union (Alex Jensen, caj2167@columbia.edu)
   i. Update: The bargaining committee is bringing a package proposal to bargaining tomorrow and is cautiously hopeful that they will be able to end the strike in the next week, but we will see. At a general body meeting just before this, the general body voted on the proposal, so if Columbia accepts this proposal package, it will be over, but it is possible Columbia could respond with a counter offer. The bylaws require a two-week discussion period for any proposal.

e. IGB (Colton Klein, colton.klein@columbia.edu)
   i. Shared updates from a December 4 meeting. Expressed appreciation to everyone who voted to rename the building. The IGB also considered and approved a campuswide group called the Columbia Student Disability Network (CSDN).

f. PhDC (Karen Perez, kip2105@columbia.edu)
   i. We still have two available slots on the PhDC for Ph.D. department reps from GSAS

6. Senators’ Updates
   a. N/A

7. New Business (Open Forum)
   a. N/A

8. Adjournment (President Ashley Wells, asgc.president@columbia.edu)

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**ASGC plenary meetings are conducted in the style of Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised (10th Edition)**

- Obtain the floor (the right to speak) by being the first to raise your department placard when the person speaking has finished. You must be recognized by the Chair before speaking.
- No member can speak twice to the same issue until everyone else wishing to speak has spoken to it once.
- The agenda and all committee reports are merely recommendations. When presented to the assembly and the question is stated, debate begins and changes can occur.