



June 29, 2016

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing in response to prior communications regarding the future of the Humanities Center and pending requests for allocation of faculty lines. I want to acknowledge at the outset that I've been mulling these questions for some time, and considered carefully the reviews and reports conducted in recent years as well as the ideas and concerns raised by you and other faculty. I do so guided by my fundamental commitment to the academic leadership and excellence of the school and a keen sense of my responsibility to ensure that our school's resources are allocated to best support its needs. Strengthening the humanities is among our highest priorities, and to that end I will seek in this letter to clarify the situation and the issues to be resolved.

### ***Factors to Consider from External Reviews***

The overall context and approach to the question at hand is well summarized in the external review of the Krieger School conducted in Spring 2010 (the Cole Report), which stated: "Simply, for the school to advance, particularly in a setting of pressing resource challenges, faculty lines must be viewed as an asset of the school, not a property entitlement of any individual department, and must be subject to re-allocation by the Dean in accordance with the school's identified priorities." The same report recommended: "The Dean should supplement the existing internal review of departments by creating outside visiting groups."

In accordance with that recommendation, from 2010 to 2012 KSAS conducted a strategic planning process that included, for the first time, external reviews of each department. The Humanities Center was reviewed in 2012. Toward the end of 2013 two of the most senior and distinguished faculty members in the Humanities Center (HC), Michael Fried and Ruth Leys, announced their impending retirements. Since then, the dean's office has considered the best use of these two lines in support of the humanities disciplines. During this same period, the HC has been requesting permission to search for two new senior colleagues. More recently, new resources have been identified that promise an

infusion of activity and recognition for the humanities, including Bloomberg Distinguished Professor lines, newly endowed chairs, and the endowment gift that formed the Alexander Grass Humanities Institute. These developments create a new context and further responsibility for all of us in assessing the implications of how best to allocate the two senior lines vacated by Profs. Fried and Leys.

The 2012 external review of the HC included some praise, while also raising some concerns about the department's integration within the humanities community and the disposition of the field of "comparative literature" within that community.

On the positive side, the reviewers noted that:

Professor de Vries has proved himself to be an extremely able director and leader of the faculty for many years now. He has built on Professor Fried's excellent work and has brought together a new generation of scholars with varied interests. These individuals have in turn enriched the interdisciplinary traditions of the Center while increasing its connections to other departments and divisions. Professor de Vries's achievements have further strengthened the University-wide importance of the Center.

The plain fact is that though the Center is a department, it is manifestly not like any other department. It is because of this, not in spite of it, that it has had remarkably fruitful relations with other departments and interests on campus, and these would be spoiled if it became more like other departments.

On the other hand, other comments raised concerns, such as:

...the individual and independent nature of the Center raises complex issues that relate to its genealogy, its self-conception, and its future development. Even a quick glance at the self-study reveals the challenge one faces in describing the department's disciplinary terrain.

The Center does not seem to us to be very much like a traditional Comparative Literature department, even though it describes itself as being in part (in a whole half, actually) geared to activities that fall under such a name—not in the preponderance of its courses and research interests, nor really even in its self-understanding as that emerged in conversations. It is doubtful that "comparative literary" themes and projects can even be said to provide the minimal glue that binds the fascinatingly diverse pursuits of the Center. So there is something

anomalous in this profile into which the Center is forced by the national rankings and it is interesting that it does as well as it does in the rankings, despite the anomaly. There is not much that can be done about this anomaly. Given the fact that the Center functions as a department it will have to be ranked in some conventional departmental category in the rankings and we have no useful suggestion about what—apart from Comparative Literature—could fit that bill.

It would be legitimate to ask how the Center's broad theoretical research agenda, with an official profile that falls under the label of "Comparative Literature," might impact on other literature and language based departments, the German and Romance Languages Department in particular.

[It is worth noting, in this context, that a number of colleagues from several departments spoke of the high level of interest and competence in theoretical work across the campus.]

On the graduate program, the reviewers commented:

The morale of the graduate students is high and their maturity and composure, for the most part, was quite striking. But a pervasive anxiety surfaced in our conversations having to do with the fear of falling between disciplinary stools when it comes to seeking jobs. This is not a matter of surprise. It is entirely to be expected, almost as a form of original sin, in a humanities center that serves as a graduate degree-conferring department.

Another review of the Humanities Center in 2014 (conducted alongside reviews of several other departments as we reinitiated the regular departmental review cycle) likewise mixed praise with some of the same concerns expressed in the prior review, such as:

The HCD (referring to the Humanities Center Department) 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.

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. [...] If the Center is to retain its visibility and salience, its next appointments must be similarly distinguished.

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.

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.

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.

... for purposes of a(n undergraduate) 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 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.... 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.

...we note the obvious point that it will be confusing for JHU to have two units with such similar names.

In the departmental response to the 2014 review, among the points raised are:

1. an unequivocal reaffirmation to retain the name "Humanities Center" [to which more recently Professor De Vries has proposed the acceptance of taking on a new name]
2. retention of the 'Comparative American Cultures' track and the name 'Humanistic Studies' for the proposed major; the track has been repeatedly recommended to be deleted from the proposal, and the review committee strongly urged a different name for the major

[which is presently a moot point, since the Academic Council rejected the proposal for the new major]

3. development of a new core course for graduate students and greater attention to the professional development and job placements
4. reiteration of the claim that the Humanities Center indeed meets the broad interdisciplinary mission that a Humanities Institute would fulfill:  
“...to our knowledge, there is not a single example in recent history of a programmatic event or desideratum in the wider humanities (whether guest lectures, the hosting of visiting professors or fellows, workshops, conferences or even themes for postdoctoral study, not to mention support for teaching and research) that did *not* come off the ground because an Institute of the Humanities was lacking at Johns Hopkins. Nor do we recall any event or programming activity that we, as real existing Humanities Center, declined to co-sponsor when asked.”

### ***Additional Concerns and Observations***

In addition to, and in support of, the factors and issues raised in these external reviews, there also are concerns and observations have been brought directly to my attention.

For example, the HC has historically been focused on a specific area of interdisciplinary research (to quote from the website, HC faculty share “a commitment to philosophical questions, engaged in art, literature, film, and history, as well as philosophy proper”), with an intentionally loosely structured graduate program and, until recently, minimal engagement with undergraduate students, even as the size of the student body has grown.

In addition, the HC represents itself as a broadly welcoming integrating locus for humanities activities (e.g., the quote from the departmental response to the 2014 review), and yet in important respects does not conduct itself accordingly. The HC website reads, “Its inherent interdisciplinarity allows the Center to serve as a crucial meeting ground for scholars from across the university’s humanities departments, particularly as students and faculty of the Center develop strong ties with those in other departments working closely to their areas of interest.” But as both external reviews pointed out, precisely because of its stated focus, the HC isn’t representative of the full range of scholarship in the humanities; and indeed the quoted passage above admits to foregrounding collaboration with those “working closely to their areas of interest.” This is in fact consonant with the

HC's behavior as a department with some interdisciplinary foci, rather than as an integrating locus for activities across all the humanities.

Moreover, because of the HC's practice of not cross-listing courses if they are not taught by core or joint appointments, colleagues in KSAS who specialize in comparative literature, critical theory, and philosophical approaches to art, literature, film, and history are de facto excluded from participation in the graduate program that attracts students with such interests. Recent inclusion of a handful of distinguished colleagues is applauded but has not alleviated this critical concern and does not obviate the need for the HC to engage and include faculty whose specializations fall squarely within the stated interdisciplinary span of the department. A quick survey of faculty in departments such as Anthropology, English, GRLL, and Political Science suggests there are at least ten colleagues who work in the fields described on the HC website but currently are not jointly appointed to the HC. While it may well be that these scholars have many other claims on their time and would not choose to accept joint appointments, there should be a way for these colleagues to teach and participate in the intellectual life of a department that claims to represent a field in which they also work. Instead, the pattern of exclusivity of the HC, and the fact that, until recently, the HC refused to allow the cross-listing of courses that had an obvious fit to its stated mission, has been divisive within the school and damaging to the department.

Finally, the HC faculty has, until recently, presented fierce opposition to changing the department's name. This request was made by the dean's office in order to clarify that the HC does not in fact function as a broad-based "humanities center," as well as to accommodate, without confusion, the newly established Alexander Grass Humanities Institute, which will play such a supporting role for all the humanities at Hopkins. This issue has, admittedly, its own fraught history, including a period during which the label of "Center" was going to be attached to the newly endowed Institute. Extensive discussions with the HC faculty made clear why calling the AGHI a "center" would constitute an unacceptable appropriation of a name with particular and special significance at Johns Hopkins University, leading us to take truly exceptional measures to have the new entity called an "Institute." However, the use of the term "Institute" for the AGHI does not eliminate the inevitable confusion that will arise if the AGHI were to co-exist with a department named the Humanities Center (e.g., see the comment from the 2014 review).

### ***Summary and Next Steps***

Going forward, I want to acknowledge that the HC has been making efforts to conform to the expectations of a department and to improve outreach to

faculty across the humanities more broadly. However, on balance, in light of the issues raised in repeated external reviews and the concerns and observations described above, I believe there a number of issues that would need to be resolved before the future of the Center can be assured and faculty searches authorized. The issues to be resolved are as follows:

1. Rather than pursuing its own major at this time, the HC should propose other ways its faculty and students can contribute to the undergraduate mission; a major could be explored in the future once the HC demonstrates its consistent contribution to undergraduate instruction;
2. The HC should clarify the Humanities Honors Program and whom it is supposed to serve. If it truly is cross-humanities rather than specific to the HC's declared field, then the Honors Program should be moved to the Humanities Institute;
3. The HC should decide upon a name that identifies it as a department commensurate with its field and that does not claim to represent the humanities as a whole. (It will also be led by a chair, as are all other departments.) It is noted that Professor De Vries agreed in December 2015 to change the name of the Humanities Center to the Department of Humanistic Studies and Values. However this name presumes and implies an aggregative function that the HC does not represent, and a more suitable name should be proposed that better tracks the content of the intellectual pursuits of the department; thoughts on what the new name could be are welcomed.
4. Additional issues to be resolved include: the path forward for the HC if another of its faculty members departs the university; clarity regarding mentoring plans for the junior faculty; and a commitment by the HC members to collegial and constructive interactions with the Humanities Institute.

In terms of next steps, during the 2016-17 academic year, the HC will continue to be led by Professor De Vries, and will have access to its usual budget for inviting visitors and hosting events; its future status will be determined in time to know whether or not new masters and PhD students should be recruited to begin in Fall 2017. In December of 2016, a small, neutral committee (to be appointed immediately, in consultation with the Provost) will submit recommendations to the KSAS dean's office regarding the HC and the status of the issues delineated above.



Based on the recommendations of this committee, a final decision will be made regarding the HC and the requested faculty lines. Authorization for the first requested search would be granted only with the expectation that the search committee include members from other departments on the search committee. The disposition of the second requested search would be determined relative to needs of the History of Art department as well, given its interest in the line vacated by Prof. Fried. One of the charges of the Committee will be to consider whether, if the issues discussed here are not resolved, the HC should be subject to closure effective June 30, 2017, with current faculty and staff reassigned to other departments, and current students grandfathered to allow completion of their degrees.

Respectfully and sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Beverly Wendland". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Beverly Wendland, James B. Knapp Dean  
Krieger School of Arts and Sciences