




UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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From: Gary Handwerk, Chair 
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Response of the Department of Comparative Literature to the Departmental Review Report of April 10, 2003

On behalf of the Department of Comparative Literature, I would like to express our thanks to the departmental review committee for the effort they put into their review of our unit. Knowing how much time and energy these reviews require, we feel a considerable debt to them for their willingness to assist us in assessing our current situation. We are grateful for their praise of a number of aspects of our programs and for their general characterization of us as "an unusually strong academic program," a department that has "in many ways enhanced its overall strength during a period in which CL departments nationally have not fared so well." We are equally grateful for their specific suggestions about things we might be doing differently or better, ideas that we intend to make part of our evolving departmental discussions over the next few years.

We agree completely with the broadest conceptual recommendation in the report: that our greatest advantages "derive from a focus on the department's identity as a CL department," a focus that we fully intend to maintain. As our range of activities widens, we recognize the need to keep reinforcing our intellectual and institutional coherence. At the same time, we are glad to note that the committee endorsed the present institutional structure that houses Cinema Studies (as an undergraduate program) and the graduate degree certificate programs in Theory and Criticism and in Textual Studies within Comparative Literature. As part of our self-study process, we have already begun debating how best to accomplish the long-term integration of cinema studies and literary studies at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Similar philosophical and practical discussion about the place of Textual Studies should also begin once Textual Studies has been officially established as a program within our unit, and once the terms of its establishment have been clarified. As the review committee rightly noted, we have made considerable progress in broadening the geographical and intellectual scope of our department, a process we hope to continue by exploring possibilities for further links with units such as Near Eastern Languages and Civilization (and potentially the Jackson School as well) and by strengthening links that already exist. We also take seriously the

committee's admonition to monitor the growth of Cinema Studies in order to manage its growth effectively; the wisdom of that advice is evident in the renewed increase we have seen this year, with the number of majors showing another significant rise (from 90-100 in the recent past to 120 this year).

The committee report in large measure confirms the importance of the priorities that we established for ourselves in writing our departmental self-study. Thus, the desire to enhance both the cohesiveness and the range of our undergraduate literature curriculum lay behind our request to create a new set of partial faculty appointments along the lines of those created ten years ago. The valuable additions we have made in the last six years (Braester full-time, Staten and Steele each at 0.5 FTE in terms of teaching responsibilities) cannot really offset the attrition we have suffered over the same period, with faculty losses in earlier literary periods (Adams, E. Behler, Jaeger, Vance, Fisher) particularly visible. The desirable goals that the committee has noted—defining a clear progression among courses, maintaining regularity in course offerings, fostering common objectives among our core courses, adding variety in literature offerings, expanding the “global range of offerings”—require the presence of enough core faculty to take responsibility as a group for this set of courses. Current staffing, where many faculty may teach only a single undergraduate literature course every year or two, and where we often need faculty simply to staff our small number of core courses, makes more ambitious curricular planning and coordination very difficult to attain. A relatively modest increase here (of 1.0 FTE, for instance, spread among several faculty selected for specific curricular contributions to the department) could easily produce dramatic results.

Like the review committee, we see development efforts as an important piece of our future. As in the past, we will continue to focus our primary efforts on enhancing support of various kinds for graduate students—fellowships, support for study abroad, etc. Our endowment increase for this purpose, though modest, has been steady and does now allow us to fund a number of things that we could not fund in the past. Cinema Studies may well offer the most productive route to overall departmental success in this area. With this in mind, we have this quarter launched a series of film events—informal lectures and film showings involving all of our Cinema Studies faculty and coordinated by Willis Konick—intended, in part, to help us identify potential supporters in the community. We have also taken preliminary steps toward preparing a major NEH grant proposal to be submitted in October of this year, which would, if funded, make possible a significant expansion of our Texts and Teachers (high school outreach) program.

As the committee noted, one key element of our departmental identity lies in our common commitment to the study of foreign languages, our sense that linguistic expertise forms an essential foundation for the comprehensive understanding of other cultures and peoples. Maintaining the current foreign language requirement for all students (including film students) thus seems as important to us as it did to them, as does finding ways to make national cinema courses a fully integrated part of students' academic work. (Here we would note that we have already adopted one method suggested by the report in this area—working with some Title VI programs to fund foreign language trailer sections for national cinema courses.) As our self-study noted, one of the most effective means for enhancing foreign language skills and cross-cultural understanding is to increase participation in study abroad programs; this remains one of our key goals for the next few years. A recent proposal by Cynthia Steele and Albert

Sbragia to create a September study-abroad course based at foreign film festival sites could prove an extremely effective way to do this and to let us reach a wider range of potential participants.

Likewise, we would hope to continue our efforts to find ways to enhance departmental communication and community, particularly for graduate students. Given faculty numbers next year (with several faculty on leave), creating a new core course for next year's incoming graduate students will not be possible—but we will continue discussion with students about the desirability of this suggestion. We were pleased this year by the independent initiative shown by our graduate students in two areas; they launched discussions that led to the first interdepartmental graduate student colloquium on this campus (and have developed an ambitious proposal to expand that next year), and they established a lively discussion group on film that held regular meetings throughout the year. To help students plan their own programs more effectively, we will be scheduling a general meeting this quarter to discuss and field questions about our Ph.D. exam system, and offering (as we did last year) to schedule mentoring conferences with each of them. One encouraging aspect of our graduate program is that we have just concluded a very successful year in recruiting new students—especially crucial after two successive years when the number of incoming students ran lower than we wished. This group includes seven of our top eleven applicants, as well as all four of those who made on-campus visits funded in part by the Graduate School. We have also made progress in working with foreign language departments (notably French and Spanish thus far) to regularize our TA nomination and appointment procedures in those units.

In the end, however, our most pressing priority remains the one articulated in our self-study and endorsed by the committee. We would underscore their conclusion that, “The expansion of the [Cinema Studies] faculty requires immediate attention” at a point in time when “faculty (and staff) are in grave danger of being over-stretched by crowded courses and insufficient resources.” The situation here is different from that in literature, where there has historically been a balance of full-time and partial appointments. The one new hire dedicated to this program is, even with the strong cross-departmental support the program has enjoyed, starkly insufficient for a program that now counts 120 majors. The delay in hiring a second core faculty member—someone specifically trained in film studies—for this program has now brought us to a point of crisis. We have reached the limits of our ingenuity and luck in being able to patch together year by year the resources necessary to maintain the basic core courses for the program, while finding ourselves unable to undertake any but the smallest of curricular enhancements. Moreover, we have in place a plan for curricular improvements that really only awaits a new hire for its implementation; we likewise have developed a model for a graduate certificate program in film that would build upon the considerable, already-existing student interest in the field. But we need authorization to make a new hire in cinema studies in order to put these ideas in place and before the intellectual and curricular integrity of the program as it exists becomes compromised. Even in a year of severe budgetary crisis, we would hope that the College could find a way to address critical needs such as this one.

In closing, we would like to re-emphasize one recurrent theme of our self-study: the importance that we place upon retention of faculty across the humanities, an issue that we would underscore even more strongly than the review report did. As our self-study

indicated, the continued vitality of Comparative Literature as a field and as a department rests largely upon the vitality of the humanities as a whole at this university. Yet the foundation for our success feels increasingly fragile as faculty attrition across the humanities continues to take place. Unless we find ways to retain faculty at all levels, unless we manage to replace crucial senior faculty who do leave with new hires at a comparable level, unless we figure out how to reverse the decline in faculty numbers in key departments, we are not going to be able to continue to do what we do as well as we have in the past. And Comparative Literature, dependent as it always is upon active collaboration with and support from other units, will suffer particularly hard.