

2019-2020 AAR Regional Development Grant Proposal:
Rethinking Religious Studies Graduate Education

Contact:

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Project Description:

This 2020 Pre-Conference Workshop for the Midwest American Academy of Religion will take place March 26 and 27, immediately preceding the MAAR conference, at the Horizon Convention Center in Muncie, Indiana. The purpose of this workshop is to bring together scholars of religion at different career stages (e.g., graduate students, contingent and adjunct faculty, and tenured faculty) to discuss how graduate students can effectively understand and prepare for both the academic job market and non-academic (“alt-ac”) career paths. We also aim to discuss how departments and advisors can support graduate students and tailor their programs and mentoring toward the scarcity of tenure-track jobs. How can religious studies departments restructure their graduate programs? Our objective is not to bemoan the academic job market or simply share descriptive stories about it; rather, we aim to formulate practical solutions to implement in religious studies graduate programs.

We have received strong and positive support for this initiative from scholars across the Midwest region. The MAAR currently lacks programming and resources for graduate students that address professionalization and job market preparation. This workshop seeks to fill that lacuna and serve as a “test-run” for future graduate student centered events with possible collaboration with the Wabash Center in the coming years. We anticipate that this initiative will encourage and increase graduate student attendance at the conference as well as provide graduate students with resources, networking, and critical conversation that they do not receive from their home institutions. It will lay the groundwork for future collaboration and continued conversations about graduate student concerns as well as help create a sense a community among graduate students in the Midwest region. We envision the workshop being adapted by other regional groups that seek to implement programming geared toward graduate students and professionalization.

While the primary goal of this workshop is graduate student professionalization and preparation for both academic and non-academic careers, we will encourage discussion that addresses the following related topics. By doing so, we will foster continued dialogue and interest for future workshop themes.

1. Contingency and the Decline of Tenure:

According to the American Association of University Professors, over 70 percent of all higher-ed instructional faculty in the United States hold non-tenured positions.¹ Despite the well-documented decline of tenure-track positions, graduate programs continue to accept large cohorts of graduate students and provide little, if any, information about career prospects outside of the academy. How can religious studies graduate programs modify their structure to address the decline of tenured

¹ American Association of University Professors, “Background Facts on Contingent Faculty Positions,” Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://www.aaup.org/issues/contingency/background-facts>.

academic jobs? What could advisors do to support students who want to seek alternative career paths? How can graduate students broach conversations with their advisors about preparing for non-academic careers?

2. *Harassment and Mental-Health Concerns in Academia:*

The U.S. academy has the second highest rate of sexual harassment of all careers. 58 percent of women in academia have been sexually harassed.² More broadly, graduate students are six times more likely to develop depression and anxiety compared to the general population.³ Further, sexual harassment disproportionately affects persons of color, women, gay and lesbian persons, and trans* and non-binary persons. How can restructuring religious studies graduate programs could help combat sexual harassment and mental health concerns? What specific aspects of graduate education need restructured to create safer, healthier, and non-abusive environments?

3. *Race, Immigration, and Islamophobia:*

How do U.S. immigration laws and institutional Islamophobia affect scholars' prospects and careers?⁴ How can graduate programs address these problems? Religious studies is a historically white and male field, and it continues to be so despite influences from post-colonial studies, critical race studies, and queer and feminist theory.⁵ What can religious studies departments do to ensure that scholars of color are represented and supported in religious studies? In what ways are departments complicit in the dominance of whiteness and maleness in religious studies? How can this change?

Format:

We envision this workshop as more of a series of conversations rather than formal presentations or lectures. While we will have four "presentation" slots (with two presenters in each slot), we encourage heavy participation from the audience, particularly graduate student attendees.

Prior to the conference, the four faculty presenters will submit a short piece (no longer than 1500 words) where they identify either an issue of concern with graduate education or the job market, a realistic way that graduate education could change, or any other relevant topic of their choice (they will be especially encouraged to choose a topic from the above list). Each graduate student will then be paired with a faculty presenter and serve as moderators and respondents. Graduate students will have a chance to read the faculty's responses in advance and prepare remarks (if desired). The extent to which graduate students respond or comment on faculty's short piece is entirely up to them. The

² "Sexual Harassment at Universities Must Stop, Report Says," NBC News, Accessed May 10, 2019.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/sexual-harassment-universities-must-stop-report-says-n882396>.

³ "New Research on Graduate Student Mental Well-Being Says Departments Have Important Roles to Play in Fostering Healthy Environments," Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/12/06/new-research-graduate-student-mental-well-being-says-departments-have-important>.

⁴ "A Year Later the Trump Administration's Travel Restrictions Are Having an Impact," Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/02/01/year-later-trump-administrations-travel-restrictions-opposed-many-higher-ed-are>.

⁵ Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha M, "Confounded Identities: A Meditation on Race, Feminism, and Religious Studies in Times of White Supremacy," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86, no. 2: 307–40.

purpose of this format is to ensure that the onus is on faculty to provide guidance and support for graduate student attendees.

Budget:

Grant fund allocation:

- 1) Offset meeting room expenses on the morning of March 27th (\$500)
- 2) Workshop participant dinner on the night of March 26th (\$600)
- 3) Workshop coffee and lunch for registered participants (presenters and attendees) on March 27nd: \$500
- 4) Travel stipend/reimbursement of up to one-night hotel expenses for long-distance participants: \$2,400

Total requested funds: \$4000

Timeline:

- ✚ May – August 2019: Confirm four graduate student and four faculty participants. Faculty participants are asked to submit a short piece (no longer than 1500 words) where they identify either an issue of concern with graduate education or the job market, a realistic way that graduate education could change, or any other relevant topic of their choice.
- ✚ December 2019: Faculty participants' short essays due
- ✚ January 2020: Faculty participants will be matched with graduate students. Graduate students, in addition to serving as moderators, will be encouraged to prepare to a short response to faculty.
- ✚ February 2020: Participants will be asked to select additional articles, resources, etc. that will be made available to all workshop attendees via Dropbox prior to the MAAR conference.
- ✚ March 2020: The workshop will consist of presentations with heavy discussion and participation from the audience.