

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

DEPARTMENT OF NEAR EASTERN LANGUAGES & CIVILIZATION

10 September 2004

Associate Dean Gail L. Dubrow
Graduate School
Box 353770

Dear Dean Dubrow,

I offer below the response from the Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations to the report of the 10-year review committee dated April 28, 2004. Let me first of all apologize that our response has been a bit delayed. A variety of activities and responsibilities within the department toward the end of the last academic year prevented our being able to discuss and compose a response before the summer period, and then, as it turned out, personal obligations involving the illness and death of my father during the summer further delayed the process.

The Department also wishes to offer at the very outset its sincere thanks to all the members of the review committee for their diligence and thoroughness in the fact-finding stages of the review, for the extensive amount of time they were willing to devote to this service, for the consideration shown during the interview process, and for the thoughtful, constructive and most supportive nature of the comments and recommendations contained in their final report.

We begin with comments regarding the nine recommendations at the conclusion of the committee's report:

Recommendation 1: It will come as no surprise that we agree with the committee's general view regarding the value and importance of NELC and the need for a larger amount of support for the department. We read this to include an increase in both faculty and administrative staff support, and the corresponding additional space to accommodate these.

Recommendations 2 and 4: We combine comment on these two because they entail closely related concerns. On the one hand, the committee's recommendation (#2) about the importance of not eliminating one of the core contemporary Middle East languages (Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Hebrew) is another point on which we are in full agreement. We think that perhaps the spirit of this recommendation is to underscore positively how important having all four language offered is to such things as continuing funding for the Middle East Title VI Center, and we endorse that view very strongly.

At the same time, we feel that the exclusive focus on only these four modern language areas requires some clarification, since taken by itself (a) it may give (particularly in combination with #4) a misleading impression of the actual role of the Central Asian dimension of the department,

and (b) it does not convey the very important role that the ancient Near Eastern language program has come to play within NELC.

The department considers our Central Asian language program to be very appropriately treated as a part of the same fabric constituted by such languages as Turkish, Persian, or Arabic. Linguistically, languages such as Turkish, Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uighur, etc., fit very naturally together in a comparative Turkic studies program. Many of our students benefit from precisely this availability of several representatives of this language group within one department. As part of the Central Asian Turkic/Comparative Turkic Program there is a regular offering of the ancient Turkic languages, Orkhon Turkic and Old Uighur. Orkhon Turkic is the historical foundation for all Turkic languages, including Turkish, and thus any Turkish Program benefits by from being offered within the context of a strong Central Asian/Comparative Turkic Program. Moreover, the natural role of the Central Asian language and culture program as integral to the department's curricula in Comparative Islamic studies has never been clearer. There is growing academic interest in Islam in Central Asia, as illustrated by the recently contracted Uzbekistan Educational Partnerships grant.

The committee's recommendation is that the Central Asian studies program be kept—and on that we of course agree—but that *how* it is supported should be reconsidered. This seems fundamentally intended as a constructive recommendation, with the implication that the UW should seek strategies to strengthen and ensure the longevity of Central Asian studies at the UW, at a time when the importance of this region and its culture is receiving only increased recognition nationally. Whatever mechanisms for this are arrived at, we would only urge that the intellectual appropriateness of housing the study of Turkic languages together be taken very seriously.

One note that we would also add pertains to the last sentence in recommendation #4, regarding the “inordinate length of time” to degree for some students in the Central Asian program. Many students in this program take advantage of the exchange agreements we have with several universities in Central Asia to study and do research there, before taking their M.A. examinations. The time they spend in Central Asia has often been of significant benefit in helping them to obtain good positions after graduation either in Central Asia or in the U.S. In any event, it also needs to be noted that we do have in place an annual review process of the progress of each graduate student, involving discussion of each student by all NELC faculty. We certainly concur that time to degree should be as expeditious as possible, and we think that our current procedures are improving the efficiency for students in all the areas of the department.

The faculty expressed some surprise and disappointment that in the final recommendations no mention was made of the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) studies program. The report does note earlier that only a few other institutions (e.g., UC Berkeley, University of Michigan, University of Chicago, or Harvard University) also teach a range of the ancient Near Eastern languages in addition to modern ones. The ancient language offerings range from Akkadian and Hieroglyphic Egyptian to pre-classical Arabic. Some of these offerings would be found at only one or two other institutions in the U.S. And the report also rightly mentions that NELC's coverage of the ancient Near East has helped establish natural ties with units such as Classics and expands the ties with the Jackson School's Comparative Religion Program. NELC's ANE program has shown rapid growth over the last 7-8 years, with rising student demand for such courses as the Biblical Hebrew language series, and the courses in translation taught by Professor Scott Noegel. We feel that in this review process it is important to underscore the strength and growth in this sector of the department, and the sharp need for more resources in this area ought to be raised

directly. The question of ways to enhance the integration of the ANE program into the rest of the department is another, related issue that might have been raised.

Recommendation 3: We concur with the committee's observation about the need for a cadre of permanent lecturers to support more of the basic language instruction in NELC. We had raised this need in our self-study, and it was most encouraging to find that the review committee so strongly agreed on this point. The one concern that was voiced in our departmental discussion of this item again pertains to the limitation of the wording in this recommendation only to "contemporary" Middle Eastern languages. In our view, the same structural problem exists in ANE studies--i.e., the basic first and second year language courses absorb so much of the teaching time of the single professor in ANE, preventing that professor from handling the demands of growing enrollments in the full range of other important courses in a popular program.

Recommendation 5: The committee's recommendation that NELC have its own Ph.D. program elicited differing viewpoints within the faculty. It was gratifying in general to have the review committee express its confidence in the department with this recommendation, and some department members strongly supported the recommendation. However, others just as strongly opposed it--at least at this time. Some felt that for the department to have the critical mass to support its own Ph.D. program there would need to be a significant increase in number of faculty within NELC itself.

After considerable discussion of this issue, the faculty reached a consensus that before moving to create the department's own new Ph.D. program, what should be attempted first is a reexamination of the structure, operation and potential of the already-existing Interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Near and Middle Eastern Studies (IPNMES). The latter was originally designed to be flexible enough meet the needs for a Ph.D. program in NELC—as well as for other units. And in fact several NELC M.A. graduates have gone on to the IPNMES program. The IPNMES program has unquestionably had some distinct successes over the last decade. Yet in recent years the relation between NELC and the IPNMES has grown (as the report observes) very problematic.

We feel that there are some changes that might be initiated in IPNMES at this time that could both build on the successes that it has experienced and also establish a far more constructive and productive relationship with the programs in NELC. The first would be the move to appoint a faculty member from NELC as Director of IPNMES. The first two Directors of IPNMES have both been from the social sciences (History and Political Science, respectively). We think that this is a very advantageous and appropriate juncture at which to pass the torch to the humanities side of the interdisciplinary team. We do have a proposed candidate, in the person of Professor Scott Noegel, and he has indicated a willingness to discuss this possibility.

We also recommend that measures be taken to enhance communication among the members of the IPNMES faculty (e.g., more regular and frequent meetings; but there could be other channels that would improve communication as well). We think that there are steps that could be taken to clarify guidelines for students and tighten the procedures within the program, which would be helpful to both students and participating faculty. The existing IPNMES degree program has proven itself useful for students in several different fields who have been successful in being placed after graduation (Turkish literature; Middle Eastern politics; Religious Studies, etc.). We think that it is possible that this degree program might be steered in such a way that it could capitalize far more than it has to date on the growing demand for and excellent opportunities in Islamic Studies.

In addition, as indicated in our Self-Study, we anticipate that future closer and better collaboration with the Department of Comparative Literature by some of our faculty can provide a context suitable to the needs of many Ph.D. students who might wish to focus on the literatures in which our faculty members specialize.

We therefore would suggest that these alternate, intermediate strategies be seriously pursued over the next few years and the question of whether there is a justification for mounting a separate NELC Ph.D. program be revisited at a later review.

Recommendation 6: The review committee was concerned that the requirements of the existing M.A. program in NELC are too stringent, and in particular that we have too heavy a language requirement. We appreciate why this comment was made and that it is a reasonable question. However, in response we would ask whether most students in NELC really are having difficulty in completing their degree in 2-3 years? We do not see this to be the case. And indeed, we would point out that the admissions requirement for our M.A. includes significant progress prior to admission in at least one of the languages offered by NELC. This gives admitted students an automatic head start. We feel that students who wish to take only one language might be better served by applying to, for example, the excellent Middle East Studies M.A. program in the Jackson School. The recommendation in the report implies that we would have more M.A. students if we lowered the language requirement. But in our view the lower number of students in our M.A. program is as much or more a factor of the available financial support we can offer.

We do agree that the issue of how to staff the relative large number of language offerings in NELC is another genuine problem that is to be addressed. But we do not think that diluting our requirements is the answer that best serves the strengths of the department. Our experience is that it is our M.A. students who ultimately benefit the most from the current requirements, since the more demanding language training that they receive makes them more competitive for top Ph.D. programs.

Recommendations 7 and 8: These two are closely related, and they are excellent suggestions. We do in fact have some *ideas* for such things as a core graduate course that would be required of all M.A. students; it is the resources to allow such a course to be offered consistently that we need—i.e., resources that would consistently free up the necessary professorial faculty to teach it. As far as departmental colloquia are concerned, we agree that this should be done. The department has in the fact tried this, but attendance was a problem. We have discussed approaches such as giving M.A. students academic credit for attendance at colloquium series.

We also agree on the importance of more social gatherings, and actually have been making efforts in this regard. For the past few years we have had regular gatherings at least at the beginning and end of the academic year. The problem is getting students to attend. Yet we do think that this effort is well worth it and will be continuing to find new and better ways to build more departmental culture.

Recommendation 9: We agree completely that we have not been doing as good a job as we might in informing students of anticipated offerings for several quarters in advance. Recently we have begun trying to use the departmental web site to post this information. But it the responsibility of the faculty to do a much better job of setting at least tentative plans as far ahead as possible, making these plans public, and keeping the information current.

One further general comment from the departmental discussion was that the report might have addressed the relationship of NELC to Jewish Studies. This relationship actually was not mentioned in the report, and yet it should be stressed that virtually everything that Professor Naomi Sokoloff teaches is linked to Jewish Studies and counts toward the Jewish Studies major and minor. This is also true of most of what Professor Scott Noegel teaches.

Finally, two more minor points on which we feel that the information in the report needs some correction or at least qualification: The report mentions that “there appear to be few departmental meetings.” In fact, we hold regular faculty meetings, at least once a month and more often for special purposes. The report also mentions that in the interview with the Director of the Middle East Center it was “revealed that there was almost no support of NELC by the Center” except for FLAS fellowships. In spite of the strained relationship between NELC faculty and the Center, in fairness it should be said that NELC has indeed regularly received TAs from the Center, and there has also been at least one offer of support to hire a particular lecturer in Persian—though this effort did not work out.

Once again we wish to thank the review committee for its excellent work and constructive recommendations. We hope that the responses above indicate some of our own perspectives on important issues raised by the committee, and that they will further contribute to constructive discussion in the next stages of the review. We very much look forward to meeting with the Deans and representatives of the review committee in the autumn for this conversation.

Sincerely,

Michael A. Williams, Chair