

Alumni Spotlight

Tatiana Carayannis is the Director of the Understanding Violent Conflict Initiative at the Social Sciences Research Council. She graduated from the Graduate Center in June 2017.



By Caroline Sigler:

Caroline Sigler: *Can you tell me a little about the work you do at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC)?*

Tatiana Carayannis: I direct the new Understanding Violent Conflict (UVC) program at the SSRC, aimed at developing new approaches to the study of conflict in Africa and the Middle East and interventions to end them. Since 2007, I've directed the Africa program of the SSRC's Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, which functions as an external think tank to the UN, and spearheaded some new areas of work for the Council, including the China-Africa Knowledge Project, the Democratic Republic of Congo Affinity Group, and the Justice and Security Research Program. For the last five years I've co-directed several international research consortia that bring the SSRC together with universities in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Currently, I have a visiting appointment with the London School of Economics Africa Centre and Department of International Development.

CS: *What resources at the GC would you recommend to current students?*

TC: If you're a predominantly qualitative researcher as I am, take a good quantitative methods course. I took the usual statistics courses until my eyes glazed over and still felt like I knew nothing about quant methods. Then I took what was, hands down, the most practical course of all my coursework at the GC—a course called Statistics for the Humanist Researcher. It demystified stats and quant methods and gave me some basic skills that I still use today. Also, get involved in the governance of the GC. I was a member of the department's executive committee, admissions committee, and got involved with the Doctoral Students' Council where I, together with a couple of other students, founded the Africa Research Group. This gave us a platform to bring in external speakers we otherwise would not have occasion to meet, and being involved on departmental committees was a good induction into the politics of higher ed.

CS: *Do you wish you did anything differently with your time at the GC?*

TC: Although taking the scenic route served me well, I wish I had finished my Ph.D. faster than I did. With time, you learn that the dissertation is really not such a big deal, and with a bit of discipline and focus, it can be completed in a relatively short time, even with other tantalizing distractions along the way. As they say, a good dissertation is a finished dissertation. Also, a dissertation doesn't write itself.

CS: *As someone working at the SSRC, do you have any advice for students seeking funding?*

TC: As my SSRC colleague Daniella Sarnoff (head of the International Dissertation Research Fellowship) would say, it never hurts to be in touch with the funding organization to confirm eligibility etc., but be sure to inform yourself a little, read the FAQs. Keep in mind that most applications are read by people across disciplines, regions, and themes. Have someone outside your area of study read your proposal so you have a sense of what you're assuming about your readers' knowledge and disciplinary language.

CS: *What is your favorite thing to do for fun in New York City?*

TC: Kayaking in the Hudson River and NYC harbor. I've been a longtime volunteer (12yrs +) and former board member of the NYC Downtown Boathouse, the largest free kayaking organization in the world, based in Tribeca's Pier 26. We do this both for recreation but also to promote and preserve free public access to our local waters. It's a fun thing to do in the summer in NY, and a very rewarding volunteer activity.

