

The Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University:
A Report by the ad hoc Steering Committee
in the College of Arts and Letters

26 January 2004

History and mission

In October 2003, Provost Simon announced that Dean Wendy Wilkins had decided not to undergo review for possible reappointment as Dean. Provost Simon at that time indicated that she would like to pause and re-think the future of liberal arts at Michigan State University: no interim Dean would be appointed and no search for a new Dean would begin until a process of discussing “the future for the liberal arts and sciences in our land-grant university of the 21st century” (5 November memo) had taken place. The College Advisory Council in the College of Arts and Letters named a steering committee “to help [the Provost] organize and coordinate various focus groups; meet with her to convey or to help clarify College-wide faculty views and perspectives, particularly those generated in focus-group discussions and also those gained from communication with individual faculty and students; communicate regularly with College faculty via e-mail about issues being discussed, and provide faculty with opportunities to have input into this process; and meet with the CAC and the Chairs . . . in order to discuss the results of focus groups and other discussions, as well as possible outcomes” (CAC minutes).

In late October, with this charge, the Steering Committee began a series of discussions with faculty members and administrators about the current state and future prospects of the College of Arts and Letters. These discussions continued until mid-December, paused for the winter break, and then were renewed until, on January 16, the Steering Committee held its last information-gathering meeting.

What follows is a summary of the committee’s findings, cast into a prefatory statement, specific responses to questions posed by the Provost in her 5 November memo, and a set of specific recommendations about the arts and humanities at Michigan State University.

Preface: the role of the arts and humanities

The arts and humanities are central to the mission of Michigan State University as a land-grant, research extensive university. They are dedicated to the preservation, transmission, and creation of knowledge about the human condition as it was/is expressed through the artifacts of diverse cultures: languages, art, texts, and other cultural practices.

In its preparation of our future local, state, national, and international leaders, Michigan State University must continue to support the arts and humanities both as they promote social and intellectual change and as they conserve human knowledge and artistic achievement. The arts and humanities enhance the emotional and intellectual growth of our students by teaching, in particular, the following skills: critical thinking, creativity, writing and communication.

- **Critical thinking** enables our students to develop, in a reflective and deliberate manner, solutions to intellectual, technical, social, and political challenges. Students who can think critically can engage the world more fully, recognize and navigate current intellectual and social issues, and construct new paradigms to meet the challenges of the 21st century.
- **Creativity** enables our students to imagine the world as it has been lived, as it is currently experienced, and as it might be lived in the future. Creativity plays a crucial role in human development, in complex thinking, and in the solution of intellectual challenges. Students in the arts and humanities create and study music, fine arts, drama, film, historical narratives and documents, philosophical treatises, religious views, languages, and literatures -- the best and most important things that have been thought and said and made by human beings.
- **Writing and communication skills** enable our students to state their ideas clearly and articulately in the public sphere and in private life. These skills will be vital for America's global citizens in the 21st century as they negotiate the United States' ongoing discussion of its national cultural values and the relationship of those values to the values of other peoples and other nations in an international arena.

An understanding of the arts and humanities forms the basis of intellectually engaged activity, enriches and sustains lifelong learning, and cultivates the capacity for empathetic and relational thinking.

“How do we maintain—perhaps even increase—our capacity to provide a sound liberal education to all of our students?” (Provost Simon, November 5 memo)

- **Re-examine general education**

- ⇒ Continue and encourage serious discussion of general education within and among all departments in the arts and humanities. Find a way to shift more of the responsibility—more of the “ownership”—for general education to the departments. Complete centralization within a Center has not worked effectively.
- ⇒ Continue to create flexibility for students by rethinking teaching models (e.g., half-semester, 2 credit courses), cross-listing courses that might serve either to fulfill the general education requirement or as a requirement/elective in another program of study, including the arts in the general education curriculum, and incorporating the international dimension of the educational enterprise.
- ⇒ Initiate broad-based, issue-driven courses that address and focus on important topics facing society in the 21st century: e.g., Globalization/ Internationalization; Technological Innovation; and Current Ethical Issues.
- ⇒ Remove impediments to original, innovative ideas about teaching general education. Having a new course approved in IAH has often been an arduous task. Faced with the obstacles to course approval, faculty members are too often tempted not to proceed. New courses and new initiatives go undeveloped.
- ⇒ Continue to investigate the role that Integrative Studies can/should play in writing instruction. Faculty members in the arts and humanities should determine the amount and kind of writing that is needed in Integrative Studies.

- **Re-examine the Writing Requirement**

- ⇒ Consider alternative teaching models: e.g., 1-2 credit modules that could be taught separately or in conjunction with another course.
- ⇒ Discontinue the trend of hiring fixed-term faculty to teach freshman writing. Fixed-term faculty are underpaid relative to the regular faculty, and they do not have the same opportunity to develop their own research programs; at the same time, they cannot be expected to develop loyalty to the university or to the curriculum in which they teach, and thus we short-change our own students in a course that—across the university community—we agree is central to each student’s intellectual well-being. Professional organizations like the Modern Language Association are outspoken in their resistance to this trend. We concur.

- ⇒ Keep class size small (22-25 students) in all writing courses in WRAC and in other courses in the arts and humanities in which writing instruction, as determined by the faculty, is central and vital.

Faculty members in the arts and humanities appear to us to be quite willing to re-think their role in and teaching of general education. We would emphasize, however, that changes in freshman writing and/or general education must not come at the expense of our current commitments to undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Shifting a higher percentage of the current resources toward freshman writing and/or general education will cripple programs in the arts and humanities that are vital and central to the healthy arts and humanities curriculum of a major research university.

“What should be done to foster the intellectual vitality of the liberal arts and sciences?”
(Provost Simon, November 5 memo)

A great strength of any university lies in the high quality of the research and teaching done by its faculty. What truly distinguishes Michigan State in the liberal arts, however, is the regular, active interplay between these two activities, which in other major research institutions are quite often very separate activities. Over the last fifteen years, in particular, research productivity in the arts and humanities departments has increased, despite a net loss of tenure-stream FTEs in the College. Each unit has a core of highly visible faculty members with national and, indeed, international reputations, all of them engaged in undergraduate and graduate education.

- **Rethink areas of the curriculum that were initially established in the belief that interdisciplinarity was something that needed to be imposed on the curriculum and monitored centrally.** Today, teaching and research in the arts and humanities are necessarily interdisciplinary in their focus. Historians, literary scholars, and artists, for example, regularly call upon the insights and methods of such disciplines as anthropology, political philosophy, gender studies, physics, and medicine. This diversity of interests is apparent in the reading lists and assignments for many courses.
- **Encourage interdepartmental discussions aimed at consolidating and cross-listing courses on the undergraduate and graduate level, where appropriate.**
- **Retain the full complement of M.A., M.F.A., and Ph.D. programs in the disciplines appropriate to a leading land-grant research extensive university.** In the arts and humanities, as in many other disciplines on campus, graduate studies play an essential role. Graduate assistants bring energy, enthusiasm, and innovative ideas to undergraduate classrooms. Graduates from our M.A., M.F.A., and Ph.D. programs land jobs at top-rated universities and in key corporations and businesses. The vitality

of the arts and humanities depends upon strong graduate programs in the disciplines. Departments should regularly reevaluate and calibrate program size, recognizing that program size is not necessarily an indicator of its quality.

- **Retain teaching loads and sabbatical leaves appropriate to a land-grant, research extensive university.** Research methods in the humanities and creative endeavors in the arts, we note, normally require many months or years of sustained work that will be completed by an individual faculty member working primarily alone; increased teaching loads and/or reduced sabbatical leaves would hinder this kind of work. This method of conducting research does not mean, however, that such faculty members are in any way insular or removed from the larger world of ideas. Though interdisciplinarity in the sciences may indeed manifest itself as interdepartmental appointments for faculty members, in the arts and humanities it more often manifests itself methodologically in single-authored research or creative products, or pedagogically in the single-teacher classroom.
- **Consider the creation of a common-numbered course in all arts and humanities departments that addresses timely issues of interest to all educated citizens.** Catalog-approved courses tend to become “boxes” in which course content is less flexible than it might be, particularly at a time when both the professional fields and the institution itself are undergoing large-scale changes. The “special topics” course we envision would be driven not by faculty interest (as is the case with most special topics courses), but by current crises and debates: a controversial art exhibit might be the subject in the Department of Art and Art History; ethical issues surrounding cloning or stem-cell research might be the subject in the Department of Philosophy; the censorship of writers might be the subject in English or Spanish. We note that, with the help of the Provost’s Office, the Department of History created and successfully implemented one instance of such a course in 2002 (the course focused on the causes, implications, and aftermath of “9-11”).

Our discussions lead us to believe that the arts and humanities at Michigan State University are interesting and vital. Do not separate and parcel out the humanities to more than one existing or yet-to-be-created college. The humanities constitute a core, and to dilute their presence together in the curriculum is to guarantee the loss of their ability to support and sustain each other in research and in teaching, as well as to weaken the fabric of graduate and undergraduate education at Michigan State University. In a moment of financial stress like the present one, it makes more sense to address the financial issues head-on rather than to pretend that shuffling the humanities disciplines about can solve them. However, open a discussion about a “College of Visual and Performing Arts” (that might include Art, Music, Theater, and/or other design programs on campus, as appropriate). This latter initiative should be decided upon after open discussion among university administrators, the College of Arts and Letters administration, and—above all—the chairs and faculty of the units concerned.

“What assets and collaborations do you now have across collegiate lines and how can / should these be strengthened and invigorated?” (Provost Simon, November 5 memo)

- **Without being exhaustive, and for illustrative purposes only, we note some examples of the kind of collaborations that currently take place in the arts and humanities:**
 - ⇒ Faculty members in the arts and humanities play a vital role in the success of all the area studies centers; at the same time, these area studies centers depend for their continued national visibility and financial support from granting agencies on the intellectual contributions of arts and humanities faculty and graduate students. The relationship between the arts and humanities faculty and the areas studies center is synergistic and symbiotic. Though precise figures were not available to us, it seems to be the case that approximately \$1,000,000 per year flows into the arts and humanities departments from the various area studies centers.
 - ⇒ Faculty members in Linguistics and Languages and in Philosophy are active contributors to the Cognitive Science Program, fostering scholarship and research that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries in the pursuit of “the nature of mind” and providing a structure for graduate training that will produce new scholars and scientists who have the tools needed to take on this challenging, interdisciplinary puzzle. They have partnered with colleagues in departments like Psychology, Computer Science, Zoology, and Telecommunications to pursue these goals.
 - ⇒ The Department of Philosophy has re-positioned itself in certain fields, particularly ethics, to create cross-college collaborations with the College of Human Medicine, the Center for Ethics and Humanities in the Life Sciences, and the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (among other cross-college connections). Other departments in the arts and humanities understand the success of Philosophy’s initiatives, and should be encouraged to find ways of following in its footsteps.
 - ⇒ Faculty members in History, Women’s Studies, English, and Music are in the early stages of collaborating with faculty members in Sociology, Anthropology, International Development, Political Science, Epidemiology, and James Madison College to create a program in Migration Studies.

In our conversations with faculty members and administrators, we discovered a fact that should already be known, understood, and appreciated by the Michigan State University community: faculty members in the arts and humanities collaborate extensively and productively with other units, centers, and research across the campus. They are plugged in across the campus. We are not in a position to suggest

how any one of these collaborations could be strengthened and invigorated, though we do note that new initiatives—like Migration Studies, Peace and Justice Studies, Film Studies, and others—are “cutting edge” initiatives that promise to provide many returns for any investment made in them.

- **Eliminate barriers to team teaching.** Willingly or unwillingly, administrators from associate chairpersons on up make it difficult for faculty members to team-teach. This is particularly true if faculty members from different colleges attempt to team-teach a course. In addition to those barriers, there are simply too few tangible rewards for faculty members in the arts and humanities who try to teach across college lines.
- **Encourage—rhetorically, financially, institutionally—initiatives that promote cross-college discussion.** For example, provide forums in which faculty members with similar research interests are encouraged to talk to colleagues using relevant methods, approaches, and techniques.
- **Continue and extend a leadership role in the arena of quality of life issues that are deeply informed and often defined by the arts and humanities.** One form of “collaboration” in the arts and humanities is community outreach, exemplified by such programs as the Department of Theatre’s Young Playwrights Festival, the Department of Art and Art History’s Saturday Art Program, the Writing Center’s various workshops, the MSU Museum’s and Kresge Art Museum’s children’s tours, German’s “Reaching for the World” program in local elementary schools, the Philosophy Department’s Mali Project in local elementary schools, and so on. Many of these collaborations are under-reported in the media and little known outside the departments and programs within which they are fostered. They—and the joint, communal effort of faculty members in the arts and humanities to take the arts and humanities beyond the MSU campus—deserve to be better known and appreciated.
- **Recognize that quality of life issues require diverse cultural offerings in the arts and humanities, city planning, and design.** Otherwise, our future graduates will simply inherit a culture—a designed world—that they are not sufficiently prepared to interpret, critique, or actively shape. Referring to her “Cool Cities Initiative” to recruit and keep young workers in Michigan, Governor Granholm recently emphasized that “the arts and culture” are linked to business development: “creating cool cities is more than a catchphrase, it is an initiative that is imperative for us to undertake to grow our state’s economy and to keep our young, educated workers here.” Given that the State of Michigan currently ranks 47th in attracting young people (according to a study last year by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation), serious consideration must be given to the fact that quality of life issues are also a matter of economic concern, especially in this era of creative and cultural “capital.”

This recognition suggests that both this university's and the State of Michigan's ability to retain and attract the best and brightest student population/workforce will increasingly be predicated on building a learning/living environment that is culturally rich and diverse.

Michigan State University is building a more culturally aware and informed citizenry, educating students who are the future stewards, interpreters, and makers of culture. This goal remains an indispensable characteristic of a highly rated, highly respected university. If the arts and humanities become less oriented toward research and more oriented toward service, less oriented toward original contributions in teaching and artistic production and more oriented toward simply providing general education, then Michigan State University will certainly become something less than a top-flight university.

“What concrete steps must be taken in order to achieve short-term goals that will result in long-term change?” (Provost Simon, November 5 memo)

There is an unfortunate level of distrust between the faculty in the arts and humanities and the administration of the College and the University. Many faculty and staff members are concerned that there is an insufficient understanding on campus about the approaches and contributions of the arts and humanities. The example of the sciences seems to drive expectations about research productivity in the arts and humanities at Michigan State University; but this ought not to be the case.

The quality and level of productivity of research in the College is quite impressive, and has been strengthened enormously during the past fifteen years by new hires. This has created new pressures as faculty members try to balance their need to fulfill expanding expectations for tenure and their teaching responsibilities. Although faculty are willing to take on the teaching of large numbers of students through lecture classes (and do so quite successfully), they are also very committed to continuing to offer students access to small classes. Faculty members are invested in these sorts of courses primarily because it is only there that the instruction of writing, artistic production, and critical analysis can be carried out with real effect. The existence of such classes, many feel, is threatened by the pressures to increase class sizes and overall productivity in student credit hours. Overall, there is a general frustration with the emphasis on quantitative over qualitative measures of evaluation in teaching; chairs and faculty members believe that units are asked to pursue “moving targets” that are inconsistent and therefore difficult to fulfill in the long-term.

At the same time, administrators seem frustrated and disappointed with faculty members, many of whom they see as intransigent, overly committed to traditional approaches, and unwilling to adapt to new realities.

We are not in a position to adequately evaluate either the long-term history behind or the concrete justification for these sentiments. But we are concerned with the corrosive effects such distrust has on the quality of education and research at the University, and believe that it is vital to work together to create a better climate. We propose a set of initiatives that would demand new approaches and efforts on the part of both the faculty and the administration to resolve some of these issues.

- **Permit faculty members in American Studies in WRAC to move, if they choose, to another unit in the arts and humanities.** American Studies has been and is a strength at Michigan State University. The reinvigoration of the writing program in the new Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Culture is a strong initiative; but the American Culture side of the department's mission appears to us to sit awkwardly next to the Writing and Rhetoric mission. The degree programs in American Studies could be administered by English or History, or stay in WRAC if a critical mass of faculty in American Studies chooses to remain there.
- **Increase support for new initiatives to develop outside funding.** In the university of the 21st century, it will be vitally important for the arts and humanities to rethink the way they view the following four areas:
 - ⇒ **Publicity.** The School of Music has led the way, and the College has begun to follow, in the area of publicity. The School of Music has on staff a full time publicist, which is necessary because of the large number of concerts and recitals produced by the department yearly. WRAC has also emerged as a unit that understands the importance of publicity, producing a website and brochures that promote their research and productivity. Public relations will play an important role in the university of the 21st century. Departments need to embrace the idea of advertising themselves. They must invest in public relations or assign a faculty member with knowledge in this field to handle such work. Departments could consider sharing a publicist.
 - ⇒ **Development.** Chairs/directors, and faculty members themselves, should become more involved in fund raising. We have to change the mindset in the arts and, particularly, the humanities. Faculty members must understand that, for the long-term survival and vitality of their units, fund raising is necessary and they need to support it in word and in deed. Seminars and workshops could be given by chairs / directors (from MSU or from elsewhere) who have already been successful in fund raising. Another suggestion would be to increase the number of development officers who work with various departments. Chairs and Directors need to provide leadership for the development officers: only they have complete knowledge of their departmental needs and resources. Research shows that these positions pay for themselves. The College has made great strides in this area; bigger steps, even yet, need to be taken.

- ⇒ **Grants.** It is a fact that grants are not as plentiful in the arts and humanities as they are in the sciences. Still, money is available to arts and humanities researchers. The administration should consider hiring a full-time grant writer for the arts and humanities.
 - ⇒ **Entrepreneurship.** There are ways to create profitable ventures in the university community. Doing so requires a great deal of creativity and thought. In recent years, the School of Music has supported a number of successful ventures, like the Community Music School, which provides classes and private instruction for the greater Lansing community; and the Jazz Area, which established a business plan modeled after the Medical Practice Plan. The Department of French, Classics, and Italian has recently initiated a French Language School for children in local school systems.
- But let us be clear: **summer institutes, profitable ventures, and other initiatives that are “revenue generating” cannot provide the *foundational* support that the arts and humanities need and deserve.** The administration should encourage such initiatives and needs (perhaps continually) to explain their value to units; but the administration must also recognize and show in its actions that the arts and humanities inherently deserve support at or above current levels in the form of tenure-stream FTE lines, TA positions, and research monies.
 - **Disseminate knowledge about the approaches and contributions of the arts and humanities at MSU and in the broader community.** Most of the humanities areas simply do not have access to large-scale grants of the kind available in some fields. The model of inquiry and research in the humanities rarely requires large grants, and many faculty members conduct a great deal of research with no research funding at all. Nevertheless, their research often gains great visibility and earns prestige for the University. Indeed the humanities provide a unique and necessary set of contributions regarding cross-cultural understanding and international questions that is particularly crucial today. Faculty members need to work harder on all levels to help others in the University community and beyond understand what they are doing and why it is important. The administration should also seek out ways to provide leadership to the faculty in articulating the place of the arts and humanities in the broader community and the world. New structures might be put in place to facilitate bottom-up initiatives for outreach and improve collaboration with other units in the university in areas such as Study Abroad, where the College is particular strong. Faculty in the College are already deeply involved in International Studies on many levels, but should work to make their contributions there more visible and more connected to other areas of the University.
 - **Improve communication between faculty members and the College and University administrations.** While approaches in the arts and humanities are often interdisciplinary, the disciplines remain central foundations both academically and administratively. Academic production and the training of graduate students necessarily take place in relation to the expectations and demands of the disciplines.

Universities that have successfully created exciting interdisciplinary programs (e.g., the University of Chicago) have done so by building on very strong disciplinary programs. The disciplines, then, must thrive at Michigan State University in order to sustain new and experimental initiatives. Members of many departments feel that in the current climate they have insufficient power to shape the long-term agendas, particularly in the area of hiring and graduate education. Many departments have in recent years created consensus in support of hiring in certain areas, trying both to sustain the core of instruction in their areas and to build on areas of strength, only to discover that their priorities were overruled by the upper administration. Although there are sometimes understandable reasons for this, it creates frustration in the departments, whose faculty members are in the best position to determine what is needed to teach and sustain research in their discipline. The long-term impact is corrosive and divisive. There needs to be an effort on all sides to improve communication about and implementation of the direction departments envision for themselves. For departments and chairs, this means providing well-argued and well-articulated strategic plans that outline long-term goals and the ways particular hires fit into them. That process should be tied to the broader project of setting out a strategic plan for the College as a whole. At the same time, the administration should be more responsive to the departments' decisions to determine which hire is the highest priority for them. Of course, departments must remain attentive to the demands of College and university initiatives, but they should retain a high level of autonomy in determining how to shape their own future.

Recommendations

- **The humanities departments** (English; French, Classics, and Italian; History; Linguistics and Germanic, Slavic, Asian & African Languages; Philosophy; Religious Studies; Spanish and Portuguese; Writing, Rhetoric, and American Culture) **and most, if not all, of the current interdepartmental programs should remain clustered together**, either in the current College of Arts and Letters configuration, or in a Humanities College (without the arts), or—if it is clear that substantial savings will be realized—in another allied College like the College of Social Science. The humanities departments share methodological, theoretical, and historical connections, as well as objectives; they also share an institutional history at Michigan State University that has generated, over time, linked programs, relationships, expectations, and goals. In a configuration in which the humanities would be joined with, for example, the social sciences, we would hope that the reorganized college would take on a new identity commensurate with the common ideals of the affected departments (e.g., a College of Liberal Studies).

- **The arts should either remain allied with the humanities (as in the current configuration) or, with appropriate support, be reconfigured into a “College of Visual and Performing Arts.”**
- The current budget deficit in the College of Arts and Letters has been caused by a variety of factors. The faculty understands that state funding for higher education has decreased in recent years; nevertheless, they feel that the arts and humanities have been and are underfunded given the centrality of their contribution to the mission of the university. **We believe that any attempt to address this situation must include the development of a long-term, faculty-driven vision or strategic plan of action for the College.** Without this, departments and programs cannot act forcefully and independently in shaping their own futures; and “bottom up” thinking cannot take place. Also, steps must be taken to end the constant miscommunication (or simple lack of communication) between the administration (at all levels) and the chairs/faculty members in the College. This includes the upper administration’s apparent refusal to recognize the different outside funding patterns available to the arts and humanities, as well as the faculty’s continued distrust of the upper administration’s well-intentioned initiatives and ideas.
- **Intellectual reasons for reorganization must take precedence over the fiscal ones.** For any reorganization to be successful, the faculty members in all affected units need to be convinced that such reorganization is intellectually sensible—then they will support it enthusiastically, and make it work.
- **Support for graduate studies in the arts and humanities needs to be strengthened.** Without support for teaching assistants, graduate programs cannot compete for the best and brightest students. Without the best and brightest students, graduate programs cannot maintain the research profile demanded of us as a top-rated comprehensive university. Without a strong research profile in the core arts and humanities areas, Michigan State University cannot fulfill its mission as a highly rated land-grant, research extensive university.
- **Currently offered degree programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels should be maintained.** We uncovered no evidence that any existing programs should be eliminated.
- **Changes of the sort that have recently taken place in the arts and humanities,** like the moratorium on the Art History graduate program, the moratorium on the Latin undergraduate program, and the change in the mission of ATL/WRAC, **should be approved by the entire faculty in the College.** Such changes may be for the better, but they need to be made, evaluated, and understood by the faculty in the context of a long-range plan for the college. Otherwise, as we learned with IAH, the faculty will not support such “top-down” initiatives.

- **Faculty members in the arts and humanities units are eager to help solve the budgetary problem.** The arts and humanities have in recent years attracted talented faculty members, recruited excellent graduate students, and increased the number of majors in almost all disciplines. Given these realities, the University community is duty-bound to find both a short-term and a long-term solution to the budgetary problem afflicting the arts and humanities, and indeed the entire university. In our conversations with faculty members, we were struck by their willingness to engage this problem head-on. We are convinced that, with continual and productive discussions between the faculty and the administration, arts and humanities can emerge from this re-visioning process reinvigorated and fully committed to continuing to fulfill its vital mission within the University community.
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