

*Report to the University of Washington Graduate School  
and the College of Arts and Sciences  
by the  
Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization Review Committee  
April 29, 2004*

Foreword

This Program Review committee was appointed in Autumn 2003 and charged, on February 13, 2004, with the responsibility of reviewing the academic program offered by the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization (NELC). The last review having been done in 1994, the current review has the potential to offer “an independent assessment of the Department’s health and advice as to how it might be improved.”

The Committee was provided with the 1994 report and subsequent responses by the Department and the administration; the Self-Study; additional information requested by the committee on numbers of majors with specializations, language course enrollments, and language course teaching assignments. The Department’s Self-Study contains the Mission, Significant changes since last review, Assessment measures, Current strengths, Current weaknesses; a list of current faculty and staff and a description of their work; a discussion of relations with other units on and off campus; a presentation of degree programs and graduate students; a summary of development and outreach; eleven appendices. The appendices include: graduate student statistical summary; academic unit profile, special options for BA and MA degrees; list of faculty’s participation in MA and PhD committees; placement of graduates; mission statement; faculty curricula vitae; HEC Board summary; UW exchange programs; NELC courses; department ratings summaries; student awards; departmental strategic plan.

Prior to the site visit, the three campus members held meetings with Professor Bacharach (former director of the Middle East Center) who was to be in Egypt during the site visit, and with Chair Michael Williams. The committee also solicited participation from department members (faculty, students and staff), other humanities chairs, and other faculty who have ties with the Department.

During the site visit the full committee interviewed Chair Williams, Professors Cirtautas, Noegel, Kuru, DeYoung, Andrews, Sokoloff, Karimi-Hakkak, and Lecturer Freeman of NELC. In addition, they interviewed Professors Hanson (Director, REECAS), Clauss (Chair, Classics), Goldberg (Director, Middle East Center), and Jaffee (Comparative Religion, JSIS). They also interviewed Lecturer Brandl (Scandinavian), Librarian / PhD student St. Germaine (Head, Near East Section, Suzzallo), and NELC office staff members Shannon Quinn and Administrator Karen Hansen. The committee also met in two separate meetings with three undergraduates and five graduate students.

Based on the interviews and the written material collected, the committee was able to reach consensus on our evaluation of the Department and our recommendations for the programs that it offers.

## Findings and recommendations

### Introduction

The mission of the NELC Department is “the teaching and research concerning the principal cultures and languages of the Near and Middle East, including Central Asia, emphasizing not only their contemporary manifestations but also their ancient and medieval roots, and their significance within the history of world civilizations.” The Department aims to realize its mission through its undergraduate and graduate programs, interdisciplinary collaboration and community outreach.

The Department’s mission is most appropriate, especially given the importance of the study of the Middle East today, and the committee finds that NELC is potentially competitive with other comparable university programs nationally. Only about 15 or 16 universities in the United States offer all four contemporary Middle Eastern languages (Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew); such programs exist, for instance, at UC Berkeley, UCLA, University of Arizona, University of Texas, University of Chicago, University of Michigan, New York University, Harvard University, and Princeton University. The fact that NELC also has a Central Asian Turkic component makes it almost unique in the United States (with only a few places, such as the University of Indiana, having a focused Central Asian program). Only a few institutions, such as UC Berkeley, University of Michigan, University of Chicago, and Harvard University, similar to UW, also teach a number of the ancient Near Eastern languages, such as Aramaic or Akkadian as part of their Near East Studies program. Most of the comprehensive (all four contemporary) language programs are in universities which have received Title VI funding for a Middle East Center – the funding of such centers is, in fact, inextricably linked to the support of and teaching of Middle Eastern languages.

The NELC department at UW is designed to fill the critical role of providing instruction and advancing research in all periods of Near and Middle Eastern languages and civilization. This report highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the department. It also addresses areas that furnish opportunities for further development. The strengths of the department are its breadth in both quality of instruction and quality of research, its interdisciplinarity and its innovative use of technology. The primary challenges result from the faculty’s overextended teaching obligations, ranging from the teaching of various levels of the principal Middle Eastern languages to the teaching of content courses for majors and large survey courses focused on introducing the cultures and societies of these civilizations to a large range of undergraduates.

This chronic condition of insufficient staffing undermines faculty morale and damages research projects. It also curtails the department’s liberal arts education mission and prevents the development of viable undergraduate instructional programs in most of its areas of specialization. A primary conclusion of our committee is that the College of Arts and Sciences needs to make a strategic determination to provide the support necessary to have an effective Near East Languages and Civilization at the University of Washington.

### Overall Instructional Program and Faculty

NELC advances teaching and research in languages and civilizations of the Near East through undergraduate and graduate courses across a breadth of synchronic and diachronic specializations. There are nine permanent faculty members who are teaching one or more classes, including four Full Professors (Cirtautas, Karimi-Hakkak, Sokoloff,

and Williams), three Associate Professors (DeYoung, Noegel, and Wheeler), one Assistant Professor (Kuru), and one Lecturer (Freeman). Also, there is one Research Professor (Andrews) and a number of other associated retired or affiliated faculty. These faculty members have an impressive research record (see Appendix G of the self-study), are responsible for a large number of classes (Appendix J) and have served on (or directed) the committees of a considerable number of MA and PhD students (Appendix D). The quality of the permanent faculty in the NELC program is of the highest caliber, as one would expect – and be proud of - at an institution such as UW.

As in all similar departments across the nation, language instruction, which is the foundation of the department is strategically essential to the department's mission and constitutes the pivotal core of the Title VI centers. Currently, NELC's small faculty is responsible for an extensive language program, including Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, Turkish, and Uzbek. (Other Turkic languages of Central Asia such as Kazakh or Uighur are also occasionally taught – see Appendix J of the self-study). In addition to these contemporary languages, a number of ancient Near Eastern languages are also taught, including Syriac, Aramaic, Hieroglyphic Egyptian, Coptic, Biblical Hebrew, and Akkadian (the latter listed, but perhaps not taught recently – see Appendix J). Yet, this faculty is also responsible for a considerable number of non-language courses that focus on the region and its peoples, cultures, and civilizations. These range from large introductory courses on the Ancient Near Eastern and Islamic Civilizations to intermediate and advanced-level courses in literature, film, cultural history, Islamic mysticism, Biblical prophets, and many other subjects (see Appendix J). All together, NELC's small faculty is expected to be responsible for over a hundred language courses (on the books), and over 50 non-language courses (on the books). Consequently, it comes as no surprise that there are few 500-level graduate courses among all these courses, an issue to be addressed in our recommendations.

One clear pattern that emerged from the review process is that this small, dedicated faculty is indeed being “worked-to-death”. The amount of teaching they are doing – and that they feel responsible for doing– is quite incredible and, ultimately, counterproductive. The review panel found that even in those relatively rare instances when teaching assistants were used, considerable time still had to be spent by the supervising professor on repeatedly training and closely supervising transient TAs who, other than being native speakers, had no qualifications for or experience in meeting the pedagogical challenges of teaching a difficult foreign language.

The Committee came to concur with the NELC faculty's collective view that they are overworked and underutilized. Their teaching loads are normally heavier than those of their colleagues in peer institutions. The time consumed by the low-level language courses they are required to teach prevents them from offering more general civilization courses that would appeal to a larger undergraduate audience as well as more advanced courses that would strengthen the department's currently meager offerings to its majors and graduate students. The fact that faculty members are relegated to teaching elementary and intermediate language courses not only curtails the department's liberal arts education mission, it also prevents the development of comprehensive, four-year instructional programs in all of the languages taught in the department with the notable exception of Arabic. Arabic is the only language program in NELC that is sufficiently staffed with two faculty members and a lecturer. Lack of adequate staffing in all the

other NELC language programs forces each of them to fall short of the more successful programs in comparable institutions. A successful program is defined as one in which a student who begins studying a language at the elementary level can pursue a four-year sequence of language and literature courses that will bring him or her to an advanced level of linguistic and cultural competence. Some of the more successful programs are staffed, like Arabic in NELC, with two faculty members and a Lecturer. In other cases, they manage well with a single faculty member and a lecturer. Having less than that dooms a program to mediocrity, if not outright failure. The cumulative experience in departments that do not have a robust graduate program, as is often the case in NELC departments, shows that relying on teaching assistants for instruction of elementary and intermediate language courses is largely ineffectual. Such TAs are usually drawn from a small pool of native speakers who are graduate students that were not awarded assistantships in their own departments and who have neither the skills nor the commitment needed for success in teaching difficult languages such as Turkish, Persian, Arabic or Hebrew. Based on this recognition, there is now a growing tendency in less-commonly-taught-language programs to replace transient TAs with permanent lines for professional lecturers. Our committee has come to a clear and unanimous conclusion that if the University of Washington wishes to realize the full potential of NELC and develop a successful program of Near East languages and cultures, it must make a strategic commitment to a viable staffing model.

Another concern of the review committee is the fact that a number of faculty are either leaving, or are on extended leave, or are actively seeking to leave the department. Dr. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, the core of the Persian Program, is leaving to begin a new Persian program at the University of Maryland; Dr. Brannon Wheeler, will be on leave for a second year, and rumor has it that he, along with his wife who did not receive a more permanent position with the Jackson school, is looking elsewhere; the lecturer hired to teach Arabic language (Dr. Andrew Freeman) has resigned, stating that the workload is “much too horrendous”; and at least one other professor is actively searching for another position. The excessive workload and the lack of support by the administration for their program appear to be central causes of this exodus.

#### Interdisciplinary relations

The committee examined, in part, interdisciplinary relations between NELC and the following units or programs: Jackson School of International Studies (JSIS), the interdisciplinary PhD program in Near and Middle East Studies; Middle Eastern Center; Classics; Comparative Literature, Comparative Religion Program, and the Center for Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies (REECAS). As an “area studies” department that focuses on a critical part of the world, NELC has a natural connection with similar area study units. Whereas in some UW departments, such as Germanics or Scandinavian Studies, the languages, cultural courses, and degrees are mostly all within one department, NELC’s world is somewhat more complex. Dealing with the ancient, Islamic and contemporary world, NELC has natural ties with Classics, International Studies, Comparative Religion, and Comparative Literature as well as programs that focus on the present social, political, and economic aspects of the Middle East (Political Science, Geography, etc.). Its regional focus bridges the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, and hence there are ties to the Middle East Center and REECAS. For some

courses and individual faculty members there are also ties to such programs as Comparative Literature and Comparative Religion.

Yet many of the NELC faculty are not pleased with their standing in relation to these other units. Some of the faculty (and several students) expressed the view that NELC was being used only as a “service unit” to provide language training for other units, and that they are not being recognized for their scholarship and intellectual contributions, and hence are not being supported sufficiently for their mission. For instance, NELC is one of the five programs out of the 37 departments in the College of Arts and Sciences that is not permitted to offer a PhD degree (the four others being Art, Dance, International Studies, and Spanish & Portuguese Studies). The fact that NELC is not smaller than some of the PhD granting units, such as Women Studies where most of the faculty are adjuncts, intensifies the impression that it is regarded as a second-class department.

In reality, a considerable number of students who received their PhD degree from Near and Middle Eastern Interdisciplinary PhD Program were directed exclusively by NELC faculty. Yet the department receives almost no credit or recognition for this. It is, in fact, the relationships with the Center for Middle East Studies (the Director of which also administers the interdisciplinary PhD program in Near and Middle East) that our review panel found as one of the most difficult problems perceived by NELC. The relationship is strained, if not, hostile – one which certainly is not conducive to productive teaching, scholarship, and training of graduate students. Most members of NELC who were interviewed had little contact with the Center, and could find little reason to interact with the Center, it being perceived as focusing on social science issues and ignoring their own field(s). The interview with the Director of the Center for Middle East Studies also revealed that there was almost no support of NELC by the Center, the Director stating that the Center supports NELC by providing Foreign Language Area Fellowships (FLAS grants) for students. This practice contrasts markedly to Middle East Centers at other universities, which often provide funds for teaching assistants, lecturers, or even seed money for faculty positions in languages. It is true that there are always different viewpoints, and our committee’s mandate did not include investigating in detail this relationship from the perspective of the Center for Middle East Studies or its Director.

Relations with REECAS and NELC appear to be somewhat better on a personal basis, although what funding and support are provided to NELC by REECAS was not pursued by the review committee. In our interviews with the secretary of NELC it also was apparent that considerable time was being spent on administering a three-year one million dollar grant for Central Asia (a grant through the Department of State). The staff of NELC is very small, and it might be more efficient and practical to have this grant being administered through REECAS – who might also be able to contribute to developing a continuing focus on Central Asia as well.

Finally for the faculty – and the department – the committee’s impression is that there is not a strong “departmental culture” and esprit de corps – despite the great job that everyone agrees Michael Williams is doing as chair of NELC. There appear to be almost no committees in which faculty members work – and plan – together, and there appear to be few departmental meetings. There is no departmental-wide colloquium series, which would not only bring faculty together, but also integrate the students (especially graduate

students) intellectually (and socially). The fact that Michael Williams himself is serving as undergraduate advisor underscores his dedication – but also the lack of departmental responsibility (but Williams, to his credit, has done this hoping to alleviate the heavy burden in teaching of his faculty).

#### Specific academic programs

Undergraduate offerings include a few very popular general education civilization courses and a BA with four degree tracks (Languages and Civilization, Culture and Civilization, Comparative Islamic Studies, Biblical and Ancient – see Section VI: Degree Programs and Appendix C of the self-study). Several of these tracks have only recently been created to fulfill student interests. There are 49 majors and nine minors in the department, the majority of the majors being the first track, Language and Civilization. The tracks are impressive foci for students, although there is a concern by the committee for sufficient courses to be offered to fulfill the needs of the students in these various tracks. According to the undergraduates interviewed, all the courses are admirable for the caliber of instruction, the variety of disciplinary modes (e.g. literature, archaeology), and the close interaction with faculty afforded by small classes. They regretted that there were not more offerings, however.

The MA program in NELC is a rather concentrated program, one which focuses heavily on languages. In fact, the MA students must master two Middle Eastern languages as well as one European research language (French, German, etc). It is probably fair to say that these requirements are the most demanding of any MA program in Near/Middle East Studies in the United States. In other programs throughout the country, such language requirements are only for the PhD degree – with usually only a high-level (e.g. third-year level) being required at the MA level. As a point of comparison, the Romance Linguistics MA at the UW requires advanced proficiency in one language for entry to the program and an introduction to Latin; the PhD requires additional Latin and demonstrated knowledge of a research language. It is true that the demanding MA language requirements in NELC have turned out quite excellent students, and that this has resulted in some superb PhD students either in the interdisciplinary UW program or at other institutions. Most of the five graduate students interviewed also were quite proud of having learned these languages.

The rather difficult requirements might be one of the reasons for the very few number of MA students in NELC. Presently there are 12 MA students in residence in the program. The self-study notes (p. 31) that 37 students have completed the MA since the last ten-year review – which is an average of only 3.7 per year (although, as mentioned, the self-study emphasizes the success of these students for going on to other programs, etc.). The fact that only 20 students applied for the graduate program in Autumn 2003 and that 16 students were accepted (four resident, 12 out-of-state) but only five came (three resident, two out-of state) is not a sufficient number of graduate students to have a viable graduate program. We believe that, besides the ability to fund graduate students – an issue for all departments, but maybe more acute for NELC, the rather rigid and stringent MA language requirements may be a hindrance to having a viable MA program. There is also the issue that despite the great number of undergraduate language and content courses (over 150 total), there are only a few 500-level courses directed toward a graduate experience and training in NELC (and except for Cirtautas listed for Turkic

language/culture classes, most graduate classes do not have an instructor named - unlike the majority of the content undergraduate classes – see Appendix J of the self-study).

Another issue for the MA program is the diversity of student interests and the lack of an esprit de corps. Despite the small number of students, we were surprised that when we interviewed the five graduate students, that they did not all know each other! There is no NELC graduate student organization or other attempt to create a cadre of students. There also seems to be no department-level interaction with the graduate students (as a group), such as part of colloquium series, social gatherings, graduate representative at faculty meetings or graduate representative on departmental committees, etc.

Finally, the interdisciplinary PhD (under the Grad School and administered by Prof. Ellis Goldberg) doesn't serve NELC well. While the PhD program is very successful in many ways (e.g. we were told that every graduate has a postdoc or tenure track job), its interdisciplinarity does not necessarily serve the needs of students in NELC. At least in the perception of the faculty of NELC, it mainly focuses on the social sciences. The disjuncture between NELC and the PhD program is perhaps indicated in the attitude of its director who said of the PhDs that the successful ones were in the social sciences (even though there have been eight NELC students getting a PhD from the program, also getting faculty positions, etc.). The fact that the chair of the interdisciplinary PhD program in the Near and Middle East is also the chair of the Middle Eastern Center is perhaps a problem, and one which needs to be addressed (although we have a possible solution in our recommendations, see below).

### Recommendations

Based upon our review of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization we provide the following recommendations:

- 1) We should emphasize that NELC is a valuable and important unit at the University of Washington, and we think that it is a viable program which not only should be supported but also it should be strengthened.
- 2) Even though the department is “stretched thin,” the teaching of the four contemporary languages of the Middle East (Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew) should remain a priority. Any attempt to eliminate one of these languages not only weakens the department and its ability to provide the principal languages and cultures of the contemporary Middle East, but as significantly it will jeopardize the refunding of the Title VI Center for Middle East studies in the next round of federal funding. Hence, it is particularly imperative that the position in Persian be replaced with a tenured professor with the departure of Dr. Karimi-Hakkak.
- 3) As emphasized in the self-study and in our own report, the faculty of NELC is being asked to teach too many courses, especially languages. We recommend in strongest terms that a cadre of permanent lecturers be hired to teach the first and second year language courses for the four contemporary Middle Eastern languages (Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew). This is a model that is already being used at UW; for instance, in Scandinavian Studies seven different languages are taught by a combination of lecturers and teaching assistants, enabling the tenure-line faculty to focus primarily on content courses. Romance Languages and Literature has eight lecturers, four senior lecturers, and 16 teaching associates

- (most of whom are permanent full-time), while Slavic Languages and Literatures has two lecturers and one senior lecturer. All these lecturers focus on teaching languages at the lower levels. NELC should have the same support and have permanent lecturers teaching the first and second-year languages. We also believe that the Middle East Center should be helping to provide seed money for some of these lecturer positions.
- 4) The focus on Central Asia should be kept – but perhaps rethought in how it can be supported. The program has been developed entirely by Dr. Ilse Cirtautas, and even though there are an impressive number of Turkic language courses taught, the intellectual scope of that program is limited. It also appears that a number of graduate students have spent an inordinate length of time working to finish degrees related to the Central Asia component.
  - 5) There should be a PhD program in NELC. With eight PhD students directed by NELC faculty through the interdisciplinary PhD program in Middle East Studies and a ninth one in the pipeline over the last 10 years, that number is probably comparable with the number of PhD students being produced in other small departments. With a PhD program the department can attract more students, as well as being on par with other departments and programs. There also are major problems between the faculty of NELC and the administration of the interdisciplinary PhD program in Middle East studies. By allowing NELC to have its own PhD program and keeping the interdisciplinary PhD program as truly interdisciplinary (which can be focused on the social sciences), the problem of this relationship will be solved.
  - 6) The MA program needs to be restructured, to be less rigid and to not have such a heavy language requirement. This should help attract more students, particularly in conjunction with a PhD program (and the MA language requirements can easily become the requirements for the PhD, comparable to other programs).
  - 7) NELC needs to create a “departmental culture” and provide for the creation of an intellectual community in the department. We recommend a colloquium series, committees (e.g. an admissions committee, an undergraduate committee, etc.). There needs to be a graduate student organization, graduate student representation on appropriate committees, and more interaction between the students and faculty (as a group) outside the classroom.
  - 8) We also recommend that a graduate course be created in which all incoming graduate students take; many departments have such a course, often with all the faculty participating and it designed to introduced them to “the field” as well the faculty – and, as importantly, it creates a bonding and cadre of students.
  - 9) From our interviews with the graduate students (in particular) we believe that there is a need to establish what courses are being taught for the entire year (all three quarters) well ahead of time. The students indicated that they often did not know what was being offered until shortly before a quarter started.

### Conclusion

The faculty of NELC is strikingly talented from all perspectives—research, teaching and programmatic service—and the range of languages and cultures represented by the program is quite impressive. Current geo-political concerns only reinforce the importance



of the Department's place in the university. It is an extremely important unit for the University of Washington, the state of Washington, and indeed the United States, and particularly the Northwest. It is a unit which should not only have continued support, but also there should be more university resources put into this significant program. Given the number of substantial recommendations, we recommend that the next review be in five years. This is not any reflection on the lack of quality of the program, but more because of the number of recommendations which we have made. It also is made to encourage the administration to provide the proper support and changes within this shorter time period.

Respectfully submitted,

Professor Julia Herschensohn, Linguistics, Box 354340, Review Committee Chair

Professor Michael Bonine, University of Arizona

Professor Gilead Morahg, University of Wisconsin

Professor Richard Dunn, English, Box 354330

Professor Terje Leiren, Scandinavian Studies, Box 353420

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