



May 22, 2017

Michael Bernstein, Provost
Sacha Kopp, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
Stony Brook University
Stony Brook, NY 11794-1401

Dear Provost Bernstein and Dean Kopp:

On behalf of the Northeast Modern Language Association's Executive Committee and NeMLA's membership, we write to express our shock and deep concern about the recommended suspension of the Doctoral programs in Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, and Hispanic Languages and Literatures at your institution. The proposed closing of undergraduate majors in Comparative Literature, Cinema and Cultural Studies, and Theatre Arts, likewise, troubles us a great deal. We urge you and the administration of Stony Brook University to reassess your decisions, as their consequences will most certainly endanger your institution's academic and intellectual mission and send a dangerous message to the academic world at large. Furthermore, damage to the intellectual life and diversity of your faculty and students far outweighs any minimal and short-term budgetary gains that Stony Brook is expected to derive from these closures.

We recognize several distressing human costs embedded in your curricular resolutions. First and foremost we believe that the world-class research and excellence in teaching that Stony Brook has promoted throughout its sixty-year history will be put in jeopardy. The programs that your proposal aims to remove contribute in fundamental ways to prepare New York State's future citizens—to speak nothing of students from across the country and around the world—to enter the global community and economy. We believe that the objective of any publicly funded institution is to prepare its graduates to realize their fullest potential, intellectually and professionally speaking. Yet by targeting only programs in the humanities, your institution implies that the humanities play a less vital role than other disciplines in preparing students to compete in an increasingly international marketplace.

Second, we believe that at this historical junction, the university must foreground its role in promoting reasoned debate and intercultural dialogue, which are central to the curricular programs you wish to eliminate. As our nation's residents grapple with the relentless marginalization of minorities as well as with issues of economic inequality, racism, xenophobia, and violence, college students, faculty, and staff look to universities to provide space within which to engage in difficult conversations about human rights and personal freedoms. Although Stony Brook has admirably offered spaces for such discussions to occur in the past, the loss of multiple doctoral degree programs and undergraduate majors in which these issues are so often discussed gives us reason to pause.

We would like to remind you that Comparative Literature is a discipline in the humanities that engages with the study of literature as an artistic expression that transcends national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. A traditionally intercultural and transnational field, Comparative Literature promotes the study of literature in relation to history, philosophy, art, and the sciences, delving into the analysis of the products of social, cultural, and political movements. As such, Comparative Literature provides students with important analytical instruments to encourage informed discourse across cultures, bringing different linguistic regions and artistic expressions in conversation with each other. With its foundation in critical thinking, Comparative Literature is a formidable discipline that allows students to gain a global perspective on the realities of our communities. Understanding these realities is fundamental to engaged intellectuals, professionals, and citizens in the future of our nation.

We are particularly concerned that specific programs under threat—Hispanic Languages and Literatures, Cinema and Cultural Studies, and Theatre Arts—are vital departments for Comparative Literature, forming close synergies and interdisciplinary partnerships with that discipline, yet this interdependence seems to have been overlooked. Most importantly, these programs intersect quite dramatically with the political, economic, and cultural issues that are challenging us today.

We must also call attention to the disturbing implicit message sent by the proposed elimination of the Hispanic Languages and Literatures Ph.D. at a time when our nation has the second largest Spanish-speaking population. There is an urgent need to promote nuanced understanding of Hispanic peoples' prominent political and economic role and their rich and diverse cultural contributions to our society and to our nation's history. Public institutions such as Stony Brook have a responsibility to participate in the ongoing debate on the representation of this community. Instead, the eradication of the Hispanic Languages and Literatures doctoral degree suggests lack of interest in promoting excellent education and cross-cultural literacy for all Stony Brook students.

In closing, we urge you to reconsider your proposal in light of its local and global ramifications, and to engage in a dialogue with your faculty and students to find solutions that would enhance, rather than weaken and significantly imperil, the future and renown of your institution.

Sincerely,

The NeMLA Executive Board
NeMLA Executive Director