

## **The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization**

### **Review Committee Report**

**November 19, 2010**

#### Executive Summary

The Review Committee finds the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization (NELC) to be remarkably successful in providing academically rigorous nationally distinctive training in language and cultural studies, despite the relative autonomy of diverse instructional programs within the unit, and the recent departure of a core member of the faculty.

NELC graduates are highly competitive in securing university-wide and national honors and awards, and they are offered spots in leading Ph.D. programs when they choose to continue on to graduate study. Each year, approximately two hundred students are turned away from Arabic language training, demonstrating NELC's limited capacity to meet university instructional demands.

We unanimously recommend a review of NELC in ten years, based upon the anticipated demand for strategic language instruction for which the Department is well-positioned, and the capacity for the Chair of NELC to capitalize on a closer partnership with the Middle East Center (MEC), and to engage with the academically rigorous and nationally competitive Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies (IPNMES).

#### Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the UW

Two distinguished faculty trained at Princeton University (Farhat Ziadeh and Nicholas Heer) founded the Near Eastern Language and Civilization studies at the University of Washington in a partnership with the Classics Department (1966-1970). In 1970, the Department admitted its first students. The Department currently offers both BA and MA programs in Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Modern and Biblical Hebrew and Central Asian Studies. NELC courses offer introductory and advanced training in both the ancient and modern world. Few departments in the United States offer the historical depth of NELC's educational programs, and even fewer include a specialization in Central Asian Studies.

The last comprehensive review of the Department occurred in 2003-2004 with a final recommendation to the Provost in 2005. The previous Review Committee requested a review in five years, and recommended that the university provide additional instructional support for NELC. The request by the previous Review Committee has been met largely through lectureships provided by federal government grant monies secured by the Middle East Center under the current leadership. Our committee recommends specific ways to strengthen and enhance NELC in the coming decade based upon our assessment of faculty excellence, instructional rigor, and the potential for enhancing the effectiveness of the Department's role within the University and the community.

### The Review Process

The Review Committee appointed by the Graduate School consisted of the following members:

Christine Ingebritsen, Professor, Department of Scandinavian Studies,  
University of Washington (Committee Chair)  
Kent Guy, Professor, Department of History, University of Washington  
Nita Krevans, Associate Professor, Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies,  
University of Minnesota  
Peter Sluglett, Professor, Department of History, University of Utah

The Review Committee's Charge Letter requested an assessment of the educational quality of the department and its degree programs; and constructive ideas and suggestions on how to strengthen degree programs.

To assess the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization, the Review Committee conducted meetings with faculty, staff, undergraduate and graduate students, as well as stakeholders who interact with the department, including the Director of the federally funded Middle East Center (MEC), the Director of the Henry Jackson School of International Studies (JSIS), the Middle East Librarian, the Director of the Language Learning Center, and interdisciplinary faculty who teach and mentor graduate students in the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies (IPNMES).

### Resources to Support NELC

NELC is a small academic unit with six full-time faculty members. Six lecturers provide language, literature and cultural instruction in Arabic (2), Biblical Hebrew (1), Modern Hebrew (1), Persian (1), and Uygur (1); they are hired on a yearly basis supported by the resources provided by the Middle East Center. The recent departure of a talented Islamicist and scholar of Arabic who accepted a faculty position at Georgetown University, is a significant loss to the Department's academic quality and to its capacity to meet the curricular needs of those it serves.

The Department holds a few modest endowments which honor and award scholarly excellence and support distinctive academic programs. For example, NELC coordinates an annual symposium, the Farhat J. Ziadeh Distinguished Lecture Series in Arab and Islamic Studies; and the Maurice and Lois Schwartz Fellowship supports graduate and doctoral students with international travel funds necessary for field research.

The Department is supported by one administrative assistant (100%), an undergraduate advisor (75%) and a program assistant (75%). The facilities are well-appointed, with a remodeled library, conference room, and generous graduate meeting room space.

### Departmental Norms and Leadership

The Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literature is currently serving in his fifth year. He is a leading scholar in his field, and is described by colleagues as “vigorous, efficient, organized and capable of thinking outside the box.” Under his direction, the separate area specialties developed greater autonomy with individual faculty leadership over each of the programs within the department. NELC shares common intellectual goals in teaching and learning, but any shared sense of a joint departmental mission has been eroded by individual units gaining greater autonomy, and with the loss of a key faculty position that served as the intellectual link between sub-units. The Chair acknowledges this, and has developed a management style to match the structure. Faculty meetings are brief and non-consultative. Also under the Chair’s leadership, the NELC Student Group (founded in the 2007-2008 academic year) arranges annual interdisciplinary cultural conferences connecting and integrating the disparate intellectual emphases within the department in an impressive way.

### The Undergraduate Program

For the past three years, enrollment in the NELC undergraduate major has remained steady at approximately 100 students, a significant achievement for a small department with a curriculum centered on notoriously difficult languages. The committee was impressed with the undergraduates we met during the site visit; they are bright, ambitious and uniformly enthusiastic about the quality of the various tracks within the department. NELC majors regularly win university-wide recognition and even national awards, and if they choose to go on to graduate study, are offered spots in leading Ph.D. programs.

The loss of the faculty member to Georgetown University in 2010 created a huge hole in the undergraduate curriculum, especially for Arabic language majors. Other faculty members in the department have stepped in to provide some options for student learning (such as creating directed study sessions in Arabic to accompany civilization classes) but these are only stop-gap measures. The curricular disarray in upper level Arabic, combined with the appointment of a brand new undergraduate advisor in fall of 2010 has resulted in confusion among the advanced undergraduates; some are worried that their graduation will be delayed. The Review Committee believes that clearer

communication with the students (and flexibility about specific course requirements until a replacement for the departed faculty member can be recruited) will allay these concerns.

Lack of access to Beginning Arabic remains an issue, as it was in the 2004 report. The department turns away hundreds of students each quarter. While it is neither feasible nor advisable to provide 300 spaces in Beginning Arabic every year, it is possible that the new budget model will allow the addition of one more Arabic lecturer, which would benefit NELC and MEC as well as easing the ferocity of the competition for undergraduates to get into classes and complete their degree requirements in a timely manner.

### The Graduate Program

At present, the NELC program offers only MAs. Since there were no admissions last year, there are now only 9 MA students enrolled, as compared to 15 in previous periods. A part-time staff member assists the faculty member who serves as Director of Graduate Studies. The three graduate students who met with the Review Committee seemed generally satisfied with the program.

Although the Department does not offer a doctorate, exceptional students who wish to work with a particular faculty member are able to apply to the Independent Ph.D. Program, the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies, or to the Department of Comparative Literature. Neither the graduate students nor the faculty endorsed the idea of a departmental (NELC) Ph.D., which makes sense to the Review Committee given the small number of faculty members in the department.

As far as financial aid is concerned, various endowments (with reduced income in recent years) provide small scholarships in the particular fields for which they were founded. A limited number of TA-ships are also available, although there are currently fewer provided than in the past. NELC graduate students, along with all other UW students, can apply for Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowships, administered by the Middle East Center, which received the highest dollar amount of FLAS money awarded to any of the National Resource Centers applying in the 2010-2014 cycle.

To improve graduate education and opportunities for NELC students, the Review Committee recommends two changes. First, the University's graduate application process needs to be adjusted so that FLAS fellowships can be offered to *incoming students*, as they are at other National Resource Centers (currently, FLAS fellowships are only awarded to students already enrolled in a University of Washington program). FLAS fellowships serve as an important recruiting device at peer institutions, yet this has yet to be adopted here.

Secondly, the Review Committee recommends the adoption of a thesis option in the MA Program. At the present time, one or two seminar papers serve as the basis for adjudicating a student's performance. A more substantial piece of work might serve as a better preparation for students who wish to continue on to a doctoral program, either at

the University of Washington or elsewhere. While accepting that not all students might wish to write a thesis, we feel that a thesis option should be available for students who wish to pursue it.

### Relations With Other Units

It is very important for a relatively small unit like NELC to maintain good relations with other units on campus; such relations increase its visibility and highlight its critical importance to the endeavor of the University. This is particularly true at the present moment, when the Middle East is so much in the public eye. The relationship between NELC and the federally funded Middle East Center, housed in the Henry Jackson School of International Studies, is particularly important to both units. The Department receives significant resources from the Center, including support for lecturers and TA-ships. In addition, the Middle East Center pays for training of language teachers and academic conferences hosted by NELC. For its part, MEC, which was ranked #1 in the country in the 2010-2014 competition, is dependent on NELC, since an application for federal funds would not be possible without effective language instruction.

As dependent as the two units are on each other, their interests are not the same. The Middle East Center is mandated to provide instruction in Middle Eastern affairs, producing students who are capable of assuming positions of responsibility in government, academe and the private sector. NELC, like other language departments in the Humanities, was established to foster the disciplined academic study of ancient and modern languages and civilizations. Academic enterprises do not exist to serve federal mandates, nor can the Middle East Center meet all the needs of humanistic departments.

Tensions exist between NELC and MEC, as they do between most language departments and federal Title VI Centers. The problems between NELC and the Middle East Center are perhaps more significant in degree, as they seem to have generated personal resentments among the relatively small and consistent group of people who administer both units.

Although it may be a counsel of perfection, the Review Committee finds that it is necessary for both sides to recognize that their interests, though congruent, will never be the same, and that the difficulties of the relationship are ultimately structural. Consistency and communication are key on both sides. Federal grants require considerable advance planning, and commitments made must be honored by NELC. At the same time, the Middle East Center must be prepared to consult not only with language teachers and faculty, but also to forge an understanding with department leaders as the terms of collaboration between units are outlined.

With a newly appointed Director of the Henry Jackson School of International Studies in 2010, who has also served as the Chair of the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies, the opportunity for collaboration is ripe.

## Recommendations

1. The Islamic Studies position is critical to this unit, and to a number of other programs on campus, and must be replaced.
2. NELC should consolidate its resources, work as a team, and take better advantage of opportunities afforded by collaboration with other units.
3. Establish a graduate colloquium to connect *all students* in Middle East Studies, ancient and modern, and enlist graduate students to lead this effort.
4. Support undergraduate excellence in Near Eastern Languages and Civilization by expanding access to critical courses. Demand for Arabic remains high, and NELC is well-positioned to be revitalized under a new, activity based budget model.
5. Work with the Chair to reward collaboration across programs, areas, and personalities to avoid further fragmentation of the faculty.
6. Do not review NELC for ten years, and instead, support the department as its members work to implement the recommendations of this report.