

Report of the Internal Review Committee for the Humanities Center, Johns Hopkins University

The Internal Review Committee for the Humanities Center met with faculty, administration, and students on November 10th and 11th, 2014. Over these two days it also met with the External Reviewers. This report follows the one submitted by the E.R. and is largely a commentary on its findings as to the questions presented to reviewers.

The Humanities Center Department's character is rooted in the department's history. It is small in size, with faculty concentrated around specific intellectual areas and research but at the same time with broad interests. Since its founding, it has been known as the *Humanities Center*, which is how it styles itself in its self-study. It was founded in 1966, before what are called "Humanities Centers" or "Humanities Institutes" at other universities became widespread. Elsewhere, humanities centers are the supra-departmental entities intended to foster co-operation across between departments. Such humanities centers invite speakers, provide internal and external fellowships for faculty and post-doctoral fellows, and organize seminars, often around a yearly theme. They have no permanent faculty or specific disciplinary interests of their own. Partly because it was originally very small and therefore relied crucially on the involvement of faculty from other humanities departments, the Hopkins Humanities Center continues to have something in common with "Humanities Centers" as these are conceived elsewhere. Its seminars are regularly attended by students from other departments. It brings in short-term visitors from overseas, whose lectures and seminars are attended by students and faculty from across the humanities. However, although the Humanities Center maintains a high level of involvement with other departments, it is vital to recognize that, over time, it has evolved into an autonomous department, albeit one with a distinctive and somewhat unusual character.

Based on the wide-ranging interests of their faculty, the Humanities Center claims to be "a crucial meeting ground" for scholars across the university's humanities and social sciences. This is not self-evident, as "humanities" also describe the focus of many other Krieger departments in many aspects overlapping or simply connecting with those of the HCD. This claim for interdisciplinarity, instead, has been borne out in the department's history (especially since the 1960s), the major intellectual personalities that have shaped its culture, and the lines of research this faculty has pursued. At the present moment, however, when facing the retirement of two (out of four) full professors, this is a matter of concern.

Another topic that was repeatedly discussed in the course of this review is whether there is an issue of "isolation". Some faculty from other departments who operate closely with the HCD did not see such a problem. At the same time the question whether connections with other departments are sufficiently strong and fluent, both for faculty and students, is a concern that has been raised in discussions concerning the desirability of creating a Humanities Institute. However, the relation of such an Institute to the HCD however has yet to be clarified (see later).

1. Faculty

The department currently has four full professors, one associate, two assistants, and one lecturer; it is a small department. Besides interaction with the faculty of other

departments (who teach HCD students in their own seminars, teach joint seminars with the Humanities Center's, faculty, or participate in HCD events) the Humanities Center also has an important number of joint appointments in the departments of: Classics (Celenza, Yatromanolakis), Anthropology (Veena Das), Philosophy (Förster, Melamed), History of Art (Warnock), and GRLL (Neefs). Invitations to accept secondary appointments are issued at the discretion of the department. This is one important aspect of the department's interaction in Krieger (that the HCD has, for example, more joint appointments than GRLL was repeatedly mentioned to us).

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, one of the basic issues that this department is now facing is the situation generated by the immediate retirement of two of their full professors: Ruth Leys and Michael Fried. The department's proposed plan is to replace them with people covering areas similar to theirs: "Modern Art and Aesthetics" and "Intellectual History". While recent history demonstrates their outstanding contribution, and also how their particular areas perfectly correspond to the HCD's inter-disciplinary nature, we see no particular reason to try to perpetuate these particular fields with the new hires. It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to replicate Leys and Fried, and ultimately not advisable to try to do so. This is also consistent with the history of the department, whose wide intellectual horizon and ambition has taken very specific directions based on the concrete interests and expertise of the faculty. In our opinion, the search should be as open as possible –under the umbrella of the "Humanities"- considering obviously the department's recent history, or the synergies with the present faculty, but also open to exploring new areas which might currently be more innovative, and not necessarily represented by what actual or former faculty have been doing. The list of those areas in which the department is planning its expansion –Philosophy of Visual Media, New Concepts and Forms of Life, and Islamic Thought and Global Religion- are just examples of such promising new avenues to explore.

It is also important to open the question of who should be part of these discussions in order to be sure that the decision fully explores and considers these possibilities. We completely agree with the ER that "the person matters more than the field." One final issue that needs to be discussed is that of Michael Fried's replacement. As a joint appointment between the HCD and History of Art departments, discussions should necessarily include the latter, and be decided in the benefit of both departments.

2. Undergraduate teaching.

This department has traditionally concentrated strongly on graduate education. The introduction of the Major will bring an important change in its culture and will require some adjustments. The HCD is offering a course for undergraduates on "Great Books," but has yet not offered a major. This is now planned with three concentrations: **Intellectual History, Comparative Literature and Comparative American Cultures**. This proposal has been discussed by the Curricular Committee and is awaiting approval. This Internal Committee also found almost unanimous support among faculty and students as the External Committee did.. It does however share some of its concerns.

- Is it appropriate to name the major after the Department? It seems more reasonable to name them each after their respective fields. Also, Humanities describe the disciplines of numerous courses taught by many Krieger departments.
- The E.C. has considered the major proposal "overly ambitious". There are several ways to face this problem. One is to reduce the number of seminars, and

increase the number of Humanities-related electives as posited in their review. As raised in our discussion with faculty, however, it is recommended that this be considered an opportunity to expand the number of cross-listed courses. This not only will relieve the burden on the HC's limited faculty, it will also reinforce the ties with other humanities departments' faculties; ties which, at this moment, remain somewhat limited. As it was suggested during our conversations, this might lead to a more flexible model (Brown's Master in Public Humanities was cited as an example).

- One major concern has to do with the graduate students' involvement as TAs. In some seminars, the instructor assumes that, before coming to class, the undergraduates have acquired a sophisticated understanding of the often difficult assigned reading. As a result, the instructor devotes class time to discussing the issues raised by the week's reading at a level for which the undergraduates are not prepared. In some cases, the instructor may not explain the assigned texts at all, choosing rather to relate them to other works with which the undergraduates may not be familiar at all. When this happens, the TAs feel that the responsibility for making the core readings accessible to undergraduates devolves entirely on them, so that they are not so much assisting the instructor as teaching the class. The graduate students did not suggest that such problems arise in all seminars, and they were understandably reluctant to cite individual classes or faculty. There is also the fact that, recently, undergraduate enrollment in the Department's courses has declined. Since other humanities departments have experienced declines in undergraduate enrollment, it is unlikely that the decreased enrollment in HCD courses is a reflection of the problems that the graduate students identify. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is a problem that needs to be addressed, particularly given that the department is preparing to launch a new major. Serious reconsideration of undergraduate pedagogy is very much to be welcomed.

3. Graduate program(s)

This committee was very much impressed with the graduate students. There seemed to be a high level of collegiality, of departmental/intellectual identity, and of agreement in their opinions regarding the strengths (and weaknesses) of the HCD. Even if the HCD's model does not correspond to a normal type, students who might have decided to enter departments particularly specialized in their areas of interest (e.g. Comparative Literature) come to the Humanities Center attracted by its reputation and its interdisciplinary nature no less than for the quality of its faculty.

- One sensitive element is that of its number. There are currently 14 graduate students. We had a very similar impression as the External Reviewers on the importance of preserving this student body's critical mass, particularly on how damaging it would be to cut down its number in order to raise graduate students' stipends. Although their interaction with other departments seems to be strong and fluid, it is the department's graduate students themselves who constitute their primary and most important interlocutors. This is important for example for the specific issue of the conversations held in a seminar, but also for the department's group in itself. Size is in this particular case not only a quantitative matter, but also qualitative. Alteration in cohort size would have effects on the group's intellectual life and morale.

The HCD graduate program is characterized by its freedom. There are few requirements, and no required courses or seminars. Instead, students need to take three field examinations (e.g. written examinations, publication projects, or MA degrees). The Self Study report argues that this is coherent with the nature of the department: to encourage students to be intellectually creative, incentivizing them to go beyond disciplinary barriers.

While we accept the central contentions of this argument, we agree with the External Reviewers that there are potential improvements that should be considered.

- As it was mentioned to us, one of the important benefits of this flexible system is that it allows time and opportunity for students to work, for example, on their language training. This is considered to be one of their strengths. Nevertheless, this is also subject to the availability of summer funding.
- Stipends/Summer funding. If, as we have already mentioned, cutting down the number of graduate students does not seem to be the right solution to their (small) stipends, that only means it is not the appropriate one. The program is currently able to attract the students they want. It does not seem as if stipends have been an obstacle for the program in attracting the right students. However, there is a more practical problem when facing living costs that turns particularly serious during the summer. Students are expected to have saved enough money during the year, which –according to their testimony- is not always easy. The department is supportive when it comes to academic expenses (such as attending to conferences or language programs). During the summer, however, travel expenses and/or accommodation become difficult to face with no extra funding. Given the number of students working on Comparative Literature, it seems important to facilitate as much as possible their residence and research abroad.
- On isolation. Students at the HCD are encouraged to take courses outside their department. Given its interdisciplinary nature this seems reasonable and necessary, although we have no data available that would enable us to measure the extent to which this occurs. At the same time, it does not seem that the best is being done in order to promote synergies between graduate programs (at least in one case it was mentioned to us that graduate students of one department were discouraged from taking courses at the HCD).
- Graduate Student Placement seems to be good but not outstanding. 2014: Loyola University, Maryland Institute College of Art, MIT (Instructor, Instructor, Lecturer in German). The question is one of institutions, but also if they end up teaching in the right departments.

4. Relation with the proposed Institute for the Humanities

The proposed Institute for the Humanities is one issue that absorbed much of the time during our review. Surprisingly, the response of the faculty we had the opportunity to talk to was unanimous in at least one aspect: no one seemed to know anything about the new Institute's content, structure or goals. Nor could the members of this committee answer the faculty's questions. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that we found quite a lot of resistance to the idea of the Institute. It is not been seen as a threat, but some faculty simply considered it unnecessary, as they saw that the HCD represents what the Institute is supposed to cover. In our opinion, this project urgently needs a very different format for its

discussion, one that involves not only the HCD but also the rest of the Homewood departments that in one way or another consider their work *humanistic*.

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