16 February 2010

Arts and Humanities Curriculum Committee

Arts and Sciences Interdisciplinary Curriculum Committee

Council on Academic Affairs

The Ohio State University

Dear Colleagues:

The attached proposal to begin a new interdisciplinary undergraduate major in Sexuality Studies at Ohio State is supported by over 30 participating faculty members, as well as by concurrence letters from the chairs, directors, or deans of participating departments and Colleges. The proposal also includes a proposal for a new “special topics” course in Sexuality and Violence that would be identified in the Course Catalog listing as a Sexuality Studies course, contingent upon approval of the Sexuality Studies Major.

In the process of seeking concurrence for the Major, several departments made suggestions, which we address below.

First, the Department of Comparative Studies asked for clarification regarding the requirement that each student pursuing the Major complete a course focused on GLBT sexuality. We have provided a brief explanation of our rationale on p.10 of the proposal by noting that this requirement is equivalent to a diversity requirement. It ensures that Sexuality Studies Majors will have exposure to a “minority” field (GLBT and Queer Studies) that has been immensely influential in theorizing the social construction of all forms of sexuality, including processes of normalization and ab/normalization related to sexuality and the body.

Two departments—History and Sociology—requested that we add additional courses from their course offerings to our elective courses for the Major. As the attached responses to both departments indicate, we remain open to including new courses in the Major, but stipulate that sexuality be the common denominator for such inclusion. This has been our practice with the Sexuality Studies Minor and the Graduate Interdisciplinary Specialization (GIS), and it has served us well in maintaining focus for both degrees. With this rule in mind, Sociology has agreed to revise their description for Sociology 435: Sociology of Women so that sexuality is a prominent element (Professor Liana Sayer is taking the lead on this revision). Thus, we have included it as part of the list of permanent electives on pp 10-11. We never heard from History about whether they might make a similar change to their History of Love course, so we have not included it. We would be willing, however, to approve individual offerings of that course as an elective for the Major if a faculty member chose to make sexuality a major component of the course in a given quarter. Our rule of thumb for adding one-time electives to the Minor and GIS has been to calculate whether at least 50% of the course content, discussions, and assignments will address sexuality, and this will be a practice we will continue for the Major.

To ensure consistent focus within the Major, we also resisted the request from Sociology to allow one of their minors (Sociology, Health and Society, Inequality and Society) to serve as a focus area for the Sexuality Studies Major. As the attached response to their chair, Craig Jenkins, indicates, we are open to a having a series of courses from one department serve as a focus area for the Major, but we believe those courses should have a sexuality component. Professor Jenkins has indicated his support for this suggestion and also informed us that the course description for Sociology 435: Sociology of Gender has been changed, as we requested, to indicate its coverage of sexuality. This email is included among the concurrence letters attached to the proposal.

Finally, the concurrence letter from Women’s Studies raises several concerns, and we have had meetings with the chair, individual members of the department, and the faculty as a whole (on January 15) to seek ways to address these and to jointly shape the form our continued interdisciplinary collaboration will take. Women’s Studies has been a key player in the Sexuality Studies Minor, the GIS, and the Sexuality Studies Program more generally as they have provided courses, faculty representation on our Oversight Committee, and program funding; and we have been partners with them in the Diversity and Identity Studies Collective at OSU (DISCO), which connects eight identity-based programs and departments for academic and research purposes (<http://drupal.asc.ohio-state.edu/disco/>). The Sexuality Studies Minor and GIS have also brought students to Women’s Studies classes. For instance, over 40 Sexuality Studies Minors have taken Women’s Studies 230 (Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Popular Culture) in the past four years. Thus, we look forward to continuing to nurture and deepen the mutually beneficial association we have established with Women’s Studies.

The institutional history that Women’s Studies traces in their letter emphasizes the way in which Women’s Studies programs have moved from a single lens of investigation (“women”) toward an intersectional model of analysis, a model in which “categories” of identity and social difference are theorized as interrelational rather than independent. It is a model that is also at the heart of Sexuality Studies, Disability Studies, African American Studies, Asian American Studies, American Indian Studies, Latino/a Studies, among others—and that generated the formation of DISCO. As the names of these disciplines indicate, each takes a particular category as its crucial experiential and analytic point of entry into the question of identity and social difference, but that entry immediately and necessarily entails the accounting for others. Thus, Women’s Studies enters this intersectional model from the standpoint of gender, and Sexuality Studies enters it from the standpoint of sexuality, but both fields recognize that their unique standpoints are always already inflected with and shaped by intersections with categories of race, gender, class, sexuality, geography, nationality, and dis/ability. A free-standing Sexuality Studies Program should not send the message that sexuality is not integral to our Women’s Studies Department, just as an autonomous department of African American and African Studies and interdisciplinary programs in Asian American Studies, Latino/a Studies, and American Indian Studies have not sent the message that race and ethnicity are not vital components of our Women’s Studies Department. Moreover, Sexuality Studies and Women’s Studies can continue to work together to establish visible links between our programs, for example, by advertising the connections via our respective web sites (as we already do), by co-sponsoring programs (as we already do), and by advocating for additional hires in the field.

As the letter from Women’s Studies points out, some Women’s Studies programs have reconstituted themselves as Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies or Gender and Sexuality Studies. A number have also constituted themselves simply as Gender Studies or Feminist and Gender Studies, a widening of these programs to cover masculinity and men, and cross-gender identities such as transgender, transsexual, and intersexual. These title changes reflect the move toward intersectionality (if racially-based programs weren’t already well established elsewhere within all universities, one suspects that race would be part of these title changes as well). It must be noted, however, that the number of programs that have taken this step is, at this point, relatively small. According to data that Women’s Studies provided us, 28 Women’s Studies programs nationwide include sexuality in their title; this is out of over 900 programs, in other words, approximately 3%: <http://userpages.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/programs.html>

It must also be noted that there are a few Sexuality Studies Programs that exist independently of Women’s Studies, such as the Studies of Sexualities Program, which is funded by the Race and Difference Initiative at Emory University (<http://rdi.emory.edu/ss.php>), and the Department of Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University (<http://hmsx.sfsu.edu/>).

Thus, there are currently two models for advancing Sexuality Studies within universities, the more prominent one in which Sexuality Studies is foregrounded as part of an existing Women’s Studies Program, and one in which Sexuality Studies is established independently of such a program but with acknowledged affiliations between them. Both models have their virtues, but it would seem that this latter model is one that works well for an interdisciplinary study of sexuality in which Sexuality Studies courses and faculty are located throughout the university and not in one or two Colleges. This is the situation at Ohio State, with Sexuality Studies courses well established in four Colleges that are themselves interdisciplinary—Arts and Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Education and Human Ecology, Social Work—and new courses being piloted and moved toward permanent status in Medicine (Molecular Virology, Immunology, and Medical Genetics 694: Sexuality, Health, and Sexually Transmitted Pathogens) and Architecture (City and Regional Planning 394: Sex in the City, which is about how sex-oriented businesses are perceived and regulated). By far, the majority of our Minors are Psychology Majors. In its seven years of existence, the Sexuality Studies Minor has been pursued by 91 Psychology Majors, and we expect that the Major will be attractive to this student constituency as well. The Minor has also been popular among English (18), Sociology (14), Criminology (13), Human Development and Family Science (13), and Political Science Majors (10). Among 220 minors across the seven years, only 13 have been Women’s Studies Majors, which suggests to us that those students are most interested in studying sexuality within the feminist interdisciplinary context that our Women’s Studies Department provides. Indeed, as the attached list of the Majors of Sexuality Studies Minors reveals, the Sexuality Studies Minor has drawn students from across the university; its widely interdisciplinary status is matched by its widely interdisciplinary constituency. The kind of interdisciplinary Major we have proposed will have the best chance of continuing this trend of appealing to a variety of students pursuing a variety of academic interests and career goals.

That said, we want to re-emphasize our strong affiliation with Women’s Studies. As mentioned above, we have been partnering with them for three years through DISCO, a formation that calls attention to the intersectional model of difference and identity that we both enact. Now that the Arts and Sciences Office of Interdisciplinary Programs is being dissolved, Sexuality Studies must find a new “home.” Aligning ourselves with the Department of Women’s Studies, as they have invited us to do, is one attractive possibility; another is establishing a separate administrative unit composed of American Indian Studies, Asian American Studies, Disability Studies, and Sexuality Studies, a possibility we have discussed with Dean Steinmetz. We are still attempting to sort out the advantages and limitations of both options, as we want to ensure that we preserve our autonomy and also our visibility as an interdisciplinary program that crosses not only departmental and divisional but also College boundaries along the lines of the One-University model that President Gee has promoted. We continue to discuss these options with our DISCO partners, Women’s Studies, and Dean Steinmetz, and plan to make a decision soon. Whatever option we pursue, we would like to express here our support of the modified dual degree or specified track possibility that Women’s Studies mentions in their letter; we expect to pursue this possibility with them in a separate proposal.

We hope that both this cover letter and the proposal itself indicate the benefits and appeal of instituting an interdisciplinary Sexuality Studies Major at Ohio State. We would be happy to address any questions in person or by email (moddelmog.1@osu.edu; blackburn.99@osu.edu).

Sincerely yours,

Debra Moddelmog Mollie Blackburn

Professor of English Associate Professor of Teaching and Learning