

**College of Arts and Letters
Comparative Studies PhD
Program Review
March 19-20, 2020**

Review Team

**Laurie Ouellette (University of Minnesota)
Max Skidmore (University of Missouri-Kansas City)
Evonne Rezler (Florida Atlantic University)**

OVERVIEW

On March 19-20, 2020, the team of Dr. Laurie Ouellette, Dr. Max Skidmore, and Dr. Evonne Rezler conducted a virtual site visit to review FAU's Comparative Studies (CS) PhD program, in the College of Arts and Letters at FAU. Dr. Aimee Aries, Associate Dean of Research and Creative Achievement, College of Arts and Letters, provided the reviewers with a self-study in advance of the visit. Additional documentation for this program was provided during the site visit by Dr. Eric Berlatsky, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies, Director of the Ph.D. Program in Comparative Studies. A detailed itinerary and exemplary logistical support for the virtual site visit (conducted via WebEx) were provided by Ms. Gabrielle Denier. During the virtual site visit the review team met with:

- Russell Ivy, Senior Associate Provost for Programs and Assessment
- Robert Stackman, Dean, Graduate College
- Karin Scarpinato, Senior Associate Vice President for Research
- Eric Berlatsky, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies, Director of the Ph.D. Program in Comparative Studies
- Adam Bradford, former Director of the Ph.D. Program in Comparative Studies, and now Dean, Graduate College, Idaho State University
- Michael Horswell, Dean, College of Arts and Letters
- Comparative Studies Executive Committee faculty:
Alan Berger, Endowed Chair, Raddock Family Eminent Scholar-Chair for Holocaust Studies, Jewish Studies Program; Susan Love Brown, Professor, Department of Anthropology; Frédéric Conrod, Associate Professor, Department of Languages, Linguistics and Comparative Literature; Sika Dagbovie-Mullins, Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies, Department of English; Mary Ann Gosser-Esquilín, Professor of Spanish and Caribbean Literature, Department of Languages, Linguistics, and Comparative Literature; Taylor Hagood, Professor, Department of English; Karen Leader, Associate Professor, Department of Visual Arts & Art History; Ilaria Serra, Associate Professor, Department of Languages, Linguistics, and Comparative Literature
- Graduate students

The findings below are based on a review of the self-study document, and the information shared by faculty, students, and administrators during the March 19th and 20th, 2020 virtual site visit.

Strengths of the Program

The program recognizes the fiscal and political realities within which it operates, and provides a mechanism to create a critical mass of faculty for each student individually. It therefore incorporates considerable flexibility, making it attractive to an extremely wide variety of student interests, and fitting their backgrounds. It strengthens the University, utilizes resources extraordinarily well, and also adds strength to the overall educational pattern of the state. It should be highly attractive. One of its greatest strengths is that it appeals not only to traditional Ph.D. students, but also to those who have goals outside the academy.

The philosophy of the program, its working both within and beyond disciplinary boundaries, and its admirable flexibility are consistent with a rather widespread trend toward interdisciplinary studies among American universities. To a considerable degree, it reflects the best of that trend. Many universities now pursue interdisciplinary intellectual emphases as a goal, and they would be well advised to view the program at Florida Atlantic University as a model to emulate.

The structure of the program aims to make available pathways outside the academy, thus potentially opening wide career opportunities unavailable in more traditional curricula. Certainly, the career preparation for academic life it provides are sound and attractive, but the recognition of life, and career, in non-profit organizations, government agencies, non-government organizations, libraries, publishing houses, and an almost unlimited range of opportunities outside colleges and universities makes the program particularly distinctive compared to its peers.

The program is large, and it potentially draws upon the entire graduate faculty. By so doing, it makes possible a great breadth of mentorships, as well as depth. These potential mentors include faculty representing a wide range of disciplines, thus making possible an enormous range of topics that can extend even outside the College. Provided that guidance is in place at the program level, the resulting range of choice can also facilitate considerable innovation that can lead to substantial contributions unlikely to result from more traditional programs.

The nature of the program encourages an admirable diversity of the student body. This diversity extends beyond traditional considerations. There are, and will be, students of varied racial and ethnic makeup, students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as students representing a variety of skills, backgrounds, interests, and goals. This diversity, as we note below, needs to be fostered by higher stipends. With proper support, the resulting mix almost assuredly will provide an atmosphere of intellectual excitement that encourages the broadest of education for every student.

Challenges/Threats Faced by the Program

There is a need to re-tool the curriculum toward the new Culture, Society, and Politics track. That track

makes possible greater social science emphasis, and expanded opportunities for students beyond the existing humanities emphases. The initial step in this regard would be to incorporate political science, sociology, and other social science departments as fully equal to the existing disciplines in the CS program.

We noted above the strengths that the huge size of the program creates. Such an enormous program, however, also creates considerable needs. It seems clear that the lack of a dedicated director is a considerable challenge for this program. The director should be able to devote full time to the program. The time available is finite. It should be fully dedicated to interdisciplinary studies. Thus, ***we recommend that the director be freed from other administrative responsibilities.***

Consistent with this is yet another recommendation, that ***there be appointed associate directors for each track.*** These could be part-time appointments, and include course release for the associate directors. Student advising should be greatly improved by having advising come from associate directors associated with disciplines related to the students' own discipline(s).

One of the most obvious challenges for the program's future success comes from the low student stipends. To be sure, these are not unique to this program. Regardless, they are very low for the high cost of living in the region. ***Improving the stipend could help greatly to attract more students and ensure that those in the program are able to complete their degrees.***

The program seems certainly to have suffered from high faculty turnover. ***A stable core faculty from within the college (in key areas of interest for students in this program) would better support the goals of the CS program, and help ensure continuity.*** Other faculty from across disciplines within the college and across FAU could also participate in the program. In addition, such a core faculty would help to ensure faculty interest in, and commitment to, interdisciplinary studies.

A related challenge is the lack of incentives for faculty to prioritize the CS program, and CS students as part of their usual workload. ***The provision of more research funding opportunities that specifically promote the goals of the CS program would help support faculty accomplishment, and make participation in the program an attractive opportunity.***

More faculty from various fields (outside of language and literature) need to participate in the CS program. These should especially include faculty from the social sciences and faculty from outside the College. There are considerable opportunities for insights from other fields, including key sciences (environmental, biological, chemistry), business subfields, and education.

Currently, there seems to be some ambiguity regarding the student council's role in the program. ***The role of the student council in the CS program needs clarification and articulation for both students, faculty and administrators.***

CS PhD students need to be made better aware of resources available to them through FAU's Career Center, and the Writing Center. This will help enhance job market preparedness for students.

Course scheduling conflicts need to be addressed to enable more choice, and better block scheduling for students. Few things frustrate students more than having courses offered that they need, but cannot take because a required course is scheduled simultaneously.

The name of the program is misleading. A potential student who is browsing through offerings from various universities might see “comparative,” and assume it means comparative literature, or comparative government (far more narrow fields than this program offers), and go on to other listings without becoming aware of the true nature of this program. At the least, in recruiting, a full explanation of the nature of the program should be as prominent in the description as “comparative.”

Opportunities

The exciting new opportunity for synergy and collaboration with the programs and faculty in the School of Public Administration which will soon join the College of Arts and Letters is discussed in more detail the next section.

A significant range of opportunities for inter- and multi-disciplinary projects at the intersection of more unusual fields exists at FAU. As we noted in the above section we recommend more collaborations with faculty outside the College of Arts and Letters, and in particular with faculty in education, architecture, (especially with respect to theoretical/historical perspective), public art, and the sciences (especially environmental science).

Another opportunity just being tapped into by the program is *the BA to PhD pathway for students. This pathway needs careful shepherding to ensure smooth transition, and interdisciplinarity of research projects*, as students complete the MA along the way in a specific discipline.

Recommendations Concerning Program Goals Discussed in Self-Study and Questions for Review Team

Q1: How might the PhD program in Comparative Studies most effectively revise its curriculum to ground students in interdisciplinary theory and methodology? Does such a revision strike the committee as desirable and what resources might be necessary to make this happen?

The recent addition of a second track has created a need to revise the core curriculum as well as the list of elective courses. Students should be introduced to interdisciplinary theory and methodology in their core courses, in order to provide them some type of shared conceptual grounding in what is otherwise an exceptionally broad and open program. At the same time, this material should be presented in a manner which is flexible and useful to students in their program of study.

The core syllabi should be revised to account for a much broader understanding of the humanities, as well as the social sciences. Currently, the core course syllabi (with the exception of the draft syllabus for the as-yet-to-be-taught seminar in research design) focus quite narrowly on canonical texts in philosophy and literary studies, with little attention paid to contemporary social, political or cultural theory (including critical race theory and gender and queer theory). The Executive Committee might be enlisted to workshop the core syllabi and generate a broader list of readings and concerns.

As noted in a previous section, to oversee the core curriculum, the program needs a dedicated full-time director as well as associate directors, one for the humanities and one for the social sciences. These should

be faculty members who receive at minimum one course release per year to help oversee course development and advising, as well as the selection of electives from the College of Arts and Letters and other colleges that students might take, depending on their track and area of emphasis. We encourage the program to include courses in the sciences, education, and other areas as potential electives for the Comparative Studies PhD.

The Executive Committee should be expanded to include faculty on the second track with expertise in social and political sciences. These faculty should be invited to help re-design the course syllabi, as per our recommendations above.

Q2: How might the PhD program increase its effectiveness in recruiting, especially given the unique nature of a comparative PhD degree?

The appointment of a full-time director and two associate directors would allow for more targeted recruitment of students and the identification of potential mentors for them. Involving faculty who might serve as advisors or committee members earlier in the process, and who can be in dialogue with potential recruits, may help applicants see themselves in the program in more specific ways.

In advertising and during the recruitment process, the term “comparative” in the PhD program should be clearly explained and articulated to better identify it as an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary program. The term “comparative” can evoke more narrowly focused disciplines and sub-disciplines, such as comparative literature and comparative government. Promotional materials should dislodge these meanings, if the name of the PhD program is to remain intact.

Focusing recruitment on the local area and universities in the state of Florida may attract students who have ties in the area, and could especially help to grow the MA/PhD.

Q3: What other alternatives, models, or suggestions might the review committee offer to help us better support Alt-Ac career pathways?

Helping students better imagine the wide range of institutions (museums, libraries, government agencies) where interdisciplinary PhD degrees can be applied is important, and should be part of academic advising. ***The program might bring private and nonprofit employers to campus for specific program events on a regular basis.*** The director may wish to develop connections to potential employers to familiarize them with the program and its alt ac possibilities. ***Reaching out to alumni who might return to campus to share their non-academic career trajectories with current students*** would be helpful. In addition, ***the program should utilize the Career Center and Dean’s Office/Political Science Department contacts to create a pathway to employment/career opportunities.***

Q4: Programs have been encouraged to create revenue-generating programs that can be used to enhance regular budget dollars. Does the review committee see opportunities for the PhD program or its students to be involved in the creation or delivery of such a program (Continuing Ed, Community classes, etc.)?

N/A. However, ***there is great potential for fundraising (companies, alumni) to create named fellowships and other resources for students.***

Q5: It appears likely that the School of Public Administration, which houses a PhD in Public Administration, an MPA, and Master of Non-Profit Management, will be joining our college (along with the School of Architecture) this July. What synergies or partnerships does the review committee imagine might be beneficial for the Comparative Studies students to pursue with this new unit?

The School of Public Administration opens the door to extremely promising synergies and partnerships with the Comparative Studies PhD. Coursework in the School should be allowed and encouraged, particularly for those students interested in alt-ac positions. Pathways to careers in public administration and the nonprofit sector should be emphasized, and the value of combining professional coursework with graduate study in fields such as gender, political science, languages, and so on should be creatively imagined and communicated to students.

Other Recommendations

The reviewers were favorably impressed by the program (faculty and students), its nature, philosophy and how it is operated on the minimal resources available. It is a newly revitalized program hence it is difficult to evaluate it before it has graduated its first cohort. The recommendations herein are intended to help the program strengthen and build.