

Review Committee Report
Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in
Near and Middle Eastern Studies

October 25, 2004

The Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies (IPNMES) was established by the University of Washington Board of Regents in September 1992. The Program's first cohort of students began their studies in autumn 1994. The Program was reviewed in February 1999 and renewed for a five year term. The present review, begun in February 2004, is thus the second in the Program's history. Like the reviewers five years ago, we found this to be a small, rigorous, high-quality program. Ten years on, we can now also report that this new interdisciplinary program is having remarkable success in placing its graduates in academic positions inside and outside the United States. We have no hesitation, therefore, in recommending the Program be renewed for another five years. For all its achievements, however, IPNMES remains fragile, for reasons we will discuss below. Because of this fragility, we recommend that IPNMES should be reviewed again in five years rather than waiting the usual ten years.

The Review Process

The Review Committee was appointed by Dean Marsha Landolt on November 5, 2003, and consisted of the following members:

Robert C. Stacey, Professor of History, UW (Committee Chair)
Ann S. Anagnost, Assoc. Prof. of Anthropology, UW
Paul Burstein, Professor of Sociology and Chair, Jewish Studies Program, UW
Mary Layoun, Professor and Chair of Comparative Literature, University of Wisconsin,
Madison
Robert Vitalis, Assoc. Professor of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania

The Committee's charge letter of February 5, 2004, asked specifically that we consider the standing of IPNMES relative to other nationally-recognized programs in Near and Middle Eastern Studies; its current size, with respect to both faculty and student numbers; and its future viability in light of these facts. It also asked us to consider the intellectual directions the program is presently pursuing; its relationships with other academic units at the University of Washington; and the support, both financial and intellectual, the program offers to its students.

To these ends, the internal committee members held preliminary meetings with several Program faculty members in order to get an orientation on the issues facing the Program. On February 26 and 27, the dates of the site visit, the entire committee met with nearly all the active faculty participants in the Program; with Jean Rogers, the Graduate School professional staff member who acts as administrator for the Program;

and with a group of six current graduate students. We also met with Michael Williams, Chair of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization; with all the members of the NELC faculty except for Brannon Wheeler, who was on leave and away from Seattle; and with Anand Yang, Director of the Jackson School of International Studies.

Quality of the Program

In comparison with peer institutions across the country, the quality of the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies appears extraordinarily high and its nature unique. The Program's success in placing its graduates in departments across a range of disciplines (see Appendix E of the self study) and the high professional visibility of the faculty are two important markers of its remarkable quality. Unlike virtually all other Ph.D. granting programs in Middle East area studies, IPNMES has trained and placed its graduates both in language and culture *and* in social science departments. All eight of its graduates have either secured a full-time tenure track position or a post-doctoral fellowship appointment. IPNMES' thirty two faculty members are spread across a rich and diverse range of social science and humanities disciplines. Their publishing records and scholarly profiles in their respective disciplines and in the field of Near & Middle Eastern Studies are comparable to peer institutions and in some instances, they lead the field in their scholarly work. As might be expected of affiliation with a lively and engaging program that, however, is essentially maintained on the goodwill overload commitment of the faculty, their involvement in and engagement with IPNMES is as diverse as their disciplines, waxing and waning depending on their departmental and research commitments. The high caliber of IPNMES in spite of its lack of resources is both remarkable and admirable.

The more conventional Near or Middle East Studies Ph.D. program is one with a profile like that of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at the University of Washington. Examples include the original and still highly-ranked degree-granting programs at Harvard, Princeton, Chicago, Berkeley, NYU, the University of Pennsylvania, and so on. In these departments, training focuses on expertise in reading and interpreting texts, and, as an extension, work on ancient and medieval history drawing on the same skills. Students trained in this way typically teach in other departments of Near Eastern Languages, departments of Fine Arts, History, Religious Studies, and—in those departmental instances in which Anthropology retains commitments to museum-curating, material culture, and salvage work--in departments of Anthropology. Put another way, the advanced study of and teaching about non-Western but highly literate peoples and cultures is still primarily carried out within humanities departments in U.S. higher education.

In the years following WWII, the Federal government and private foundations provided funding to support bridging institutions—in the form of area studies centers—that would support interdisciplinary study of the modern Middle East and other world regions across the humanities and the social sciences. Fifty years later, advanced study of the modern Middle East and of contemporary Middle Eastern politics, culture, and society is being carried out at all of the University of Washington's peer institutions but typically not within Departments of Near and Middle Eastern Studies. Rather the norm is

that social scientists work within Political Science or Sociology Departments, for example. Faculty lines for modern historians are also generally in disciplinary departments. The main exception is the case of scholars of modern vernacular literature, novels, films, and culture, who tend to hold positions in Middle East Studies Departments, where they are usually required to teach language as well as literature or culture.

On this intellectual and institutional landscape, it is not an exaggeration to say that the norm for relations between social science and classical studies faculty is often a fraught one. As a result, students often find one or the other of the traditions caricatured; little if any serious engagement takes place between scholars or with work that stands on one side or the other of the modern and medieval or ancient border lines. Even less serious engagement takes place at the graduate student level between those working in the humanities and those in social sciences. But at the University of Washington, under the admirable leadership of the IPNMES directors and with the committed engagement of IPNMES faculty, the Program has evolved a viable model for the training of new social scientists and humanists in ways that the original area studies model envisioned. That is through rigorous training, both in language and culture *and* in social science methods.

The main form of integration of these two broad areas is in the more-rigorous-than-usual IPNMES language requirement. In comparison with departmental or disciplinary norms, that requirement commendably approaches the skill level expected of expertise in literary exegesis. This level of competence is hardly ever seen in social scientists who are not native speakers of the less commonly taught languages such as Arabic, Hebrew, or Persian. This is one of the things that distinguishes the Program and its students.

At the same time, however, there appears to be no equivalent cross-skill development experience in social sciences for students with research interests in the classical or modern literary traditions. The “common experience” or “introduction to the field” seminar that students note as lacking in the program at present might serve to play such a role. Whether in the form of a required introductory seminar in methods and approaches or a faculty-graduate student research colloquium, one emphasis ought to be exposing students to work across the social sciences/classical and arts divide, guided by faculty or teams of faculty who can engage these different fields productively.

Overall, however, the IPNMES faculty, students, and the curricular program itself stand as a remarkably successful and unique intersection of diverse disciplines and training. It is worthy of continued and augmented support as a uniquely visionary achievement in training broadly informed and deeply disciplined scholars of the Near and Middle East. IPNMES is a strikingly impressive and unique configuration of faculty, students, and intellectual disciplines.

The Program's Position and Role at the University of Washington

Because it is an interdisciplinary program, and therefore has no direct connection to any single academic department, IPNMES is able to require both systematic methodological training and rigorous linguistic standards from all its students. This is a combination only rarely found even in Near and/or Middle Eastern Studies Programs; it is extremely rare amongst departmentally-based social science Ph.D programs. The UW program has, therefore, a quite distinctive profile among Ph.D-granting programs nationwide. Mastery of one regional language is required for admission; all candidates who enter the program are then required to study a second regional language and also a European research language other than English. Each student must also take a sequence of methodology courses in a core discipline or disciplines. This combination of intensive linguistic and cultural expertise in area studies, combined with methodological sophistication in at least one academic discipline, has proved to be quite attractive on the academic job market. Uncertainties about the Program's long-term ability to place its graduates, expressed by the review committee five years ago, have been decisively resolved by the experience of the past five years, during which every single one of the Program's graduates has found academic employment either in a tenure-track position or a post-doctoral fellowship. Our committee sees no reason why this record of successful placements would not continue so long as current faculty members remain at UW and are associated with the Program.

The Program's interdisciplinarity is a key to its success. We recommend, therefore, that it remain in its current location within the Graduate School, rather than being transferred to the Jackson School of International Studies or the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization (neither of which units is, at present, authorized to offer the PhD degree). That said, however, we should also note that the appeal of IPNMES is not necessarily limited to students whose interests are directly interdisciplinary. Even students whose interests mark them clearly as historians, political scientists, or as scholar of religion or literature, but who nonetheless have a strong area studies concentration in the Near and/or Middle East, are likely to be attracted to the Program, especially as it becomes more firmly established and more widely known.

Interdisciplinarity has its costs, however, and we would note three costs in particular which need to be acknowledged and, to the extent possible, resolved.

- 1) IPNMES depends for its success upon the unremunerated willingness of individual faculty members to train, supervise, and mentor its students. All the faculty members associated with IPNMES have full-time appointments in other academic units. Their involvement with IPNMES brings them benefits, to be sure; but by and large, these faculty members do NOT wish to add additional burdensome administrative duties to their lives. Partly for this reason, there is no formal group of "core" faculty who meet regularly to direct the Program, or to provide it with an overall intellectual direction. There are no common courses offered by the Program faculty to all its

students, and there are no seminar programs or speaker series that provide a focus for the academic life of the Program. Students who succeed in the Program need therefore to be highly self-motivated and independent, more so than if they were in a “regular” disciplinary department. Even so, however, most students we spoke with regretted the absence of a common intellectual experience.

- 2) The Program depends heavily upon the willingness of disciplinary departments (NELC, Political Science, and Anthropology in particular, but also History, Sociology and the Middle East Studies Program in the Jackson School) to admit students in the Program into graduate-level classes designed and intended for their own students. There is some disagreement as to how difficult it has been for IPNMES students to secure places in the core methodology sequences they need to take; their experiences on this score seem to have varied from year to year, from department to department, and from student to student. In practice, much seems to depend on whether or not a student has already found a faculty mentor who will “go to bat” for her/him in securing admission to these classes. But even when students do manage to secure a place in the language and methods classes they need, the process of gaining admission to these courses is anxiety-inducing, because there are no formal agreements between IPNMES and the disciplinary departments to guarantee that IPNMES students will in fact be allowed to enroll in these classes.
- 3) Like many interdisciplinary PhD programs, IPNMES is seriously under-resourced. Five years ago, the review committee concluded “that the Program is adequately funded at present and can continue to satisfy its basic goals without any substantial increase in financial support.” Five years later, our committee would render a different verdict. We do not believe IPNMES can maintain its current level of excellence without a significant increase in financial support. Here is why.

Resources

At present, IPNMES is supported by an unpaid Faculty Director; a staff person in the Graduate School who handles student advising for this and several other programs, and who does so quite successfully by all accounts; one three-year graduate fellowship, awarded triennially and funded by an endowment created by a private donor; and one 9-month RA position. The Program has no TA positions, no office space (even mailboxes for its graduate students are donated by NELC), no common space, and no general program funds. With so little support to offer graduate students, IPNMES is effectively limited to recruiting “place-bound” students who are already in Seattle for other reasons. The pool of such students is limited; equally obviously, only a few of these “place-bound” applicants are strong enough academically to compete successfully within a truly national applicant pool. We find no evidence that IPNMES has been admitting weak students to fill its ranks; but at the same time, we do not expect that this pool of “place-bound” students will continue over time to be sufficiently “deep” as to provide a

continuing supply of highly-qualified applicants to the Program. Sooner or later, this pool is likely to become “fished out.”

Because IPNMES is so under-resourced, some of the University’s most eminent faculty, not only in the Jackson School and NELC but also in Political Science and History, are thus effectively excluded from being able to recruit from a nationally (and in this field, internationally) competitive pool of graduate students in their fields. This seems to our committee both a waste of faculty resources and a potential recruitment and retention issue for the affected faculty members. UW has the faculty and library resources to make IPNMES an outstanding graduate program; but without the financial resources necessary to support a nationally and internationally competitive graduate program, our potential to achieve this goal is severely compromised.

Nor is it realistic to imagine that any kind of “core” IPNMES course could be created for the Program’s graduate students, or that a large undergraduate level “Introduction to Middle Eastern Studies” class could be developed (and so generate TA positions for the Program’s students) unless the Program has funding to enable it to “buy out” faculty time from faculty members’ home departments. Both ideas (a “core” graduate course and a large introductory-level undergraduate course) strike this committee as good ones; but neither can be anything more than “a good idea” unless resources are available to enable their implementation.

Governance and Relations with Other Units

As noted above, the Program’s Faculty Director, Professor Ellis Goldberg, receives no salary support and no release time for his efforts. He is a volunteer, who also serves, simultaneously, as Director of the Middle East Studies Center and as Director of the Middle East Studies Program, both housed in JSIS (even though his faculty appointment is 100% in the Political Science department, and so he is not even a voting member of that unit). While unstinting in our appreciation for Professor Goldberg’s willingness to take on so many roles, we do not believe this combination of roles is a desirable one. Quite apart from the unfairness to Professor Goldberg of asking him to take on so many responsibilities without adequate remuneration, the mission of each of these units is different. The Middle East Studies Program (MESP) is a Master’s degree program located in the Jackson School of International Studies; the Middle East Studies Center (the Center) is a Title VI-funded area studies center, also located in JSIS; the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization (NELC) is a BA and MA granting department located in the Humanities Division of the College of Arts and Sciences; and IPNMES is an interdisciplinary PhD program governed by the Graduate School. Ideally, Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Washington should be promoted jointly by these four complementary programs. Unfortunately, combining three of them under a single head inevitably leaves the fourth leg of the “table”, the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization, feeling excluded, even alienated, from these other units. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, this Committee is firmly convinced that if these four units are to work together effectively, they must be headed by four different people.

We also believe that certain changes in the governance structure of the Program itself would be desirable. Communication and coordination are always difficult in interdisciplinary programs; but we believe these problems, which are to some extent inherent in all such programs, could be lessened by creating a steering committee of faculty members drawn from all the constituent departments which contribute to the Program (including MESP, NELC, the Middle East Center, Political Science, History, JSIS, and Anthropology). This committee should then be charged to develop more formalized procedures for admission (at present, candidates are sometimes admitted without most program faculty even being aware of their application) and a more formalized system of faculty advising for entering students. This committee should also take on responsibility for fund-raising (although the University should contribute, it is unrealistic to expect that increased funding for graduate students will come primarily from the Graduate School itself). More broadly, this steering committee should take responsibility for charting the intellectual directions that will characterize the next generation of Near and Middle East Studies experts, and that hence should govern the direction of IPNMES itself.

These changes – having IPNMES, MESP, the Center, and NELC headed by separate people; creating a faculty steering committee for IPNMES; and developing more formalized procedures for admissions – would, in our judgment, lessen considerably the tensions that at present exist in the Program between the “humanists” (who tend to identify with NELC) and the “social scientists” (who tend to identify with JSIS). The review committee has not been able to judge the truth of the perception, widely shared within the NELC faculty, that in recent years the IPNMES program has become a modern-oriented, social science program that no longer has an interest in textually-based, pre-modern literary and cultural studies. In a sense, however, it is not the truth, but the perception of truth, that matters in this case. So long as this perception persists, NELC faculty will continue to feel that they are regarded as a “service” department, useful for the language training they provide, but not true partners in a common interdisciplinary enterprise. It seems to us quite important, therefore, that these changes in the governance of the Program be undertaken at the earliest practicable opportunity.

Recommendations

- 1) The Program should be renewed for a five year term, and reviewed again at the end of that time. Its achievements over the past five years have been admirable, but its resources are inadequate, and so it remains fragile. A couple of faculty departures, or a drying up of the local applicant pool, could bring IPNMES to a halt in very short order.
- 2) IPNMES, the Middle East Studies Program, the Middle East Studies Center, and NELC should each be headed by a different individual. This arrangement will actually increase the effectiveness of cooperation between these units.
- 3) The Director of IPNMES should be remunerated, either by at least 2 weeks of salary, or else by comparable release time.
- 4) IPNMES is properly sized. It should not grow, nor should it shrink.

- 5) The Program must be able to recruit graduate students from a national pool of applicants. If it is to do this, it must be able to guarantee 3 years of support to at least two entering students per year. This can best be accomplished by some combination of additional central resources, RA and TA appointments, fundraising by the Program, and perhaps resources from the Middle East Studies Center.
- 6) Discussions should occur between the Director of IPNMES, the Director of JSIS, and the Chairs of Anthropology, History, NELC, Political Science and Sociology, in order to guarantee that IPNMES students will be able to get into the core methodology and language courses they need for their programs.
- 7) A steering committee of IPNMES faculty should be appointed, membership of which should be drawn from the primary academic units that contribute faculty resources toward IPNMES. This committee should be charged to develop more formalized admissions procedures and a more reliable faculty advising system for entering students.
- 8) The steering committee should also take responsibility for engaging the faculty and students of the Program in a thoroughgoing discussion of the future intellectual directions for Near and Middle Eastern Studies, both nationally and at UW. This discussion might be focused around a collaborative, on-going faculty and graduate student seminar modeled on the one run for many years by the Comparative Religion program in the Jackson School.
- 9) Funding should be available to “buy out” certain IPNMES faculty from their teaching obligations to their home departments, so that they could develop and teach a large undergraduate course, “Introduction to Middle Eastern Studies.” This course should be cross-listed between NELC and JSIS, and would, ideally, be team-taught. IPNMES students should have first priority to TA this class.
- 10) The steering committee should actively debate whether a core graduate course, required of all IPNMES students, should be created. If the decision is “yes,” then funding should be provided to “buy out” faculty to develop and teach it.