The Historical Studies Society: “A Society to Watch”

The Historical Studies Society (HSS) is one of the most high profile and involved academic societies at UTM. Featured as a ‘society to watch’ in the January 9th issue of The Medium, the HSS is a success story that almost did not happen.

Having disbanded at the end of the 2010-2011 academic year, the future of the HSS remained uncertain. But a new energetic executive with an ambitious agenda would change all that. Committed to revitalizing the presence of the HSS, the seven-member team undertook a complete rebranding and restructuring. This involved drafting a new constitution and designing a coat of arms, and pursuing an impressive goal to involve students from all levels and faculty from all departments in both educational-based seminars and social events.

“Our aim is to provide a forum for junior and senior undergraduates to discuss, share, and learn about academic initiatives offered by the Department of Historical Studies, as well as host social events on and off campus,” said Ashley Yoannou, President of the HSS. “Being named a recipient of a Dean’s Academic Society Initiative Prize was the highlight of our first term together, and we are thrilled to have received a second Dean’s Prize this semester.” The Dean’s Academic Initiative Prizes are awarded bi-annually to academic societies who have contributed to the spirit of student-faculty interaction within their respective department and on campus generally. The other members of the executive include: Kathleen White, Events Coordinator; Casandra Kubik, Secretary; Kristina Terpoy, Marketing Director; Jenn Hunter, Advertising Director; Anna Kostetska, External Affairs Liaison; and Josh Aebig, Treasurer. “They are an exceptionally dynamic team who has the best interest of historical studies students at heart,” said
Yoannou in a recent interview. “After all, we are also proud members of the historical studies programme at UTM.”

Before long, the HSS quickly established an on-campus presence. “Our goal was to create a much more recognizable and involved society for all historical studies students,” said Hunter. “We are grateful for the support from faculty and staff.” Buoyed by this encouragement, HSS opened the fall semester by hosting a series of events: UTM’s first-ever Toga Party at the Blind Duck Pub; a Student-Faculty Networking Luncheon; a semi-annual General Meeting; and Activism and Awareness Day. The latter event included a keynote address from Holocaust survivor Judy Cohen, a screening of the PBS documentary Worse than War, and a lecture entitled “Activism in the Shadow of Trauma”, delivered by Professor Joan Simalchik.

In addition to realizing its own objectives, the HSS lent its support to campus events such as Clubs Week, the “Get Experience Fair” hosted by the UTM Career Centre, Fall Campus Day, and the Prandium Seminars. The HSS also co-sponsored many academic events at UTM, such as Jackman Humanities Institute’s “Adventures in Research for Undergraduates in the Humanities” presentation and the Fall Study Abroad Fair and Student Experience Panel.

You might conclude that these activities would consume an entire academic year for any newly-organized club; however, the HSS was just getting started. For instance, this academic society has now joined the league of other respected societies with products identifying members of their programmes of study. First, the HSS designed its own marketing merchandise - cotton tote bags and ceramic mugs bearing its coat-of-arms - to further enhance its on-campus presence. The HSS has now designed custom Historical Studies Hoodies available to all students, staff and faculty.
Second, the HSS hosted its inaugural Historical Studies Week in mid-January. “We set out to make the winter term just as engaging as the fall term by increasing faculty-student interaction,” said Yoannou. One of the events that drew positive response was the Faculty and Student Meet and Greet and Forum. Attended by faculty members, academic and department advisors and the chair of the Department of Historical Studies, this event connected first, second and third year students with senior undergraduates, who communicated personal experiences about particular courses, programs of study and studies beyond the undergraduate degree.

Another innovative event during Historical Studies Week that the HSS hopes will become a tradition was Agora. An Ancient Greek word for ‘meeting place’, Agora was a venue for professors to discuss their research, both past and present, in an informal setting. For students interested in pursuing doctoral studies, this event was beneficial in exhibiting the amount of research required for a postgraduate degree.

Recognizing the importance of having students involved in academic planning, the Historical Studies Week also convened its first Town Hall Meeting. This was a means by which the Department of Historical Studies could gain student input in planning the most beneficial programs and services to serve students, staff, and faculty.

The Diaspora and Transnational Studies (DTS) Student and Faculty Mixer during Historical Studies Week provided the venue for students within the DTS program to network with one another, as well as with representatives from the Department of Historical Studies and the HSS. Capping off a successful week was a guided tour of the Royal Ontario Museum exhibition “Maya: Secrets of their Ancient World”.

Although not officially part of Historical Studies Week, the HSS sponsored the Shake, Tumble and Bowl fundraiser in support of the Women and Gender Studies Action Group, an on-
campus club, which is part of historical studies at UTM. Proceeds went to the Native Women's Association of Canada.

The school year is drawing to a close, but the HSS continues to run social events for historical studies students. Most recently, the executive organized a visit to the Bata Shoe Museum’s “Roaring ’20s” exhibition which was free of charge to all attendees. Currently in the works is a year-end celebration dinner at Medieval Times in late April.

The HSS is grateful to Faculty Advisors, Professors Mairi Cowan and Ken Derry, Professor Shafique Virani, Chair of the Department of Historical Studies, and for the continuous positive support from historical studies faculty for assisting in ongoing planning to ensure the best possible results for both faculty and students.

“I am very excited by the work that the HSS has done,” said Professor Derry. “They’re organized and committed, and in their many events have done a great job addressing varying aspects of student life at UTM. I look forward to seeing what seeds they plant for 2012–2013.”

Professor Mairi Cowan had similar sentiments. “I attended last fall’s Meet and Greet, and really enjoyed meeting historical studies students in a social venue that was more relaxed than the lecture hall or seminar room. Our students are such interesting people, and it’s a lot of fun to get to know them as the people behind the papers.”

Overall, the tremendous support from faculty and staff, and junior and senior undergraduates has been gratifying for the HSS executive who turned their vision into reality. It has been this collective spirit that broke new ground for HSS and restored it as a respected and prominent society fully engaged in campus life at UTM.