

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

Submitted: November 25, 2014

The External Review Committee for the Humanities Center Department (HCD) met with members of the administration, the HCD faculty, faculty members from other departments, and the graduate students over two full days, November 10 and 11, 2014. Our report is based on these conversations and on the department's extensive self-study.

The HCD is a small interdisciplinary department whose intellectual foci have traditionally been shaped by the overlapping interests of its distinguished faculty. Its main pedagogical focus is its one-of-a-kind PhD program, which runs tracks in Intellectual History and Comparative Literature, but whose students routinely work in areas well beyond what these labels would suggest. The HCD is now at a crossroads. Two of its four full professors are on phased retirement. It is in the process of adding an undergraduate major and minor and a new terminal MA program to its teaching portfolio. 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.

This report makes no effort at a comprehensive assessment of the HCD. We have focused on the questions raised in Dean Wendland's charge to the committee, under four heads: undergraduate teaching (§1), the graduate program(s) (§2), the faculty (§3), and the relation between the HCD and the recently proposed Institute for the Humanities (§4).

1. Undergraduate Teaching

The HCD has a history of distinguished undergraduate teaching, through both the courses it offers and the Honors Program in the Humanities that it has sponsored and directed since the mid-1970s. The Center considers the present to be a propitious moment to augment its contribution to undergraduate education at Johns Hopkins by launching a departmental major and minor. We encountered unanimous support and enthusiasm for this initiative among HCD faculty. Several emphasized how much they enjoy teaching undergraduates and look forward to even stronger involvement with students. Others stressed that both the University and the Center would benefit from the implementation of an HCD major. All emphasized that such a major would greatly benefit the Center's graduate students. This sentiment was strongly echoed by the Center's graduate students themselves, who currently frequently serve as TAs in very small seminars where their role is often unclear and awkward. They feel strongly that they need more extensive and more typical forms of teaching experience, and that will be well served if the HCD is able to mount larger classes.

The external reviewers support the creation of an HCD major. We are convinced that such a major could be very beneficial to a certain kind of undergraduate, whose interests

in the Humanities are sophisticated and interdisciplinary, and it would tap more effectively the distinguished and motivated faculty of the HCD. To our overall positive response to this initiative, we do want to add some concerns and suggestions.

- 1) The faculty might want to reconsider the proposed name, “Humanities Center Major”. Is it appropriate to name a major after the place or institute where it is housed and not after its intellectual content? Will such a major have sufficient resonance in the world outside Johns Hopkins to serve graduating seniors as they present themselves to prospective employers or graduate programs? Yale offers a thriving major called “Humanities”. Princeton has a certificate program (i.e., a minor) in “Humanistic Studies”. Since the proposed tracks in the new major are potentially quite distinct, the Center might introduce two new majors simply called “Comparative Literature” and “Intellectual History”. In any case, the question of the label should be revisited.
- 2) We suggest that the proposed “comparative American cultures concentration” be dropped from the major. While the HCD offers some courses with American content, this seems to be a minor area of interest for the existing faculty. The fact that specific mention of what might be called American studies first appears on p. 31 of the self-study document is already quite telling. There does not seem to be a critical mass of expertise or interest to mount a credible concentration in comparative American cultures. The external reviewers urge the HCD to focus the major on its two great strengths, Comparative Literature and Intellectual History, neither of which, it goes without saying, preclude attention to American topics.
- 3) We worry that the proposed number of courses in the major will stretch the teaching resources of the HCD too far. For a faculty of this size, with a proposed MA program added to its already substantial commitment to graduate education, requiring that a major must take ten courses in the Humanities Center seems overly ambitious. Ensuring that an appropriate range and number of appropriate courses are offered for a majoring student to complete the requirements is likely to impose unsustainable burdens on the HCD in its present size and configuration. One way to make the major more viable would be to reduce the number of seminars to be taken in the HCD from the proposed 7 to 4, while increasing the Humanities-related electives to 5. As the self-study indicates, such electives would be subject to advisor’s approval. The HCD might also take this as an occasion to revisit its policy of limiting the cross-listing of courses from other departments. It might be feasible to require 7 courses listed or cross-listed by the HCD if the menu of cross-listed courses were more extensive.
- 4) The external reviewers find the requirements of Great Books and Great Minds courses to accord fully with the goals and sensibility of the proposed major. However, we feel that for purposes of a major, the Great Minds course should be conceived more expansively. Currently, the figures named as examples in the self-study represent the specific interests and preferences of faculty members rather than broader ecumenical considerations of what might constitute an appropriate coverage for a Humanities major. While we recognize that a strong

course should not be simply encyclopedic, we urge the faculty to expand the concept and content of the Great Minds course.

- 5) Launching an undergraduate major will likely demand some changes in the culture of a department that has traditionally focused heavily on graduate training and given considerable freedom to its faculty to orient their teaching toward their own concerns and preferences. The pluralistic and interdisciplinary sensibility of the HCD will offer valuable opportunities to a certain kind of undergraduate; however, precisely these features will place a particularly heavy weight upon the role of faculty mentoring and advising in helping students to structure their course of studies. It will be essential that HCD faculty be very attentive to their role as advisors and mentors. Regarding what goes on in the classroom, faculty will have to be very attentive to the specific needs of undergraduates, the limits of students' knowledge, as well, perhaps, of their attention. Matters of basic understanding and background information should not be assumed of the undergraduates nor should the task of communicating these be delegated to the graduate teaching assistants.

The deans asked us to consider the “significant fall in undergraduate enrollments in the HCD over the last years.” While it is true that overall enrollments are down in the last two years, some qualification is in order. Based on the figures provided in Appendix C, enrollments in the Fall semesters of 2012-13 and 2013-14 are indeed down from a high of 175 in the Fall semester of 2011-12. However Fall 2011-12 is, in fact, the anomaly within the seven years presented in Appendix C. Measured against the other Fall semesters, 2012-13 and 2013-14 actually return to the enrollment numbers in Fall 2007-8 and are significantly higher than in years 2008-9 and 2009-10, years that were perhaps negatively affected by the HCD's move to Dell House while its permanent home was under renovation. Rather than try to explain a fall in undergraduate enrollments in the last two years, the more telling task might be to try to explain the significant jump in enrollments in Fall 2011-12. Did HCD do something specific in that semester to produce such a high number and can it be replicated? Where the numbers do drop quite precipitously is in the Spring semesters of 2012-13 and 2013-14, both in comparison to the immediately preceding Fall semesters and to Spring semesters in the more distant past. Is there a reason for this quite significant drop? Based on the data provided, the external review committee is unable to provide answers to the fluctuations in enrollment, nor were HCD faculty able to account for them. Clearly additional study within the HCD and KSAS is called for in order to gain insight into the pattern of enrollments.

2. The Graduate Program(s)

The External Committee was most encouraged to find that the morale among the graduate students was measurably high. There was an almost exceptionless assertion of positive comments from the students we met ---about the instruction they received, the attentiveness and helpfulness of the faculty, the opportunities provided to the students to do their own teaching, the solidarities that existed among them, and the relative freedom to pursue their special interests without the constraint of compulsory routines.

Though we were aware in some general sense of the Center's lack of the usual form of harnessing of students in a set of requirements, we had not appreciated quite how untethered they were from a structured path in their career as graduates at the Center, not even to a distribution requirement in the courses which led up to the comprehensive examinations they eventually have to eventually take. Yet when initially asked about whether they were happy with this, all except one student said that it worked fine. And the exception too was expressed in tentative terms with no overt complaint about the current system. None of this deterred us from forming our own opinion of the matter, which is at slight odds with the students' view. All three of us feel that it may be no bad thing for the Center to ponder whether its program might be improved by constructing a year long pro-seminar for all graduate students which covered some works by abidingly influential thinkers in the fields of study that dominate student interests. Since we found those interests are pervasively touched by philosophy and by literary theory and aesthetics --all of the modern period-- we suggest something like the following. (We repeat that this is merely a suggestion and not intended as any firm proposal.)

A required seminar for all students over a year covering texts by Kant (including Kant's aesthetics), Hegel (including Hegel's aesthetics), Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud.

In short, a sort of survey of Old Masters of the Modern. Ideally such a year long course should be taught each year to the incoming class. And perhaps it could be taught in a modular format if necessary with different faculty members taking on each thinker. Our motive in suggesting this is, of course, primarily intellectual --it would give the students a background mastery of the ideas and doctrines that shaped a variety of disciplinary pursuits that are likely to figure in their research. But it is also motivated by our desire to see a common base from which the students can find themselves relating to one another in the kind of community of discussion which allows students to learn from one another, even as they learn from their teachers. When we mentioned this idea to students and faculty, their responses, as it turned out, were uniformly receptive. As one faculty member put it to us, even though the Center admits sophisticated students who know many these central texts already, a seminar of this sort would be an opportunity for the faculty to convey to the students early on in their graduate careers how texts of this sort are read in the Center. The Internal Review committee also seemed to endorse the idea.

There was a strong feeling among us that once the MA program is underway, MA students should not be treated as second class in any way. Since they will be paying for their education, unlike the PhD students, they deserve to be treated as equal partners in all pedagogical contexts without condescension or deprivation of the usual rights and privileges to choose to learn what the others learn in the shorter period that they are in the program. If this means that they be allowed into the Core pro-seminar suggested above --should it be set up-- we hope that the Center will indeed allow that. We also noticed that there was almost no write-up on the details of what the MA program is to look like in the self-study by comparison with the newly proposed undergraduate program and the existing PhD program. We trust that this does not reflect the sort of lack of interest in the MA program as is sometimes found in research institutions which treat MA students as

primarily a source of revenue. The PhD students with whom we spoke were enthusiastic about the new MA: they look forward to having more like-minded students in their classes. There was some concern, however, that Master's supervision would stretch an already small faculty too thin. We trust that the department is well aware of these potential pitfalls, and that steps will be taken to provide the sort of rich, hands-on program that MA students will need, without diluting the existing PhD program in any way.

On the matter of placement of graduate students in jobs, though the Center's record is satisfactory, the External Committee had a somewhat different view of the extent of its success from what was expressed in the Self-Study report. Relatively few recent students have been placed in tenure track positions, and over the past ten years, with some striking exceptions of which the department is rightly proud, there have been very few placements at major research universities or liberal arts colleges. However given the fact that we really don't have a clear idea of what the comparison class is (the Center being so unusual in its disciplinary status) we are not sure whether we are right in thinking that the record is not as good as is claimed in the report. Since in the rankings, the comparison class seems to be comprised of Comp Lit departments in other universities, one thing that the Center might do is to study the placement record over the last many years of Comp. Lit. departments and see how those placed lower in the rankings than the Center have fared. If their placement record is in fact better than that of the Center, that might be reason to take a more sober view of its own placement record than is done in the self-study. In general, since the Center has such a non-standard disciplinary profile, it needs to work very hard to present its students to the world as having all the strengths needed to do well in that world, which tends to be much more conventional in its demands than the Center. We realize that this is perfectly well known to the faculty but still it would be irresponsible of us not to mention it as a particularly urgent responsibility of the Center's faculty towards its students.

We turn now to what we consider the most important observation that we can make about the graduate program: the great and serious necessity of meeting the Center's request in the self-study report for maintaining the numbers of graduate students in the program. Any reduction to a number less than what was cited in the report (14), would, we believe, cripple the program's weight and gravity and, as a result, its morale. It was visible to us that the students we met were flourishing partly because there was sufficient intellectual comradeship and frequent intellectual exchange between them. (Their numbers are buoyed by a significant number of visiting students from abroad.) The students stressed, emphatically, that given a choice between increased stipends with a smaller cohort, or the current stipends with their current cohort size, they strongly preferred the latter option. The Humanities may not require quite the sort of cognitive cooperativeness that some of the sciences do, with researchers working as a team on a single project; but intellectual and scholarly pursuits in the Humanities are by their nature more gregarious than they are in the sciences, and this requires sufficient numbers to be thrown together in a common space. We were told by the administration that the need to raise graduate stipends will force a reduction of incoming graduate students. These are matters for the University to sort out. But the reviewers felt that if there really was no other way to raise the

fellowship stipends (which we very much hope there is) and if we as reviewers who have looked hard at the Center over two days had to choose for the Center between higher stipends for its students and retaining the number of admitted students, we too would choose the latter. It is the loftier choice, a choice that reflects better values. But, of course, we would prefer it if the Center was not landed with this impoverishing choice in the first place.

3. The Faculty

The Humanities Center is currently staffed by four full professors (Fried, Leys, Marrati and de Vries), one associate professor (Lisi), two assistant professors (Eakin Moss and Ong), one senior lecturer (Patton), and one post-doctoral fellow (McGrath), leaving no searchable open slots. However, Leys will retire in 2015 and Fried in 2016, so the department is at a crossroads. The Center sees it as vital that these distinguished scholars be replaced at the senior level, and we agree. The Center's junior/senior balance is excellent at present, and however reasonable it may be in general to favor restaffing at the junior level, that would make little sense in this case. Fried and Leys are internationally renowned scholars in their fields. If the Center is to retain its visibility and salience, its next appointments must be similarly distinguished.

The Center's current proposal is to run two searches as soon as possible, one in Intellectual History and the other in Modern Art and Aesthetics. This can give the impression that the Center's aim is to replace Leys and Fried with scholars who cover similar areas, and while our conversations with members of the faculty make it clear that they are in fact open to scholars with very different profiles, we are concerned that the proposed searches will artificially limit the range of candidates. The Center's great strength, historically, has been its openness to scholars with intellectual profiles so distinctive that it would have been hard to describe them in advance. Ideally, the Center would appoint the best and most creative humanist regardless of field, subject of course to intangible considerations of fit with the traditions of the HCD and the existing interests of the faculty. This might be an intellectual historian, but it might also be a philosopher or even a musicologist — someone who might not think to apply for a position labeled "Intellectual History" or "Modern Art and Aesthetics". Some members of the faculty were concerned that an unconstrained search would be unmanageable. But our sense is that so long as the ad is clear that the Center seeks to appoint a distinguished humanist, it will be straightforward, in practice, to generate a relatively short list from the pool of applicants. We would not insist on this, of course, but we urge the Center to consider a more open search. We also urge the administration to authorize two senior searches, whether focused or open, as soon as possible. It can take years to fill a senior position, and the prospect of the Center limping along for several years with only five regular members (some of whom will no doubt be on leave at various points) could have serious consequences for current students and for the future of the Center.

The Center's wish-list for expansion beyond these replacement appointments focuses on three areas: Philosophy of Visual Media, New Concepts and Forms of Life, and Islamic

Thought and Global Religion. Since there is in no imminent prospect of new slots, we did not explore these proposals in our discussions. But as with any appointment in a small program of this sort, the person matters much more than the field. And so we would advise the Center and the administration to cast as broad a net as possible should new positions become available.

4. The HCD and the proposed Institute for the Humanities

Most of JHU's peer institutions have Humanities Centers: non-departmental units charged with supporting teaching and research in the humanities, sponsoring lectures and conferences, promoting interdisciplinary work both within the humanities and beyond, hosting visiting fellows, and engaging in public outreach. The administration has begun to explore the possibility of establishing a center of this sort at Hopkins — provisionally called the Institute for the Humanities, to avoid confusion — and so a question arises about the relation between the Humanities Center and the proposed Institute.

The question arises because the Humanities Center regards many of the functions of the proposed Institute as falling within its purview. Many of our informants stressed that the Center already functions as a hub, bringing faculty members, graduate students and visitors from many humanities departments together for talks and seminars. Since many had not heard about the proposed Institute prior to seeing the text of the Humanities Center self-study, their views were of course provisional. However, many expressed frank skepticism about the need for an Institute of this sort at JHU.

Given the preliminary nature of the plans for the Institute, we cannot say whether this skepticism is warranted. But we will make four points.

First, it goes without saying that any innovation of this sort must be guided and shaped by the faculty. Only the faculty can say whether humanists at Hopkins would benefit from a new Institute, and members of the HCD should be actively involved in discussions about the Institute from the beginning.

Second, while the Humanities Center does function in many ways as an interdisciplinary hub, it does not (and cannot) play the sort of role that non-departmental Humanities Institutes play at other universities. The HCD is a department with intellectual foci of its own. It is admirably open to connections with other departments and eager to cooperate on projects of shared interest. But the Center does not aspire to be a neutral hub, open to cross-disciplinary work in areas that do not engage, methodologically or substantively, with its intellectual concerns. The members of the faculty with whom we met were all associated to varying degrees with Center and none provided examples of activities that the Center would not sponsor, but which might be sponsored by a Humanities Institute. But it's easy to imagine examples: a conference on social choice theory involving philosophers, economists and political theorists; a seminar on slavery in Brazil and North America involving historians, anthropologists and literary scholars; a lecture by (say) Martin Nowak on quantitative methods and the evolution of language. These (fabricated) examples would obviously fall within the purview of a Humanities Institute, but might

not attract interest from the Center given its main foci. This is not a criticism of the Center. A small group of people cannot be interested in everything. The point is simply that a Humanities Institute, unlike the Center, would have no interests of its own; it would be designed to serve the interests of the faculty generally and other constituencies within the university. We cannot say whether a 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.

Third: none of this should be fraught. In peer universities, humanities centers coexist easily with interdisciplinary departments and programs — Comparative Literature, Religious Studies, American Studies — which retain their distinctive roles as hubs despite the presence of a neutral, non-departmental forum. Several members of the HCD made this point explicitly: if there were a Humanities Institute, the HCD would relate to it as any department would. Some expressed concern that the proposed Institute would draw resources from departments, including the Center. But if concerns of this sort can be allayed during the planning process, we would expect the HCD to coexist easily with the Institute.

Fourth and finally, we note the obvious point that it will be confusing for JHU to have two units with such similar names. We have no solution to this problem, and the confusion may be readily manageable in any case. But steps will have to be taken to ensure that outsiders, students, and others can easily determine the respective roles of the HCD and the Institute in the university.

Respectfully submitted,

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