

# NewsNet

The Newsletter of the AAASS

American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies

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## REFORMING THE AREA STUDIES CURRICULUM: DEFINING ISSUES AND OBJECTIVES

As a linguist, I expected to devote my life entirely to exotic languages and arcane theories of meaning and cognition. However, three years ago I was appointed director of a National Resource Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, and in that capacity I have invested considerable time, energy, and thought to the trajectory of Slavic studies at US institutions of higher education. Many in our field have justifiably bemoaned the sagging enrollments and lackluster academic job market, yet buried in our current predicament I see an opportunity for us, for our students, and for our increasingly global community.

**Why We Have a Special Opportunity Now.** The end of the Cold War has engendered fundamental, transformative responses from just about every sector: trade, politics, defense, the media. Every sector, that is, but ours. Higher education, and specifically our own field, itself a child of the Cold War, has been slow to formulate a curricular response that would transform our relationship to the present realities of our world area.

During the Cold War we structured our curricula in a manner that was efficient, appropriate, and consistent with overall trends in US education. While our nation studied the former East Bloc countries as distant enemies, it was feasible and logical to do so largely from within the confines of individual disciplines. However, the detachment of the Cold War has yielded to a new era of engagement, and furthermore

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the parameters of our task as educators are changing along two dimensions: the direction of curricular evolution and the projected demographics of the US student population. Together, these three factors (the new era of engagement, curricular trends, and student demographics) offer us a unique opportunity to design future curricula that will serve our profession and our nation.

Thanks to the dramatic shift in our relation to the formerly communist countries, the US is entering into partnerships with them that were previously unthinkable. These partnerships are invariably defined by the issues that bring us together, most

of which concern security, trade, and information. Now that the fence is down, we are discovering that collaboration with our new-found neighbors requires that we bring a multitude of skills to the table. There are extraordinary career opportunities for individuals with the right combinations of linguistic, cultural, scientific/technological, and professional qualifications.

At the time of our own revolution, American higher education was structured around a spartan assortment of Greek, Latin, Rhetoric, History, Mathematics, and Science. We have devoted much of the past two centuries to the articulation of discrete, narrowly defined academic disciplines, yielding the diverse spectrum of offerings that now delineate our curricula. However the pace of specialization is coming to a standstill. The current evolutionary trend explores how the dozens of disciplines at our disposal can inform each other, creating new interdisciplinary ventures. Like our new partnerships with the old East Bloc countries, academic partnerships are defined by issues, such as Women's Studies, Cultural Studies, and Environmental Sciences. We Slavists were early leaders in this trend, establishing Russian and East European Studies programs at most major universities. We can take the lead again by designing multi-disciplinary curricula to address the issues defining new US-East European partnerships.

As loyal disciplinary scholars and Slavists, we cherish the inherent value of our endeavor and often shudder at the shallow pursuits of "global studies" and their encroachment upon area studies. Perhaps we should instead consider why the globalization of the curriculum is succeeding at our expense. I suspect it is because global studies proponents seized upon compelling, far-reaching issues at the very time when our focal issue fizzled. We cannot allow ourselves to be perceived any longer as lonely orphans of the Cold War, bereft of a defining purpose. The new era of engagement has generated a throng of relevant issues, and we need to regroup around them, for most of our students, administrators, non-Slavist colleagues, and the general public are more interested in our contributions to these issues than in esoteric achievements accessible only to an elite few. If we wish to protect our "pure" intellectual pursuits, the best way to do so is by being vital shareholders in multidisciplinary joint ventures on our campuses.

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Pre-Registration Form and Hotel Information for St. Louis Convention

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## CORRECTIONS:

On page 7 of the January issue of *NewsNet*, incorrect addresses were given for **subscribing to listservs**. To subscribe to SEELANGS (Slavic and East European Languages), send an e-mail message to: [LISTSERV@CUNYVM.CUNY.EDU](mailto:LISTSERV@CUNYVM.CUNY.EDU). Put anything (or nothing) in the Subject: line and in the main body of the text put only the single line "SUB SEELANGS Your Name" (without the quotes).

To subscribe to H-Russia (for historians), send a message to [LISTSERV@H-NET.MSU.EDU](mailto:LISTSERV@H-NET.MSU.EDU), put anything (or nothing) in the Subject: line and in the main body of the text put only the single line "SUB H-RUSSIA Your Name" (without the quotes).

The composition of the **1999 Committee on Language Study** was incorrectly listed in January's *NewsNet*. Following are the members of the committee and their terms:

- William Comer, (U of Kansas), Chair, 1999-2001
- Sandra Rosengrant, (Portland State) 1997-1999
- Benjamin Rifkin, (U of Wisconsin) 1997-1999
- Michael Katz, (Middlebury) 1998-2000
- Lenore Grenoble, (Dartmouth) 1999-2001
- George Gutsche, (U of Arizona) 1999-2001
- Lynne Debenedette, (Brown) 1999-2001
- Margaret Mills, (U of Iowa) 1999-2001

## Notice to All Special Interest AAASS Affiliates:

The new guidelines for affiliation require that an annual report on activities be submitted to the AAASS offices each year. If your group has not already done so, please send the reports as soon as possible.

As we all know, the number of university-age US citizens is increasing, and our university students are increasingly career oriented. We can best capture their imaginations with curricula that prepare them to participate as professionals in US-East European partnerships. In this way we can slice ourselves a larger piece of a growing pie. To sum up, American universities are breeding multi-disciplinary species, we Slavists are swimming in a fecund gene pool of fresh cross-disciplinary issues, and these issues can spawn career paths for a swelling student population. These are excellent conditions for curricular hybridization, and it's likely we'll hit upon new strains that are resistant to the ills plaguing our field.

***Curricula Need To Be Defined by Issues.*** Let's look at some of the issues relevant to our new relationship with Eastern Europe and how they might be addressed in our curricula by combining the language and area studies disciplines that have traditionally defined our field with specialties from the sciences and professional schools. The untapped resources and potential market of 400 million consumers in the countries of the former Soviet Union and East Bloc lured \$15.4 billion in foreign investment to the region in 1997. Current problems notwithstanding, the sheer size of the East European economy assures it a prominent place in international trade. The business issue motivates the curricular innovation that has gained the greatest ground in recent years; business courses are available in conjunction with several MA programs in Russian and East European Studies, and in a few instances it is possible to earn a joint MA-MBA. This is one area where we are already scoring some successes; let's hope these programs will continue to sprout.

The US has pledged to help contain and reduce the stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction in the various successor states. Although the "loose nukes" get most of the media attention, the chemical and biological weapons exist in far greater quantities and present a greater threat, especially if deployed for terrorist purposes. We will need to commit significant personnel resources to the long-term containment project, yet at present we have not even begun to train specialists with the combination of scientific, linguistic, and area studies capabilities they will need to collaborate with their foreign colleagues on solutions to this problem. The weaponry issue urges us to make space in our curriculum for students who would pursue fields such as chemistry, physics, biology, and epidemiology as a complement to language and area studies courses.

Our world area contains some of the greatest untapped mineral resources in existence, as well as some of the worst legacies of ecological devastation. Restoring the environmental health of the region and developing methods for responsible use of resources is another high-priority project that will occupy international teams of specialists for decades to come. In order to address the issue of environmental sustainability, we need to steer students toward the environmental sciences and geology while instructing them in the languages and contexts they will be working with.

One of the first East European exports to reach our shores after the iron curtain lifted was organized crime. The proliferation of smuggling, fraud, and other covert activities is straining the capacities of a host of government agencies (INS, FBI, DEA, Secret Service, etc.), which increasingly seek employees who can speak the languages and handle the legal and technical aspects of these problems. Because the motive for all organized crime is money, and because money is becoming more a digital than a physical reality,

some of this work requires programming skills. Organized crime is one issue which enjoins us to produce graduates with legal or computer science training, in addition to our traditional curricula.

We are everywhere reminded that the currency of the present age is information. At a conference last April commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Title VI program, Kenneth Prewitt, former President of the Social Science Research Council, asked: will countries such as ours that led the industrial revolution recapitulate their success in the current technological revolution, or will it have a destabilizing effect, creating a new world order in which we are disadvantaged? The internet changed the dynamics of relationships among countries and corporations worldwide at the very time when the role of information in our world area underwent a major sea change. We suddenly have plenty of information at our fingertips, but are unable to digest it at the rate it is reaching us. Librarian of Congress James Billington declared at the same conference that we need "knowledge navigators" to interpret and mediate this information to society. These information brokers will need to understand the languages and cultures this information is embedded in, and will also need specialized training in areas such as library and information science, journalism, and computer science.

These are just a few examples of issues that should inspire us to create curricular joint ventures reaching beyond our traditional disciplinary borders.

***What I Have Done and Why.*** Many of us have been telling students for years that if they want to use their language and area studies skills in non-academic careers, they need to combine these studies with other qualifications. Any major US university has the courses and faculty to address issues like the ones listed above; what is lacking is a curricular vehicle to navigate among them and arrive at a degree. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I have been engineering a response to the post-Cold-War world, an MA in Russian/East European Studies with a new scope and vision. Thanks to a generous Institutional Award from the National Security Education Program, unwavering support from our Provost and the Deans of the Graduate School and the College of Arts and Sciences, and the collaborative efforts of colleagues from over two dozen academic units, we have just begun reviewing applicants for our first cohort of students, who will enroll in the fall of 1999. Students will select a Slavic language, follow a series of area studies courses designed for the program, and develop a concentration in a discipline of the humanities, sciences, or professional schools. The culmination of their studies will be a thesis project targeting an issue relevant to Russia or Eastern Europe. In researching their thesis projects, students will integrate their language, area, and disciplinary studies. We anticipate that many of our students will take advantage of the internship opportunities we are investigating with government agencies and think tanks. We are also extrapolating possible career paths and consulting with likely employers to ensure that we will produce attractive job candidates. Finally, we are hiring someone for a full-time position to teach in and administer the program, and to continue following all these leads. (For more details, see our website at: <http://www.unc.edu/depts/slavic>.)

Creating this new MA program has been an adventure. I've met with representatives from units all over campus to request their cooperation in making various disciplinary studies available for this degree. I've called Lieutenant Colonels of the Army and Air Force

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in their Pentagon offices to consult on the requirements for Advanced Civil Schooling for Foreign Area Officers, waded into the mysteries of calculating Military Tuition Benefits, and given presentations to Army students from the Defense Language Institute in Monterey and from our own Fort Bragg. I've presented brochures on the program at a regional meeting of the American Chemical Society. By now I've written up our proposed degree in at least a score of different versions, asked for all kinds of money, begged favors from every member of our administration, and tried the endurance of my talented staff. I'll spend spring break making the rounds of Washington, DC offices seeking internships, career opportunities, and further funding for our students.

There have been bumps along the road. Change always takes people unaware, and some colleagues have been puzzled by or even suspicious of what it is I'm up to. Not a few are opposed in principle to the use of graduate education for career advancement, and view it instead as a drain on their real mission, the training of doctoral students. I'm also facing the challenge of using new (to me) venues such as scientific, professional, government, and military organizations to locate pioneering students who will do the real trailblazing by test-running this program.

I would like to think that all these are altruistic efforts in service of a higher goal, expressible in phrases so worn out that I can't bring myself to use them (i.e., of the "to make the world a better place" variety). Maybe they are. But much of my impetus comes from a place closer to home. I enjoy the company of an unusually diverse collection of Slavists on my campus, and in particular a Slavic department that teaches six of our languages. In an era when Slavic departments are becoming de facto Russian departments or even being threatened with elimination, I hope to draw due attention to this precious resource by adding a new dimension to its role in the curriculum. The value of the knowledge we impart to our students will appreciate when it is used to prepare (at least some of) them for tangible, meaningful careers beyond the pale of academia.

With any luck, the new MA degree will have some impact on how we as scholars view graduate education and on the future of Slavic area studies. As the authors of *A Silent Success* (Haworth and Millar, 1993) have amply demonstrated, masters degrees have benefits often unintended and unappreciated by the faculty who support such programs. Employers use the masters degree as a valuable screening device to identify high-caliber candidates, and in many spheres an MA is a ticket to career advancement. We have acknowledged the value of masters education in professional training by designing our interdisciplinary program with this purpose as our primary aim. The benefits of this strategy will not only accrue to the students; our new MA will help support traditional graduate education by increasing enrollments in existing courses, creating demand for more area studies courses, and producing alumni who are likely to lead successful, lucrative careers, becoming valuable development prospects. I hope that our modified MA will inspire others like it. The more such programs we have, the stronger our field as a whole may become since these programs will gradually be recognized beyond our field and thus draw more interest from new constituencies.

By the way, I'm still very much engaged in semantic investigations of my beloved morphemes. It's a blessed escape from the diffuse details of administration. And when I retreat to my research, I do so with an easy conscience. ■