

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects

CUNY Graduate Center

---

9-2023

### Overview of the Intern Position at SexGenLab and the Importance of Public Scholarship

Elizabeth S. Chapin

*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/5481](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/5481)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

OVERVIEW OF THE INTERN POSITION AT SEXGENLAB AND THE IMPORTANCE OF  
PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

by

ELIZABETH CHAPIN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New  
York

2023

© 2023

ELIZABETH CHAPIN

All Rights Reserved

APPROVAL

Overview of the Intern Position at SexGenLab and The Importance of Public Scholarship

by

Elizabeth Chapin

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Approved: August 2023

Dr. Deborah Tolman, Advisor

Dr. Dana-Ain Davis, Program Advisor

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

Overview of the Intern Position at SexGenLab and The Importance of Public Scholarship

by

Elizabeth Chapin

Advisor: Deborah Tolman

This paper represents a culmination of my time interning with SexGenLab and addresses the work I did from September 2022 to July 2023. This paper discusses the work that was completed, and why it is important, indicating how it contributes to the world at large outside of academia. I discuss my motivations and intentions relating to the internship, and how I was able to carry out my goals through the work I completed. In addition, this paper discusses the nature and importance of public scholarship, and how this internship contributed to that mission.

## Contents

Introduction.....	1
Importance of Public Scholarship.....	3
Overview of SexGenLab.....	5
Work Completed.....	7
References.....	11

## **Introduction:**

I first learned of the Master of Arts in Women and Gender Studies program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in the Winter of 2019, a time when my life, and the world at large, looked much different than it does today. I had spent the past few years academically focused on the post-Soviet political space of the Central Asian region, with an interest in the generational impact of the region's massive political transition of the past few decades, the journey from Soviet Socialist Republics to independent states, on the lives of Central Asian women. However, in the midst of this, I had a moment of profound uncertainty. I realized that I saw the narratives of colonization and subjugation that the Central Asian region had been subject to for centuries perpetuating, albeit on a much smaller scale, with my plans as a white American woman to come and try to contribute to the liberation of Central Asian women. I came from a region and culture that has more than its fair share of problems relating to gender and the liberation of women, and I ultimately decided to refocus my efforts on matters of gender in America, returning home both metaphorically and physically, and sought a Gender Studies program where I could build upon my earlier foundation in a more personally relevant context.

Life changed dramatically between the beginning of 2020, when I began working on my application, and April 2020, when I received notification of my acceptance into the program at The Graduate Center. The world had shuttered under the weight of a global pandemic, as we retreated from public life and into our socially distanced domestic bubbles. With so much uncertainty, one thing remained resolute in my mind- the study and examination of Gender is an essential, critical line of inquiry that demanded to be pursued, and the knowledge it would produce was a building block toward liberation for all women. In September 2020, I Zoom'd into the first class of my first semester of the program, and as they say, the rest is history.

A few semesters later, it was time to secure an internship, to be completed as the capstone of my program. I wanted to have an internship in order to gain experience and perspective on where and how the field of gender studies can contribute to the world at large, looking ahead to my life and career after completing the program. In addition, my decision to pursue an internship, as opposed to a thesis, as my capstone of this master's program, reflects my personal philosophy on the function and importance of public scholarship in academia. In fact, the option to complete an internship instead of a thesis was one of the major draws of the program at the Graduate Center, differentiating it from other Master's level Women and Gender studies programs I looked at. Public scholarship and accessibility in academia is a philosophy I share with The City University of New York, which I will elaborate on in a further section. Making knowledge available to the public is essential work that only adds to the richness and function of the academy.

I began the search to locate and secure an internship that aligned with my interests and skills; thematically, I wanted to work on something connected to women and children. Many students in my position previously completed their internship at *Women's Study Quarterly*, a biannual peer-reviewed academic journal of women's studies published by The Feminist Press, but I was hoping to find a place whose work was more oriented toward the general public. Through various meetings with professors whose work reflected my interests, I was connected with Dr. Deborah Tolman, a CUNY professor that focuses on girlhood, gender, and sexuality. Together, we developed a plan for me to complete my internship under her supervision, working on an initiative she founded called SexGenLab. This paper will detail my experience interning with SexGenLab from September 2022 to July 2023. I will provide some background on SexGenLab, its function, why it's important, and where it fits into the larger CUNY ecosystem, particularly in the context of public scholarship, and then move on to the particulars of my own experiences with the

organization. I will outline the work I completed during the internship and the impact it had on me. I will also touch upon the importance of Public Scholarship, and the role that SexGenLab plays in supporting it.

### **Overview of SexGenLab:**

From September 2022-July 2023, I was an intern at SexGenLab. SexGenLab is an initiative started by Professor Deborah Tolman and formed with CUNY students that extends to a network of scholars and researchers. Its aim is to make clear and informative content about sexuality and gender, rooted in current research and presented using a critical lens, available to the general public. As stated on the website homepage, its mission is to “translate and disseminate knowledge about sexuality and gender,”<sup>1</sup> by bringing topical cutting-edge research to the public, translated into accessible language and presented in a variety of formats on both social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube) as well as its own website. On [SexGenLab.org](http://SexGenLab.org), you will find infographics, articles, research bites, podcasts, videos, and a glossary that defines relevant terms relating to gender and sexuality. The content addresses the following topics; Positive Sexuality, Rape Culture, Toxic Masculinity, LGBTQ+, and Sexual & Reproductive Health, Rights, & Justice. For each topic, selected pieces of content are coalesced into a “toolkit”, providing a concise, yet comprehensive, collection of information. Through the content that has been made by its members, the SexGenLab team has amassed a wealth of resources for anyone interested or needing factual information regarding these subjects. Not only does it provide the basics, SexGenLab strives to focus on cutting-edge, positive research taking place in the sphere of gender and sexuality study, reflecting the advances and conclusions being made by scholars as

---

<sup>1</sup> “About: Sexgenlab.” *SexGenLab*, 2020, [www.sexgenlab.org/about](http://www.sexgenlab.org/about).

they come about in real-time. New information is constantly being uncovered in academia, and the public stands to benefit from it.

Furthermore, essential to the SexGenLab mission is to select and present research from a critical perspective, utilizing critical theories and lenses, intended to deconstruct topics that may be deemed taboo by some in society. Many issues related to gender and sexuality are unnecessarily loaded and can make people uncomfortable; a critical stance works to peel back the layers and expose the factual matter at hand while untangling essential nuances that often get lost in favor of the blatant. Working off of a starting point that asks a taboo question, such as the benefits of masturbation, the sexual well-being of teenagers, or why women do or don't shave their underarms, pushes back against the dominant social narratives and creates space for a larger conversation imbued with research and academic perspectives.

The SexGenLab tagline, *Critical Knowledge for Critical Times*, reflects the urgency of this project, and the necessity of the aims it seeks to address. Providing clear, informative, accessible content regarding topics of gender and sexuality is useful to society in many ways. Public discourse often touches upon concepts falling under the umbrella of gender and sexuality, yet at times lacks the essential context that elucidates the issues at hand. Issues relating to gender and sexuality are complex, nuanced, and far from the cut-and-dry tropes that they are often incorrectly condensed into. For example, the spectrum of gender identities is commonly misunderstood, a space full of variation and differences that articulate specific identities and communities. What is the difference between being transgender or gender nonconforming, and pansexual versus asexual? Is being queer the same thing as being gay? These differences may not be obvious to someone not well-versed in gender studies, but the SexGenLab [glossary](#), available on the website, is a tool that can help demystify these topics. In the glossary, over fifty-five terms related to gender and sexuality

are clearly and comprehensively defined. Providing content rooted in factual information and innovative research on topics relating to gender and sexuality is an antidote to the weaponization of various gender-based issues, for example, the governmental action being taken to ban access to gender-affirming care for transgender youth taking place in state legislatures across the country, or the attacks on women's bodily rights after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022.

The mission of SexGenLab is an important one that stands to send ripples far beyond its own academic sphere. As academics and scholars, we are responsible for transmitting the knowledge we study and develop far beyond the academic vacuum, where it stands to impart the most good to society. Organizations like SexGenLab contribute to the mission of public scholarship, bringing information beyond the paywall and into the hands of folks not directly engaged with the academy. Making research-based, scientifically sound information available beyond academic paywalls, written in plain language that is void of overly academic jargon is a critical part of dispelling mistruths in an era of misinformation, as well as further supporting the mission of public scholarship, something I will touch on in the next section of this paper.

### **Importance of Public Scholarship:**

Public scholarship provides a bridge between academics and the general public. Public scholarship is broadly defined as research, teaching, and learning that has an impact on populations beyond those involved with academia<sup>2</sup>. Too often, the successes and discoveries made within the academy are inaccessible to those not situated within its proverbial ivory tower. It is, unfortunately, a world where access and money are deeply intertwined. Countless academic publications reside firmly behind costly paywalls that often prevent access to those without an affiliation with an

---

<sup>2</sup> Chan, Karen. "What Is Public Scholarship." *Public Scholarship and Engagement, University of California, Davis*, 21 June 2022, [publicengagement.ucdavis.edu/what-public-scholarship](http://publicengagement.ucdavis.edu/what-public-scholarship).

institution that pays the price for access. Therefore, public scholarship seeks to take folks beyond that paywall. What good does academic and scientific discovery have if it fails to exist beyond the narrow confines of academia? It is critical that information is made accessible and transcends the academy, and projects like SexGenLab are vehicles to carry out this mission. Making knowledge accessible is key to the well-being of society and increases the capacity for public good.

The importance of public scholarship is part of the ethos of The City University of New York (CUNY), and the Graduate Center in particular. As one of the nation's leading public universities, CUNY is a premier institution of knowledge sharing, forging paths and creating opportunities that can be utilized to bring the successes of the academy to the public in a variety of capacities. Knowledge as a public good is a core belief of CUNY, and the Graduate Center, in particular, has taken many steps to foster and support the mission of public scholarship. Recently, this has included the "Scholarship for Public Good" event series put on by the Graduate Center's Mina Rees library in collaboration with the Provost's office as well as the Center for Humanities at the Graduate Center's introduction of a fellowship for the 2023-2024 school year to assist in helping to develop a Doctoral certificate program in Public Scholarship at CUNY. The Graduate Center also offers a Master of Liberal Studies (MALS) concentration in Public Scholarship.

Public scholarship provides invaluable context for issues that come up in public discourse. We are living in a particularly charged political atmosphere when it can feel like telling the truth and relying on fact is optional in public messaging. It is an era of politicians operating under guidance from non-scientific sources and falsely utilizing words like health and/or safety when their actions are in opposition to recommendations given by the medical community. Time and again governments seek to regulate or restrict society while ignoring science and the opinion of experts. Many of these areas of society that are being sought to be shaped (and re-shaped) relate

to gender and sexuality; women are losing rights to their bodies, intolerance towards any form of existence that deviates from the established white heteronormative capitalist patriarchy is flourishing, and the educational agendas in various states are being modeled after misinformed hateful beliefs. These are issues that quite literally are life and death for some impacted by them. A look at the news reveals many connections to the field of study that SexGenLab focuses on, further underscoring the dire, critical need for academics to exist beyond the paywalls that surround the academy. In addition, public scholarship has the potential to expedite new findings to the masses at a time when they are desperately needed. In the case of SexGenLab, we are able to make content on newly published research that would likely have taken a long time to percolate into the public otherwise. In such critical times, not a moment can be spared when fighting for the rights of all Americans.

### **Work Completed:**

The SexGenLab team, comprised of Dr. Deborah Tolman and Ph.D. students, met weekly. During these meetings, we would discuss the project, including future plans and ideas that came up, often resulting in tasks for me, as the intern, to complete. Additionally, these meetings often served as spaces for members to present their own current work and receive feedback; in this capacity, the SexGenLab team worked as a sounding board of like-minded scholars. Although not totally relevant to the SexGenLab project per se, the community that had assembled around the project reflected shared interests and intent and thus helped one another with the projects they worked on outside of SexGenLab. As an intern, I completed a variety of tasks. After a period of relative dormancy for the project, I was tasked with getting the website up to speed. I combed through all existing content and made sure that all the links were active and fixed those that were broken, not a small task! Once the site was current, I shifted focus to creating new content on

topical issues. I brainstormed lists of topics, things I felt were both relevant and suited to my skills and expertise. Ultimately, I settled upon Transgender Youth and Reproductive Justice as two topics to focus on and around which to create content.

A large segment of the content I wrote and created for SexGenLab focused on the rights of transgender youth and the necessity for access to gender-affirming care. This internship took place during a political period where sexuality and gender has been weaponized; currently, there is an unprecedented assault taking place on the rights of transgender and gender non-conforming people in state legislatures across the country. I undertook extensive research on the laws being introduced, the outcomes of these laws, and what the scientific community, including doctors, psychologists, and other experts on gender and sexuality, believed were the best practices surrounding gender-affirming care for transgender youth. Unfortunately, the steps being taken politically to deny individuals the right to gender-affirming care are completely out of line with what the research has found on this topic and have the potential for deadly outcomes.

After combing through recent research to identify relevant articles that spoke to the messages I sought to convey, I completed a series of “Research Bites,” short articles that each focused on a particular research finding and an infographic that reflected said findings. Altogether, these research bites and infographics represent a collection of positive research that speaks to the needs of transgender youth, the best way to meet those needs, and the observed outcomes that emerge when those needs are met. I then repeated this process under the umbrella of Reproductive Justice, another area of society that has been subject to political attacks, particularly since the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022.

It was important to me to speak to issues that are currently being discussed at length in public discourse; these are the topics about which the public so desperately needs readily available

research-based information. In creating content for SexGenLab, I wanted to consider the audience for the materials. SexGenLab is a great resource for professionals and non-professionals alike in a variety of fields and age groups; I asked myself what kind of person would seek this information and sought to make content that would be helpful for them. I envisioned a variety of people utilizing SexGenLab, from journalists and politicians to teachers and caregivers, or just curious teenagers and adults alike. If someone watched a news story or read an article about gender-affirming care for transgender youth and they turned to Google to understand what they just saw, what kind of articles would help them? This was the type of question I kept in mind as I conducted research, selected viable articles, and distilled them into accessible content.

Working with SexGenLab had highs and lows. I wholeheartedly believe in its mission and felt honored to contribute to such an important project yet struggled at times with its loose structure. Since it is a relatively new project that lacks adequate funding, no full-time employees work at SexGenLab. All the people working on SexGenLab have full metaphorical plates; many of the Ph.D. students who contribute also teach courses while working on their own research. While I think we all agree that this is vital work, there simply isn't always enough time in the day to get to all the things we'd like. As a result, I had a great deal of autonomy to pursue the topics and content that I felt was needed; this was not always to my benefit, as I struggle with self-motivation and appreciate a well-defined framework for my tasks. On the upside, I further honed many of the skills I developed over the years as a student and scholar, including research, writing, and editing. In particular, I strengthened my research skills by developing my ability to determine which research stands to benefit the public the most, by drawing connections between current events and academic research. It was also my first time creating visual forms of knowledge through infographics. Working with SexGenLab showed me what it takes to fully realize the goals of public

scholarship by bringing research to the non-expert. Ultimately, I emerge from this internship as a better scholar, thinker, writer, researcher, and collaborator.

Looking forward, I see both great potential and an urgent need for the continuation of SexGenLab. The issues we are facing as a country in the realm of sexuality and gender are far from resolution. Fighting for the establishment and preservation of rights for women, gender non-conforming people, and all other people groups will be a never-ending battle, yet knowledge is one the most potent tools we have when fighting intolerance, bigotry, and hate. It has been an honor to work with, and learn from, Dr. Tolman and the SexGenLab team, and I am optimistically looking towards the future.

## References

“About: Sexgenlab.” *SexGenLab*, 2020, [www.sexgenlab.org/about](http://www.sexgenlab.org/about).

Chan, Karen. “What Is Public Scholarship.” *Public Scholarship and Engagement, University of California, Davis*, 21 June 2022, [publicengagement.ucdavis.edu/what-public-scholarship](http://publicengagement.ucdavis.edu/what-public-scholarship).

Poulos, Christopher N. “1. Conceptual Foundations of Autoethnography.” *Essentials of Autoethnography*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2021, pp. 3–16.