June 3, 2006

Dr. Carlos Navarro  
Chair, Liberal Studies Department  
The National Hispanic University  
14271 Story Road  
San Jose, CA 95127-3823

Dear Dr. Navarro:

It was a genuine pleasure to visit The National Hispanic University and to be inspired by the many accomplishments of its administration, faculty, and staff in creating an exciting campus community and a stimulating and rigorous Liberal Studies program.

Enclosed you will find my external reviewer’s report for Liberal Studies along with a copy of the writing rubric NDNU uses in all undergraduate programs; it was an important linchpin in our educational effectiveness visit from WASC this last spring.

Thank you again for all of your hospitality, and please extend my best wishes to President Lopez and Provost Ayala. If I can be of any service to you in the future, please do not hesitate to call on me. As you said, we small private schools need to stick together.

Sincerely,

Vincent Fitzgerald, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English  
Core Program Director
External Reviewers Report for the Liberal Studies Program
National Hispanic University

Submitted by Vincent Fitzgerald
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1. Introduction

Early in 2006, Dr. Naomi Bishop (Professor of Anthropology; California State University, Northridge) and I were asked to serve as external reviewers for the Liberal Studies Program at The National Hispanic University, San Jose, California. In preparation for our on-campus visit, we received copies of the 2006 Liberal Studies Program Self-Study, the University General Catalog, Program Review Guidelines, previous external review reports, full-time faculty curriculum vitae, syllabi for EDU 300 and EDU 490, and other materials. On April 4 and 5, 2006, Professor Bishop and I visited The National Hispanic University campus. We were provided a tour of the campus and met with President David Lopez, Interim Provost Adriana Ayala, Liberal Studies Department Chair Carlos Navarro, various members of the faculty, Student Academic Assistance Center and Library staff, current students, and alumnae. We also attended a few classes. Throughout our visit, the entire campus community was welcoming, open, and obliging.

The purpose of the external review and this report is to provide some observations and recommendations based upon my visit to NHU and examination of the 2006 Liberal Studies Program Self-Study and other materials.
II. Strengths of the Program

The strengths of the Liberal Studies Major in particular, and NHU at large, are many and varied. The following is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather particular items of strength that struck me in my visit and reading of the various documents.

Mission and Program Design:

The Mission of the Liberal Studies Program flows naturally from Mission of the University: “to enable Hispanics, other minorities, women, and others to acquire an undergraduate degree or certificate using a multicultural educational experience to obtain a career in business, education, or technology.” The specific goal of the Liberal Studies Program “is to provide quality elementary subject-matter preparation that fulfills the standards of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing.” Every indication, from the self-study to our meetings with administration, faculty, staff, and students, reveals that NHU lives its mission and embeds it within the curriculum and community of the University. The Liberal Studies Department provides an academically exciting, rigorous, multicultural program that inspires its students, the future leaders and role models of their communities, to pursue lifelong learning and professional excellence while helping others overcome barriers to success. Liberal Studies students note the high expectations of the program which translates to their own high expectations of themselves.

Reflecting well the ethnic make-up of NHU students, the faculty and staff of the Liberal Studies Program understand the need for the program to acknowledge and meet especially the learning needs of Latino/Latina students, matching the program
requirements to the interests, ethnic histories, and future teaching goals of its students. At the same time, the program takes cognizance of the varied abilities and preparation of its students, and the various work and family commitments they may have elsewhere. The students we interviewed greatly appreciate the flexibility and creative and intelligent thinking behind the program design. For example, reflecting the student’s interests and ethnic heritage, and the multiethnic world we live in, all Liberal Studies students take Contemporary Multicultural Literature; Multi-ethnic Children’s Literature; Gender, Race, and Culture in American Society; and Cultural Geography.

Liberal Studies majors are required to take thirteen units of Core Courses (in Spanish and technology) preparing them for their future charges in the classroom. They also take a wide breadth of General Education courses (forty-nine units total) and sixty-four units of more specialized major and emphasis courses to prepare them for the subject areas tested on the multiple subject CSET exam and their careers in an elementary school classroom. The program design allows for students to move from introductory courses in their first years into more specific and advanced courses in their final two years. A recently added course, the Gateway Experience, previews for students (mostly juniors) the content areas and depths of understanding they will need to succeed on the CSET and in their careers. All students have opportunities for field work embedded early in their college career, and students may choose between two emphases: Cross Cultural Studies or Child Development. Each emphasis has a capstone experience, and every senior is required to produce a portfolio including many short pieces wherein students reflect upon their growth experiences at NHU and their career philosophies and goals. (At the time of
our visit, Dr. Carlos Navarro, Chair of the Liberal Studies Department, was creating a Liberal Studies track for non-credential-seeking students).

Clearly, the design and rigor of the program provide students with the tools and experiences they need to become successful role models in their careers and in the larger world, fitting perfectly into NHU's Mission.

**Dedication of the Faculty, Administrators, and Staff:**

The people who make up NHU are its greatest asset: I have seldom met with a more dedicated and inspiring group than the one I encountered during my visit to NHU. While some of the challenges facing the University are daunting, the faculty, administrators, and staff take them in stride and fully believe that by pulling together they can make NHU an institution of higher learning that will be a beacon to others dedicated to similar principles. The Liberal Studies Department, of necessity, draws from the experience and expertise of faculty from all over the University, and these faculty are genuinely willing to make adjustments and fine tune their courses to meet the specific needs of future educators. I witnessed none of the turf battles and politicking that one might expect from a small group of overworked and under-compensated people; but a spirit of collegiality and mutual respect pervaded every meeting and informal discussion I attended. Even the adjunct faculty I met seem passionate about their part in fulfilling the Mission of the University, and were willing to accept below market-rate compensation to participate.
Faculty/Student Interaction, Advising, and Academic Support:

The small student-to-faculty ratio and the availability of the full-time faculty outside of class is clearly a strength of the program. Students we interviewed said they appreciated the level of motivation they felt almost immediately upon entering NHU, from the ease of application and admittance to the final advising appointment. Students feel invited to visit their advisors and instructors outside of class to resolve issues, get help and feedback, or just chat. They universally agreed with the sentiment of one student: "They know who you are here. They really care about you." Students meet with advisors at least once a semester, and advising appointments are more than scheduling appointments; students are encouraged to talk about their goals and concerns.

The Liberal Studies students we met also felt that the small classes help them survive the rigors of the program; they develop what one student called a "cohort feeling" in the classroom, where one gets to work with students on group activities in more than one class. Several students said they would have gotten lost at a large university, like San Jose State. In addition, most students appreciated the level of education they were getting at NHU and the fact that the classes prepare them for the real world of their future careers. Many are exceptionally focused and self-driven; one said, "I may have received lots of A's, but I earned them."

Liberal Studies students also appreciate the formal support systems available on campus, especially the Student Academic Assistance Center. I met with George Shamshayooadeh and members of his staff and received an overview of the variety of services, from tutoring to career exploration, the SAAC makes available to students.
Students find George and his staff welcoming and helpful, especially regarding math and writing issues.

III. Areas of Concern

The following are offered as possible areas for consideration and modification.

(Please note: Some of the following concerns are beyond the ability of one department to amend).

Multiple Commitments of Full-time Faculty and Over-reliance on Adjunct Faculty:

One of the most obvious areas of concern one notices upon reading the Liberal Studies Department Self-Study and visiting the campus is that the full-time faculty are stretched too thinly, wear too many hats, and have too demanding a work schedule. In addition, there is a strong need for more academic affairs administrative support and clerical support. When a full-time faculty member is responsible for hunting down signatures for a student’s add/drop form, precious energy and scarce time is wasted. NHU is blessed to have so many dedicated and committed full-time faculty who put in long hours and take on many responsibilities, and who are willing to forgo salary increases, sabbaticals, and the security of a tenure system, but I fear that burn-out will increasingly become an issue, and some qualified faculty may find more attractive offers at other universities. In addition, many full-time faculty, especially recent graduates, may find themselves so overly committed that they do not have time to publish articles, attend conferences, or keep up on the latest discussions in their field, which may negatively impact their standing in the profession.
NHU must find a way to hire more full-time faculty and to increase the security and benefits of those it already has.

This shortage of full-time faculty necessitates an over-reliance on adjunct faculty. It has been my experience that most adjunct faculty are talented and qualified people passionate about their work. However, they usually do not have the time to establish a strong campus presence because they likely have other jobs, and students therefore have a more difficult time establishing the out-of-class mentor/student relationship so vital to a small, mission-driven university like NHU. There is a stability issue as well in that there is larger turn-over among adjunct faculty, and many move on to better paying positions at other institutions once they have some teaching experience to add to their curriculum vita.

Finally, many adjuncts lack the classroom experience of full-time faculty, and the more adjuncts are relied upon, the more often students will have inexperienced instructors as the norm. This problem became clear to me in one of the classes I visited. The adjunct teacher is doubtlessly an open, caring, and academically qualified individual, but he made beginning teacher mistakes such as answering too many of his own questions, questions that were mostly of the one-answer-right variety. In addition, he had a hard time getting students to participate (only three spoke minimally) and it was clear that only about half the students had done the reading. The students were not having a bad experience in the class, but it wasn’t ideal either. I am certain a little mentoring would go a long way with this instructor if a more experienced full-time professor had the time to sit in on some of his classes. But where is that time to come from? With the over-burdening of full-time faculty, something has to give.
Unit Requirements of the Major:

The vast majority of the 126 required semester units in the Liberal Studies Major are prescribed. Students do have a choice of emphasis, and there is some choice of coursework within the emphases, but otherwise there is almost no chance for electives. Many of the students we interviewed felt that more choice of electives would have been desirable and is an important part of a university experience. The CTCC has approved NHU's Liberal Studies program for elementary subject matter preparation; however, the great benefit of such approval, the multiple subject CSET waiver, no longer exists. Therefore, I suggest NHU considers either forgoing the approved, unit-rich program for one with fewer prescribed units, or at least create alternative, non-CTCC-approved tracks that provide for more choice while still preparing students for the CSET. The second option allows NHU to advertise that it has a CTCC approved program (as indeed it has) without forcing every student to follow it to the letter.

The challenge then becomes where to find the extra units. I think some courses can be combined, and others may not be necessary for CSET preparation. For example, students may not need an entire semesters of Chemistry, Earth Science, and Physics. At Notre Dame de Namur University we have found that a 3.5 unit Physical Science for Educators, which includes some chemistry, physics, geology, meteorology, astronomy, etc., adequately prepares students for the physical sciences portion of the CSET; there are several good textbooks that cover all of the material in an introductory fashion. Also, NHU students may not need nine units of Number Systems, Conceptual Geometry, and Statistics. At NDNU, Liberal Studies students take two semesters (6 units) of Math for Elementary Teachers after having taken College Algebra. American History II (beyond
the Industrial Age) is not covered on the CSET, and while as an English professor I am not opposed to students taking American or World Literature, they are not specifically tested on the CSET. I understand that there are some GE requirements involved in these recommendations, but the Liberal Studies major is so broad anyway, and thereby fulfills the breadth purpose of GE, I think some allowances may be made.

To free up even more units, I invite the Liberal Studies Department to consider changing the fifteen-unit emphasis requirement into a recommended but optional minor. (This would necessitate moving the common emphasis requirement, Field Experience in the Classroom, among the lower division requirements). The emphasis is a CTCC approval requirement, but it need not be an NHU Liberal Studies requirement.

Where, then, are the electives to come from? I would suggest that many of them already exist. Students may choose courses from among all of the emphases selections; for example, a Cross Cultural Studies emphasis (or minor) student may choose to take more than five offerings in that category, and/or some from the Child Development emphasis. In addition, with the new non-credential track for Liberal Studies and the new ECE program, students may find alternative attractive electives.

Reducing the total number of required units in the major might also benefit transfer students and those students who decide late in their college career they want to become teachers. Such students may use some of their hard-to-fit units as electives.

Retention and Student Life:

In his 2005-2006 Welcome Letter, President David Lopez offers the following as one of his key priorities for the year: “Continue to increase our student enrollment and attract
more undergraduate day-time students.” The Program Review Guidelines does not specifically ask for a description of how a program recruits or retains students, but I think retention ought to be an area of concern for the Liberal Studies Department and NHU at large. According to the self-study, in fall 2004 there were 156 Liberal Studies students making up more that half of the undergraduate student population, yet by June of the same school year there were only six A.A. and B.A. graduates. This number strikes me as low, and perhaps indicative of retention issues. Low graduation rates also impinge on future alumni contributions to the University as well as word-of-mouth advertising from graduates.

It is to be granted that many students enter NHU intending to transfer elsewhere later; but even in these cases there are opportunities to convince students to stay at NHU. Indeed, one student we interviewed said that she thought NHU was “just going to be a transition” for her, but she has since decided to stay. I think a reduction in the number of required units in the Liberal Studies program, combined with more elective choice, may keep more students at NHU.

In addition, given that all students are off-campus residents, NHU has to give students (especially traditional day students) more reasons to stay on campus beyond their class periods. One student asked, “Campus life? What campus life?” Another paraphrased Gertrude Stein; “There’s no there here.” Beyond more clubs and activities, NHU must establish some centrally-located gathering place (some students recommended a small café) where students could interact socially outside of the classroom. It is just such outside-of-class interaction that forms the types of bonds and larger discussions so important to the total college experience. The newly opened Student Lounge fails to fill
this need according to the students we talked to; it is too isolated and out of the main flow
of student traffic, which, they said, is itself indicative of the low priority the University
puts on student life.

Students want to wear NHU t-shirts and sweatshirts; they want to identify with and
feel part of something larger than their individual classroom experiences. Graduates
want a stronger Alumni Association; they want to keep in touch through a newsletter, and
they want to be continuing participants in the Mission of the University and models for
future graduates.

IV. Other Suggestions

Academic Assessment:

Under Academic Quality, number 7, the self-study is to discuss program assessment.
This is an area that the self-study may need to explore and address more fully inasmuch
as there may be an over-reliance on the academic portfolio as an assessment device. It is
beneficial that the same professor teaches both the junior-level Gateway Experience and
the Senior Seminar, and so he may personally gauge the improvement of Liberal Studies
students. But NHU may want to consider more quantifiable tools (such as a writing
rubric, etc.) which can be applied at early, middle, and late intervals of a student’s college
career. Attached to this review is NDNU’s Writing Rubric for all undergraduate
programs, which may serve as a model for NHU. In addition to measuring writing
progress, it allows us to see what portion of writing instruction needs more emphasis.
Course Cycling:

Some students complained that too often they could not get the class they needed and had to rely on independent study (which, of course, burdens the faculty as well). Others felt they were signing up for required classes simply as they became available without a clear idea of when and what future courses would be offered. One solution may be to create a two-year course cycling plan so that faculty and students alike would have a clear sense of what will be available in the future and what needs to be taken now. Two-year cycling would also allow the university to create and plan for more electives that could be offered every third or fourth semester.

Transition to the Credential Program:

Because NHU students are not allowed to take graduate courses until their Bachelor’s Degree is complete, students may have a “down” semester wherein they need to take only one or two courses to finish. Short of a blended program, NHU might consider allowing students to “double-dip” some graduate courses (perhaps six units) that will count as fulfilling both undergraduate and graduate requirements, or at least allowing students to take some graduate courses (perhaps a maximum of six or nine units) during the same semester they are finishing up their undergraduate degree. This may also serve as a hook to keep at NHU those students who are planning to get their credential elsewhere (or who may otherwise postpone graduate school indefinitely).
Junior Writing Proficiency Exam:

For students (especially those with learning disabilities or test anxiety) who cannot seem to pass the Junior Writing Proficiency Exam, NHU might consider alternative ways for them to demonstrate writing proficiency. The proficiency exam may feel too much like an exit exam to some students. My largest concern is for those students who pass Advanced Written Composition but don’t pass the Proficiency Exam; who failed whom? For what it’s worth, at NDNU successful completion of Advanced Writing with a grade of C or better is one way to demonstrate writing proficiency. Completing three units of Writing Center is another. Perhaps the SAAC can design a series of modules which, upon successful completion, demonstrate writing proficiency.

V. Concluding Notes

What is most surprising and inspiring to me is how NHU administration and faculty take so much of their nearly miraculous accomplishments in stride. They seem always to be looking forward to next challenge. I invite them to take some time to pat themselves on the back for all of their triumphs.

Faculty in the Liberal Studies major should especially be commended for their success in embedding the missions of the University and the department into the curriculum. Liberal Studies faculty are a dedicated group of professionals working together to help students overcome barriers and become successful teachers and positive role models. Students confirm that the expectations set for them by the program are high, and that these expectations become personalized and translate into their larger lives.
In his Welcome Letter, President Lopez noted that one of the goals of NHU for the coming year is to “Increase the visibility and prestige of NHU in the Bay Area, California, and throughout the U.S.” Too few faculty on my own campus, less than 40 miles away, have heard of NHU, and some of those who have are unclear whether classes are taught in English. When I explain to my colleagues that NHU is modeled on historically black colleges and universities, they get excited and note the importance and timeliness of such an institution. There are more than 120 HBCUs and only one Hispanic University, even though Latinos make up the largest minority in the United States. NHU and its Mission are too important to keep secret. Keep spreading the word!

Thank you all for the chance to join your community for a time and to become a lifetime supporter of The National Hispanic University. I wish you all the best in this exciting and inspiring endeavor so vital to us all.

Respectfully submitted,

[Signature]

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