



Review Committee Report
Interdisciplinary PhD Program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies
6 November 2019

The Review Committee finds the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies (NMES) to be academically rigorous and institutionally well-positioned. The accomplishments of its students, who win prestigious funding awards, present at conferences and publish before they graduate, is exemplary. NMES has an excellent record of placing its graduates in competitive academic and non-academic positions. Recognized nationally and internationally, both historically and currently, NMES's interdisciplinary and transregional focus is unique. It serves as a node which attracts graduate students and faculty to the University of Washington, while building synergy among scholars across disciplines and fields. It fulfills an important instructional mission by providing TAs with expertise to departments offering undergraduate courses in Near and Middle Eastern Studies. By drawing from departments and schools across the University of Washington, it creates a vibrant intellectual community. Under the exceptional leadership of its current Director, Associate Professor Cabeiri deBergh Robinson, NMES has taken numerous steps in the past four years to enhance faculty governance, professionalize student training, and put in place clear criteria and protocols for student funding and degree completion. The Review Committee unanimously recommends the next review in ten years, based upon the academic quality and distinctiveness of this program. We recommend that the program's funding cycle be synchronized with the academic review cycle of 10 years to let it flourish without anxiety.

NMES was established in 1992, and the program admitted its first students in 1994. The Program has been reviewed on three previous occasions, the last in 2009. The previous Review Committee noted the strengths of the program, especially its academic excellence. It pointed out the need for more transparent governance and continued strong leadership. Space in core classes, a lounge, and mailboxes for NMES students were additional concerns. We found that these issues have been addressed. The concern, in 2009, that changes afoot in the Near Eastern Languages and Civilization (NELC) department would undermine NMES has dissipated: NELC does not offer a PhD, making NMES its main portal for doctoral students. Likewise, the concern that the Jackson School's new PhD program would make the NMES program redundant has dissipated, too: the Jackson PhD is considerably different, being more professional and applied. In the face of Activity Based Budgeting (with its emphasis on undergraduate student enrollment numbers), cutbacks to instructional budgets and uneven FLAS funding, the 15 quarters of TA support provided by the College of Arts and Sciences, Division of Social Sciences, for five years from 2015-16 through 2019-2020, was

a necessary fillip to the program. It has parlayed these resources strategically to support the undergraduate teaching mission of departments. Our report reviews the educational mission and quality of the program, what they can do better, and how the university can best support them. These sections address the questions raised by the unit, the Graduate School, and the College of Arts and Sciences Divisional Deans of Social Sciences and Humanities.

The Review Process

The Review Committee appointed on June 4, 2019 by the Graduate School had the following members:

- o Priti Ramamurthy, Professor, UW Department of Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies (Committee Chair)
- o Richard Wright, Professor & Chair, UW Department of Linguistics
- o Devin DeWeese, Professor, Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University
- o Heather J. Sharkey, Professor, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania

To assess the program, during the site visit, October 24-25, 2019, we met with the Director of NMES, Associate Professor of International Studies, Cabeiri deBergh Robinson; the Program Administrator and Graduate Program Advisor, Jean Rogers; the NMES Executive Committee, which includes the Director of the Jackson School of International Studies, the Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization, and the Director of the Middle East Center; and faculty closely associated with NMES at all levels. We met with graduate students currently enrolled in the program and, via Zoom, alumni. And, with David Canfield-Budde, Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs and Planning, the Graduate School. (As an Interdisciplinary program, the unit falls under the purview of the Graduate School. The Director of NMES reports to the Dean of the Graduate School.) Prior to the site visit, on October 2, 2019, the committee met with College of Arts and Sciences Divisional Dean of Humanities, Brian Reed, and Divisional Dean of Social Sciences, George Lovell.

Is the program meeting its educational mission? Is it doing it well?

The NMES program's educational mission is to train doctoral students -- the next generation of Near and Middle East Studies academic faculty and experts for non-academic careers, given the changing landscape of academia. NMES supports the education of undergraduate students at the University of Washington in Near and Middle East Studies by providing TAs to classes offered by departments, primarily, in the College of Arts and Sciences. By creating intellectual communities across colleges and disciplines, NMES is

enabling the emergence of new areas of scholarly expertise. Faculty research and teaching has benefited from being closely associated with NMES students and colleagues.

The quality of the NMES doctoral program is impressively high and its nature unique. It continues to build on the national and international reputation of its illustrious faculty to attract high-caliber students to the University of Washington each year. Of twenty-five applicants, on average, three to four are admitted annually. In order to gain admission to the Program, students must have completed an MA degree. Since the program also requires third-year language competence in a regional language and reading ability in a second language to graduate, many incoming students have fluency in one or two languages. With continuous advising by the Director through quarterly meetings, students are guided to design their program of study, attain competency in the fields of inquiry necessary, and assemble their committees. After formation of their committees, the student's advisor takes on the main mentorship role. However, the Director meets with all students once a year and issues detailed annual performance review letters. Students are completing their degrees in a timely manner, taking an average of seven years, including 1-2 years of field work.

The nine students we met with were attracted to the "flexibility" of the program, the possibility to do research "across regions," and to do "interdisciplinary work at the intersections of area studies and the disciplines." They reported a high level of satisfaction with the program, finding it "intellectually exciting." Students were particularly appreciative of the Director and the support of the Graduate Administrator. The Director's recent introduction of the "Dissertation Proposal Workshop" and "Preparing for the Job Market Workshop" were lauded. The "On-Ramp, Off Ramp" series of practical training for non-academic and academic careers were mentioned several times. Graduate students cited the Director's emphasis on their developing grant-writing skills as a factor in their ability to secure sources of fellowship funding.

Indeed, we found that the commitment to professional training has reaped rich dividends. NMES students have won an impressive number of prestigious national awards from SSRC, Fulbright-Hayes, ACLS, and Fulbright, as detailed in the Self Study. Similarly, the placement record for NMES students is justifiably a point of considerable pride. This is well documented in the self-study. Because the US academy is very much structured around disciplinary departments, many scholars are skeptical about interdisciplinary Ph.D. programs. But NMES students are encouraged to position themselves to be legible to the traditional disciplines and guided to publish and attend relevant area studies and disciplinary conferences. Many of NMES's international graduates have returned to academic positions in their countries or in Europe. Recently, NMES graduates have been entering non-academic positions as researchers in technology companies, as news analysts and social media commentators, and more.

The NMES alumni we spoke with expressed high satisfaction with their experience, and appreciation for the celebratory culture that the Director had established by recognizing when students and graduates secure academic and non-academic jobs and awards. The close ties they continue to have with the program are unusual. They present a great resource for mentoring current students in academic and nonacademic career trajectories.

In sum, the NMES program is meeting its educational mission admirably. The high morale of faculty and students associated with the program was unanimous and palpable. Despite its unusual institutional location and meagre institutional resources, the NMES program delivers a unique and flexible program of study for its doctoral students who are very successful in securing funding, presenting and publishing, and securing good academic and non-academic jobs. Undergraduate students at UW have benefited from the expansion of NMES course offerings, enlarged classes, and expert TA support in writing and languages. Faculty, who may otherwise not have the opportunity of TA support, reported that they enjoy working with NMES doctoral students and building an “exciting” transregional, interdisciplinary intellectual community at UW.

How can they do things better?

The Review Committee concluded that NMES program needs to improve its branding, in projecting what the program is, how it excels, and who is involved. We have several recommendations for what the program could do.

First, the NMES program needs to emphasize its traditional strengths in Ottoman and Turkish studies while highlighting emergent areas of expertise that draw on the strengths and research interests of faculty across the university. These fields of expertise include Middle Eastern and South Asian connections; the history and culture of Jews in Islamic lands; the Indian Ocean world, including Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa; built environments; environmental studies; and legal studies.

Second, and in a related vein, the Graduate School needs to revise the application process by changing the rubrics by which applicants to the NMES program signal their interests. These rubrics should correspond to the program’s stated areas of expertise.

Third, the NMES program needs a good, visually appealing website – and needs staff support to keep it updated. This website should include individual profile pages for faculty, staff, PhD students, alumni, and any other associated researchers, as a way of advertising the program and its people, inside the university and out. This website will increase the visibility of the program’s faculty, students, and alumni as they seek jobs and fellowships. It will also help to build and maintain the high morale which we observed during our review.

The NMES program should build this website while continuing to publicize and celebrate the accomplishments of its scholars (fellowships, conference talks, etc.) on social media.

Fourth, in order to compete realistically in recruitment, the Program needs to offer incoming students 5-year packages. In terms of program and faculty quality, the university's peer institutions in Near and Middle Eastern studies include several well-funded private institutions that routinely offer generous packages. Competing with such institutions may always be difficult, especially for applicants who feel a need to prioritize funding. In a more worrying sign, however, faculty reported during our review that certain universities with far less distinguished reputations in the field, and with much weaker research profiles as a whole, wooed PhD students away from NMES by offering considerably more funding. "We lose to inferior places because we cannot put together a package," one faculty member reported. Based on its reputation, record, and pattern of high morale, the NMES program will be able to compete with the very best U.S. programs in recruiting PhD students if it offers stronger funding. Funding may be especially important to First Generation Low Income (FGLI) applicants, for whom financial security is likely to be a concern.

Fifth, to attract a diverse body of students, the NMES program should consider working more closely with the Graduate School's GO-MAP Office to attract, recruit and retain underrepresented minoritized graduate students (<https://grad.uw.edu/equity-inclusion-and-diversity/go-map/recruitment-and-retention-guide/>).

Sixth, the NMES program should consider liaising more closely with certain other departments and programs when offering workshops on topics in professionalization. One graduate student mentioned that she supplemented NMES workshops with a proposal-writing program in the History department, with which she has close ties; other students expressed interest in being able to benefit from such training as well. An argument for restricting NMES professionalization workshops to NMES scholars may be that they build the group morale; an argument for opening some of workshops to non-NMES scholars, and to securing entry for NMES scholars in the workshops of other programs, is that they widen opportunities. Either way, the possibilities for collaboration across the university are worth considering.

In sum, by improving its branding, publicizing its accomplishments more broadly, clarifying its areas of expertise, and offering secure funding packages, the NMES program will be in a position to ensure its record of excellence in the decade to come. At the same time, the NMES program will be able to heighten its visibility on the university campus, within the U.S. academic establishment, and abroad.

How should the university assist them?

Institutional Funding: The instability of the funding situation for the program is a source of great anxiety for both students and faculty in the program. A commitment to ten years of funding for the NMES program by the College of Arts and Sciences and the Graduate School, in coordination with the academic-review cycle, would create the stability needed in the program. In the same manner as departmental funding, this commitment would be understood to be conditional, to the extent that UW is dependent on biennial state funding. A situation where NMES funding review can be ongoing, would go far to remedy the situation.

In recognition of the unique skill sets of the program's students and their importance to the teaching mission of affiliated departments, the College of Arts and Sciences should fund the program with 21 quarters of TA support per year. (This is an addition of 6 quarters to the 15 quarters currently provided by the College annually.) It is clear that the NMES graduate students bring expertise in areas which have led to the growth in enrollments of courses in a variety of departments and programs including History, International Studies, NELC, and Jewish Studies. More than that, several faculty members noted that the contribution of the NMES TAs had improved the course content, thereby improving the learning experience of all UW undergraduate students enrolled in these courses.

The Graduate School should continue to provide 6 quarters of RA and 3 quarters of (Provost's) Recruitment Fellowship support for first-year funding of 3 doctoral students in NMES. This is befitting the high quality of the Interdisciplinary NMES program and its institutional location in the Graduate School. It recognizes that NMES serves colleges and schools across the university.

In addition, we recommend that the Graduate School should provide the NMES program with one SA line (3 SA quarters annually) to support the branding, web-presence, and outreach efforts of the program. The SA line will enable NMES students to develop skills in written communication, use of social media, and outreach through creation of multimedia content. This will be especially good preparation for non-academic jobs and reflects the fact that many NMES alumni are employed in social media, news and tech companies.

We note that if the NMES program admits 3 students a year, and, on average, each takes 7 years to graduate, the program requires funding of 42 quarters annually. Our recommendation for institutional support is for 33 quarters (21 from the College, 12 from the Graduate School) annually. This presumes that for the remaining 9 quarters, NMES students will continue to receive FLAS and other UW provided support, when eligible and competitive, and that students will continue to be successful in securing external fellowships for field work and dissertation writing.

To enable NMES to move to offering a five-year funding package to incoming students, we recommend that the Graduate School provide the program with assurance of back-stop funding.

Staff support: The current Administrator and Graduate Program Advisor of the NMES program is only able to do the job because she is extremely experienced, efficient and skilled. Her job is equivalent to that of a person in a similar position in a small department. We recommend increasing the Program Administrator and Graduate Program Advisor position from the current 33% to 50% in recognition. This increase in staffing support will also be necessary when the administrator assumes more responsibility for maintaining the new program website.

Director support: The Director is appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School for a five-year term. As a tenured faculty member, the Director also reports to the chair/director of their home department/school. To assess the Director's contributions, we recommend more co-ordination between the Dean of the Graduate School and the chair/director of their department/school annually as part of their YAR and merit review.

To tune the Director of NMES into goings-on in the College and University, we recommend that they be invited to attend the CAS Dean's quarterly chairs and directors meeting. Perhaps the Divisional Deans of Social Sciences and Humanities could also consider inviting the Director to their monthly chairs' meetings, or, the Director could receive the minutes of these meetings.

The NMES Director position currently receives an Administrative stipend of \$750 per month for 9 months from the Graduate School. To make the compensation for this position comparable to that of the Directors of the Jackson School Area Studies Centers, we recommend that the Director receives a one course release/ buyout per academic year. The current Director has done a lot of spade work which has put the program on a strong footing. A fair compensation package for the Director will be an important recognition of this work and position the program for further growth.

Faculty support: A number of faculty members felt that their contributions to NMES are not fully legible at the time of their departmental annual reviews and when they go up for promotion and tenure. The Divisional Deans of the College of Arts in Social Sciences and Humanities should work with departmental chairs to ensure that faculty contributions to the NMES program are recognized so that the efforts of participating faculty are fully acknowledged when merit and promotion cases are considered by the College. It is also important that faculty efforts are recognized at the departmental level, by department chairs,

so that participation in the NMES program does not overburden faculty by adding too much student doctoral committee work and mentoring to their workloads.

Advancement support: Given the institutional location of NMES, its small size, and already enormous workload of its Director, the Graduate School and the College will need to provide staff and resources for advancement. NELC and Jewish Studies have been generous in sharing the funds they have raised in the form of student support. A lot more is possible given the excellence of NMES, especially as it enters a new and exciting phase in its formation over the next ten years and gets the word out through its alumni, branding, web and social media presence.

Recommendations:

To reiterate, the review committee agreed that the NMES program needs more resources, on a reliable and steady basis, in order to continue to function at the high level of excellence it has demonstrated in the past. These additional resources are justified by the program's high quality and intellectual rigor, by its efficient use of available resources since the last review, by the exceptionally impressive record of the program's students in winning nationally competitive fellowships, and by the exemplary quality of the program in terms of student presentations, publications, and job placement.

Specifically, the committee recommends that:

- the 15 quarters of TA funding per academic year offered by the College of Arts and Sciences over the past five years should be increased to 21 quarters, with the commitment linked to the ten-year review cycle.
- the 9 quarters of RA and Fellowship funding offered by the Graduate School for first year students and recruitment should continue.
- the Graduate School should provide a backstop in order to allow the program to offer competitive five-year funding packages to prospective students.
- the Graduate School and College should fund development of a new web site for stronger branding and visibility of the program.
- the Graduate School should provide a graduate SA for ongoing website content development and for media outreach, increasing its current level of support by 3 SA quarter.
- the current 33% Program Administrator and Graduate Program Advisor staffing level should be increased to 50%.

- the Graduate School should offer one course release/buy-out for the program Director per academic year, in addition to the current administrative stipend.

The committee also agreed that the NMES program can and should be strengthened by administrative measures not requiring additional resources. The major recommendations in this regard are as follows:

- the university should work with departments to ensure that faculty who work with NMES students are not disadvantaged by their efforts beyond their departments. In particular, NMES is an unusual unit lacking adjunct faculty status, and as a result the standard checklist for the tenure and promotion process does not generate the need for support letters, rendering the labor invisible. The university should standardize a way to generate support letter requests from NMES. Upcoming changes in leadership at NELC and the Jackson School underscore the need for a formalized process to recognize and support faculty involvement in NMES. To date, current leadership in both units has been supportive, but familiarity with and encouragement of such involvement is not guaranteed.
- the leadership of appropriate units should work to ensure the NMES program's inclusion in relevant information circuits of the university by inviting the NMES Director, or other representative, to CAS college and divisional meetings, or at least providing access to the meeting minutes.
- the university should assist with advancement in ways that avoid shifting new responsibilities onto the program Director.

Unit Questions and Looking Ahead:

The central question included among unit questions involved the ways in which the program, in partnership with the Graduate School, could "resolve the structural challenges inherent to this program in the current institutional environment;" the recommendations outlined above address this question in terms of resources and in terms of structure and administration.

Additional unit questions are addressed in brief below:

Enrollment size: The committee agreed that admitting three students per academic year was appropriate for NMES, given the expanded levels of support recommended.

Community among faculty and students, program identity: The committee assessed the intellectual community framed by NMES faculty and students alike as robust, vibrant, collegial, and marked by very high morale, tempered only by anxiety about the renewal of

funding support from Arts & Sciences. Quarterly social gatherings of the NMES program's faculty and students helped to maintain the sense of community; as did the students' Canvas site and coordination of periodic student conferences.

External funding resources: The committee was impressed by the excellent track record of garnering external funds, especially in the form of ACLS and Mellon fellowships and Fulbright awards. Some of these fellowships, however, are available only to U.S. citizens. The program's international students may need to seek out fellowships from private foundations, their home countries, or international sources. The program's emphasis on developing students' grant-writing skills, as part of professional training, has paid obvious dividends.

Faculty involvement: The committee agreed that the level of faculty involvement in NMES was sufficient and appropriate for meeting the program's needs in terms of governance, oversight, and delivery; the high interest and commitment among Associate and Assistant Professors bodes well for the future.

Preparing students for the contemporary academic job market: The committee was impressed by the dramatic increase in recent years in the program's professionalization efforts and its programming on grant writing, résumé preparation, and other skills needed by students as they plan for and enter the academic job market. In addition to continuing these efforts, and cooperating with other departments and programs that offer professional workshops on other issues, the program should explore ways of leveraging alumni networks. For academic job placement in particular, the program should also look for ways to offer students the opportunity to teach independent courses, rather than only serving as TAs, before completing their degrees. The committee also noted that program students themselves are leading the way in finding and shaping non-academic careers for which their NMES training prepares them.

Looking ahead: A substantial portion of the funding for NMES students has come from Title VI FLAS fellowships. It is difficult to predict shifts in Title VI and other federal funding, but some strategic thinking about ways to offset possible cuts will be important to maintaining the quality and competitiveness of the program.

The committee was impressed by the extensive data maintained by the program and provided in the program's self-study; the excellent record-keeping with regard to student presentations, publications, and job placement was key to demonstrating the program's quality, and it is essential that this record-keeping protocol continue through changes in the program's staff and/or directorship. Continuity and institutional memory will also be enhanced by planning ahead for leadership succession.