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Department News from 2017-18

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REL Adds New Grad Degree

If you've been following developments in the Department over the past few years then you know that we not only celebrated our 50th anniversary last year but that the Alabama Commission on Higher Education and the UA Board of Trustees also approved our new M.A. degree. So, this past Fall semester we welcomed our first group of graduate students (pictured below, with Prof. Loewen, at the start of the Fall semester)—**Sarah Griswold** (working with Prof. **Mike Altman**), **Emma Gibson**



(with Prof. **Nathan Loewen**), and **Sierra Lawson** (with Prof. **Russell McCutcheon**)—and then, in January, they were joined by **Matt McCullough** (with Prof. **Theodore Trost**). So we're excited to have them around the Department—creatively sharing one of those tiny offices on the third floor and assisting with 100-level undergraduate courses while bringing their enthusiasm and new curiosities into the Department. Prof. **Merinda Simmons**, our Graduate Director, organizes our monthly journal group, meets each month with the students in their graduate colloquium (to discuss a variety of professional issues and various post-M.A. futures they might be entertaining), and helps them to successfully steer their way through all of the byzantine but manageable bureaucracy.

Student Association Updates

But adding a new grad degree doesn't mean any less time spent with our undergraduate students; in fact, we'd like to think that the care we've always given to our B.A. students—both in the classroom and as part of the many events that we sponsor—is among the things that sets REL apart. So from a career workshop, run by returning grad, **Khara Cole** (B.A. 2013), to monthly coffee breaks (yes, with **donuts**), movie nights, monthly dinners around town, and an event to end the Fall semester at Prof. **Vaia Touna**'s place (pictured top right), it was another great year for the Religious Studies Student Association. While they may not have bowled lately, they kept

up the tradition of giving out buttons to promote REL and were able to obtain funding from the Student Gov't, for the second year in a row, to send representatives to a regional academic conference, which was in Atlanta in early March. Thanks for



driving the UA van, Prof. **Loewen**. As well, thanks to Prof. **Ikeuchi** for taking the lead as the RSSA advisor. Those who have been part of RSSA over the years surely know how important it is to

help students develop a sense of campus as a place they can call home (or at least get a free donut).

Faculty Highlights

It's also been a good year for faculty, both in the classroom (with a variety of new courses approved and taught) and outside



of it. They were active at national and international conferences, presenting their research, and successful at getting it into print. Among the more notable accomplishments were Profs. **Altman** and **Touna** both publishing their first books (the former, with Oxford University Press, and the latter with Brill of the Netherlands). In fact, REL

had its first faculty book reading in the Fall, at Ernest & Hadley, our local independent bookstore. And with Prof. **Loewen**'s book due out by summer (from Lexington-Rowman Littlefield) we're already looking forward to the second annual! But apart from these firsts, everyone is keeping busy, with Prof. **Ramey** continuing to co-edit one of our field's premiere international scholarly journals, Prof. **Simmons** editing a book series and working on her second book, Prof. **Bagger** finishing an edited book, Prof. **Trost** continuing his work on religion and popular culture, and as for Profs. **Jacobs** and **McCutcheon**? Well, you know them—they've got a variety of pots all bubbling at different rates and something's bound to boil over or get published any day now.

Day and Aronov Lectures

This year marked the 5th annual Day Lecture (held in February) and the 16th annual Aronov Lecture (in April)—delivered by **Elijah Siegler** (of Charleston College) and **Linell Cady** (of Arizona State), respectively. It's been wonderful to host so many interesting speakers over the years—actually, about 40 others have spoken here, over the past 18 years, in another, more informal lecture series. And many of these, from the past several years, are featured on the Department's Vimeo site (vimeo.com/uareligiousstudies), where you'll find quite a bit



more content as well, such as visits with our faculty and students. You may even meet a squirrel or two, who share our second floor Manly balcony. Thanks to our main office student workers, to **Caity Bell** and **Ellie Cochran**, for their movie-making talents. And a special thanks to all of the **donors** who have helped us out over the years: from lecture series and an endowed faculty position to scholarships and student support funds that allow us to help our students out, just a little—or sometimes, just enough. Your gifts to the Department are always greatly appreciated.

Speaking of Technology...

One focus of the new M.A. degree is what we're calling the public humanities—using a variety of digital tools not only to analyze data but also to convey our findings to wide audiences. It's long been an emphasis of the Department, so we've made it a focus of the new degree. From our new website (yes, we miss the old one but progress and all that...) you can visit the various blogs hosted by the Department as well as our **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **Instagram** and **Vimeo** accounts, not to mention our **podcast**—we have two new episodes coming out in the Spring semester.



Be sure to check out our blog!

religion.ua.edu/blog

Honors Research Symposium

Near the end of March we hosted our 5th annual honors research symposium, featuring the work of our undergrads, all supervised by REL faculty member. This year, like the first, we held it at the University Club, just off campus, which afforded us some nice snacks and lunch, both of which complemented the new ideas and vigorous debate. Some of the students have traditionally gone on also to present at the competitive campus-wide research competition (at which our students have a pretty good track record, if we do say so ourselves).



How Time Flies



And did we mention that **Betty** is still the rock upon which day-to-day life in our Department is built? (Ask her how's she's put up with us as long as she has.)

And Prof. **McCutcheon**, who came to Manly Hall back in 2001, was recognized by the University and the Board of Trustees with the rank of **University Research Professor**.

And Let's Not Forget...

Finally, we're very pleased to report that graduating senior **Anastasiya Titarenko** is being awarded the Dean's Award of Merit at the College of Arts & Sciences 2018 Honors Day Convocation, and we don't want to forget to mention that **Caity Bell**, also graduating, was awarded the National Alumni Association's Outstanding Senior Award. Thinking ahead toward the Fall, Caity, along with **Keeley McMurray**, also a graduating senior, will be joining our second class of M.A. students, along with several others. With the new M.A. degree in mind, we're anticipating **Sarah Griswold** as being our first graduate in May 2018. She had been awarded a highly competitive Fellowship by the University of Alabama for 2017-18—an award also given to **Savannah Finver** for 2018-19 (when she will join us to begin her M.A.). Keeley was awarded the competitive National Alumni Association Fellowship—so our new graduate program is off to a great start. And one more thing: Prof. **Richard Newton** will be joining us in Manly Hall beginning in the Fall 2018 semester—welcome aboard!