

October 10, 2016

Dear President Daniels,

In light of the current proposal to close the Humanities Center effective June 2017, the graduate students would like to share with you our experience and view of the Humanities Center. We hope our perspective will put to rest the administration's concerns about the department by illuminating its strengths and integral role within the humanities while illustrating how its potential elimination would be to the detriment of the Johns Hopkins community.

The Humanities Center has built a unique identity as a world-class interdisciplinary department and as an active catalyst for cutting-edge research within Johns Hopkins. A key participant in supporting conferences and talks originating in other humanities departments, the department regularly attracts the best and brightest scholars from around the world with its own widely attended conferences and events.<sup>1</sup> Scholarly exchange between the Humanities Center and other departments is extensive; of our twenty current doctoral students, half of us work closely with other departments either in pursuit of a joint Ph.D., M.A., or in an advising capacity.<sup>2</sup> All graduate students take courses outside of those offered by Humanities Center faculty, owing to our diverse interests. At least from the perspective of graduate education, while we are united by a common intellectual identity, the interdisciplinary freedom afforded by the Humanities Center allows us to participate in dialogue across the humanities, both within Johns Hopkins and beyond.

The Humanities Center has long been a locus of intellectual exchange both nationally and internationally. We have cultivated long-standing relationships with premier institutions across the globe and proudly represent Johns Hopkins on the world academic stage. Visiting scholars regularly seek out the Humanities Center as an intellectual destination.<sup>3</sup> Our well established historical relationship with the École Normale Supérieure in Paris continues to evolve with a new generation

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<sup>1</sup> The historical association of the department with famous representatives of French Post-Structuralism (Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe) is well known, and recent years have seen visits by highly reputed scholars such as Stanley Cavell, Robert Pippin, Alain Badiou, David Wellbery, and Barbara Cassin. Last year's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference of the Humanities Center brought to Hopkins the world famous historian of science Lorraine Daston, renowned Chinese scholar Michael Puett, artist Jeff Wall, and noted legal scholar Samuel Moyn, among others. The diverse backgrounds of these celebrated intellects demonstrates the continued relevance of the Humanities Center in the global academic community, not just in prestige, but as a center of intellectual vitality. The highly regarded intellectual historian Peter Gordon of Harvard will visit in Spring 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Historically, Humanities Center graduate students have developed strong ties with the Departments of English, History, History of Art, Philosophy, German and Romance Language and Literatures, Classics, and Anthropology, among others.

<sup>3</sup> In recent years the philosophers Eli Friedlander of Tel Aviv University, Israel and Sari Nusseibeh, President of Al-Quds University, Palestine, have spent time as visiting associates of the department. Our international reputation has also lately drawn Fulbright scholars and Swiss Federal Institute of Technology postdoctoral award recipients to the Humanities Center.

of scholars, and our recent participation in Freie Universität Berlin's academic network "Principles of Cultural Dynamics" has led to exchanges with Germany as well as with China. In recent years, graduate students have taught at universities across the world, expanding the University's international recognition.<sup>4</sup> Our graduate population reflects this diversity, with current students hailing from Israel, Lebanon, Iran, Algeria, Turkey, Brazil, China, Mexico, Italy, France, and the Netherlands.

In turn, members of other departments have clearly benefited from the Humanities Center. Records provided by the Anthropology Department, for instance, confirm that the nine students since 2007 who have worked with Humanities Center faculty have placed particularly well on the job market.<sup>5</sup> Between 2010 and 2015, an average of 58% of cohorts in Anthropology have participated in Humanities Center courses.<sup>6</sup> The Department of Anthropology also indicates that prospective graduate students frequently express interest in collaboration with the Humanities Center during the recruitment process.<sup>7</sup> While this case is only one example, we trust that the outpouring of support from other departments will attest to the non-redundancy and utility of the Humanities Center's scholarly resources. Additionally, the courses offered by our faculty attract graduate students from many other departments, including Philosophy, History, History of Art, Political Science, German and Romance Literatures and Languages, and English. Puzzlingly, Dean Wendland's June 29, 2016 letter to the department does not acknowledge this rich collaborative spirit, and instead criticizes our limited research interests and our apparent failure to represent the full range of scholarship in the humanities. We would like to indicate to the contrary, that despite the research tendencies of the department, its interdisciplinary core has enabled it to serve as a meeting ground for many scholars across the university.

The Dean draws the bulk of her positions stated in the aforementioned letter from the 2012 and 2014 review committees' findings, quoting them extensively, only to depart dramatically from their unequivocal recommendations to continue to support a thriving department by restoring its senior faculty lines. While the reviewers indicate that in some respects our scholarly engagements exceed the conventional fields of intellectual history and comparative literature, these observations are obviously complimentary rather than critical.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to understand how or why quotations attesting to the department's research diversity and uniqueness—and these precisely as determining conditions of its success to date—coupled with strong statements of support, are taken to be criticism. One review makes this very clear: "The HCD has given a great deal of thought to its future, and (small details aside) we strongly support its plans. The Center is a well-run unit. The chair, Hent de Vries, is widely admired and enjoys the full support of his colleagues. We trust the Center faculty to implement its plans wisely and urge the administration to support them"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> While graduate students at the Humanities Center, Jeroen Gerrits taught a summer instructor at the University of Picardie Jules Verne in Amiens, France; Tarek Dika taught at Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem, Palestine; Nicole Jerr was an adjunct instructor at MICA throughout her time at the Humanities Center.

<sup>5</sup> Please see document "Humanities Center and Graduate Training: Data from the Anthropology Department." This document is on file in the Humanities Center's dossier.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Members of the Humanities Center have also happily assisted in the recruitment of prospective graduate applicants to GRLL and Art History.

<sup>8</sup> See the following language in the reviews cited by Dean Wendland in her letter: "fascinatingly diverse" (p. 2); "one of a kind" (p. 3); "It is because of this [departmental uniqueness], not in spite of it, that it [the Humanities Center] has had remarkably fruitful relations with other departments and interests on campus, and these would be spoiled if it became more like other departments" (p.2) The discrepancies between this text and the Dean's reading of it stretch credulity.

<sup>9</sup> See p. 4 of Dean Wendland's letter.

That our work fruitfully transcends the boundaries of our designated fields in no way invalidates the need for a department that provides specific, directed training within the disciplines of comparative literature and intellectual history. The Dean's letter challenges the department's autonomy by questioning the validity of these globally recognized, historically documented fields, which, moreover, are not represented within any other Johns Hopkins departments. Indeed, while the Dean's letter indicates the existence of faculty members in other departments who share interests or background in comparative literature, this consideration has no bearing on the question of the legitimate existence of a degree-granting department in that field. Moreover, it is in the very nature of this flourishing, interdisciplinary field that its methods and core concerns should be picked up in related national literature fields. The fact that scholarly interests and disciplines are rarely divided along absolute lines today constitutes in no small degree the richness of the contemporary humanities scholarship. This cooperative spirit does not, however, erode the need for discrete, traditional disciplinary training in a standalone comparative literature department.<sup>10</sup>

Our insistence on the necessity of a proper department in the fields of comparative literature and intellectual history does not discount the relevance of faculty in other departments with whom we share interests. Rather, we would like to stress that matters of disciplinary identity and interdepartmental dynamics are quite separate. Nonetheless, among the Dean's key complaints against the department is the allegation that we exclude faculty from other departments, despite having thirteen joint appointments—far more than any other humanities department at Johns Hopkins.<sup>11</sup> This is reflective of our extraordinary commitment to collaborative work. We thus find it strange and troubling that the Dean's correspondence made a general case against our supposed exclusivity and yet separately insisted that former Vice Dean Professor William Egginton in particular be appointed full, voting, joint appointee of the Humanities Center as a condition of restoring the department, despite the fact that he has never, as far as we can recall from our experience and have been able to verify, participated in any departmental event nor collaborated with any of our faculty or graduate students, as our other affiliated faculty have.<sup>12</sup>

We share the University's commitment to undergraduate education and view student engagement as a top priority. For the Fall of 2016, even with two of our core faculty members on leave and two vacancies, the Humanities Center offers nine undergraduate courses with a cumulative enrollment of 94 students, which reflects the department's devotion to small, focused seminars that maximize student participation. Our advanced graduate students are encouraged to design their own courses for Dean's Teaching Fellowships or Women and Gender Studies Teaching Fellowships, and we have offered courses that cover major gaps in the Hopkins curriculum (see Loumia Ferhat's "Feminism and Homosexuality in the Islamic World" taught in WGS this fall, which was featured on Elle.com's "College Classes that Give Us Hope for the Next Generation"). We have also helped to create the new interdisciplinary Medicine, Science, and the Humanities

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, the Humanities Center's historic success is a key part in the contemporary ubiquity of critical theory, as discussed in 2016's *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America* by Marc Redfield, chair of Comparative Literature at Brown.

<sup>11</sup> Compare with the six joint appointments in Philosophy, one joint appointment in German, one in Spanish, zero in English, zero in History of Art, etc.

<sup>12</sup> That Professor Egginton now serves as the director of the Alexander Grass Humanities Institute seems to be no small coincidence. Alarming, in material published earlier in 2016, Professor Egginton identifies himself as the director of the "Alexander Grass Humanities Center" at a moment when the AGHI had not yet been publicly proposed and when its naming was still highly contentious. In particular, see the paperback jacket: William Egginton. *In Defense of Religious Moderation*. Columbia University Press.

major, for which we provide six courses. As Teaching Assistants for undergraduate courses in the Humanities Center, offered currently as upper-level electives and as part of the undergraduate honor's program, we often hear from undergraduates that our classes provide an experience and perspective they cannot get in their majors; where the mastery of a canon or the specialization in a certain historical period or subordinate field characterizes the education of traditional departments, Humanities Center undergraduate courses are often organized around a conceptual idea (e.g., Moral Community in Literature), or strike at an interdisciplinary crux (e.g., Cinema and Philosophy), or provide access to literature nowhere else taught at Johns Hopkins (e.g., Dostoevsky and Critical Theory). As a result, Humanities Center courses, at both the undergraduate and graduate level, are sites of active collaboration where students exchange their respective specialized knowledge to broaden and challenge one another.

That such a unique approach to education and research has made the Humanities Center an indispensable program for graduate students and its scholarly vitality is evident in its outstanding job placement record, which has continued with the 2016 appointments of Tarek Dika, Nicole Jerr, and Daniel Schwartz.<sup>13</sup> The Humanities Center has produced consistently superb alumni through its unparalleled training, which was our primary motivation for joining the department. There are few comparable programs both in kind and prestige. We are alarmed at how the unusual rapidity of these closure proceedings threaten to destabilize the situations of current graduate students. There has been no indication of what the administration plans to do with us, as students and employees, beyond the vague closing statement in the Dean's letter that we would be "grandfathered." If we are redistributed into other departments, none of which provide specific training in the fields of comparative literature or intellectual history, we would be unable to pursue the kinds of projects that brought us to Johns Hopkins in the first place, which would force us to abandon or drastically alter dissertations in progress. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that the departments we would most likely be directed toward—Philosophy, GRLL, English, History of Art—do not have similar reputations in our fields of Comparative Literature or Intellectual History, meaning that our own job prospects would be seriously hindered. Receiving a degree from any department other than the one to which we specifically applied—departments with entirely different academic meanings and market values—is simply unacceptable.

The Alexander Grass Humanities Institute is an exciting new avenue for the continued success of the humanities at Johns Hopkins. The graduate students of the Humanities Center see no reason that its existence should usurp that of our excellent department. The clear distinction between an institute that programs events and adjudicates funds and a department that grants graduate degrees and houses faculty should already undermine the inclination to view these as competing entities.<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to believe the administration is sincere when it claims to advance the humanities by eliminating one of its most high-performing, historically celebrated departments while creating an institute whose stated purpose is to foster the very interdisciplinarity that is the foundation of the Humanities Center.

Moreover, it seems that the prospective elimination of the Humanities Center is part of a

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<sup>13</sup> Respectively: Assistant Professor of Liberal Studies, University of Notre Dame; Assistant Professor of English, Department of English, United States Air Force Academy; Assistant Professor in German and Russian Cinema, Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, McGill University.

<sup>14</sup> Such a distinction in purposes and activities was obvious to 2014 reviewers: "We cannot say whether the Humanities Institute is needed, or whether it would be valuable; but we can say that the existence of the HCD does not render an Institute of this sort redundant."

larger trend in the University as it turns away from the world-class research for which it has earned its stellar reputation. As JHU seeks to transform itself into a destination liberal arts school and climb in the undergraduate university rankings, it's doubtful to what extent its reputation can be maintained vis-à-vis its competitors, whose superior endowments enable the peaceful coexistence of a strong liberal arts education and cutting edge research across all disciplines. We fear that the outcome of this campaign against the Humanities Center will result in the continued flight of high-profile humanities faculty from Hopkins, a trend that has notoriously and irrevocably damaged the English and German departments. Historically, Johns Hopkins has been a site of innovation due to its uniqueness and commitment to cultivating its singular excellence. The Humanities Center has been a key contributor to this reputation, and the effort to remove it in order to make the university more closely resemble other universities despite the department's consistent, sustained, and unimpeachable success indicates a desire to imitate and conform rather than to continue to pioneer. Even the AGHI has been modeled after Centers at other institutions. The Humanities Center forges its own identity and its own path; it has adapted to shifting faculty and student interests and shows no signs of slowing down, even as the administration intentionally impedes the replacement of faculty.

In willfully demonizing the best of its very own, the University adopts a toxic ethos that stands to wreak havoc on the school's rich academic history and traditions.<sup>15</sup> The administration's persecution of the department against the urgings of impartial and qualified reviewers not only displays an arbitrary use of power and a failure to adhere to any standard of professional ethics or protocol, but also exhibits with disturbing clarity the ways in which academic excellence is subordinated to administrative expediency, all at the ultimate expense of the University itself.

We would like to affirm our willingness to cooperate with the injunctions listed on page 8 of Dean Wendland's letter, assuming these conditions have greater permanence than the miscellany of mutating demands that have preceded it. If it takes as little as a name alteration, minor reforms to our curriculum, and stronger efforts to demonstrate our commitment to undergraduate education to address reasonable concerns, we are certain that the department will continue to oblige and adapt. However, we must remind you that this is the third review we have undergone since 2012, and we have received excellent feedback and encouragement from the previous two; given that the previous recommendations to restore our faculty lines have been ignored and aggression against the Humanities Center has quickly escalated, we believe that the real motivations to close the department remain obscure. We urge you to consider the graduate students' perspective in deciding the fate of the department and we thank you sincerely for your time. We would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you before the Neutral Committee's recommendation has been made in December.

Yours truly,  
The Graduate Students of the Humanities Center

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the field of intellectual history in the U.S. originated as a discipline at Johns Hopkins University in the pioneering work of Professor Arthur Lovejoy (1873-1962).