

Regional Studies at Princeton University

A statement by President Christopher L. Eisgruber and Provost David S. Lee

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“[T]o enable future Princeton undergraduates to function in a globalized and interdependent world, to empower them by instilling an appreciation for the diversity of cultures that inhabit our world, and to maintain and expand Princeton’s leadership in the production of knowledge about world societies and cultures, it is incumbent upon the University to revitalize regional studies for the twenty-first century world and to invest in an enhanced and revised set of capabilities in this field.”

With this sentence, the Task Force on Regional Studies persuasively captured the reasons why Princeton must build strength in regional studies. Events remind us constantly that, in today’s interconnected world, our most pressing problems combine global and local dimensions. To address urgent issues about security, health and well-being, economic prosperity, social justice, the environment, and many other topics, leaders and citizens will have to understand the institutions, cultures, and practices that shape decision-making not only in their own countries but in other regions around the world. Princeton has the capacity and the responsibility to produce rigorous scholarship about the world’s regions, to train graduate students who will provide essential expertise in the future, and to equip undergraduates with the insights required to contribute effectively to a globalized and interdependent world.

As the task force rightly notes, the justification for teaching and scholarship in regional studies not only connects to pressing societal needs, but also attaches firmly to the core purposes and intrinsic value of liberal arts education. In the words of the task force, regional studies enhance “the development of a student’s critical faculties by challenging culturally-based assumptions often taken for granted, illuminating alternative ways of thinking, and instilling a healthy understanding of one’s place in the world.”

Regional studies are, as the task force points out, the shared responsibility of humanists and social scientists, with natural scientists and engineers also making important contributions to the field. Princeton’s humanities departments do brilliant work in regional studies, and their continued leadership and success will be indispensable to Princeton’s efforts in this domain. We constituted this task force from the social sciences, however, with the explicit goal of strengthening the contributions those disciplines make to teaching and scholarship in regional studies. As the task force report notes, the area studies model that dominated the study of contemporary issues in the regions of the world for many years has largely exhausted itself. It is time for a fresh look.

At our request, the task force focused its attention on how to enhance the social scientific study of “contemporary cultures, economies, political institutions, and societies throughout the world.” Some of its recommendations inevitably have implications for the humanities as well, and we recognize—as did the task force—that if these recommendations are to be implemented,

the judgment and engagement of colleagues and departments from the humanities will be essential.

We are grateful to the task force for its insightful work and thoughtful recommendations. In this memorandum, we respond to the report by identifying recommendations on which we will take immediate action, those that will need further consideration and development, and those that we believe, at this time, to be of lower priority.

Building faculty strength in regional studies

At Princeton and other great universities, the success of any academic initiative depends first and foremost on the number and quality of the tenure-track faculty committed to it. The task force therefore quite rightly devotes two of its eight recommendations, including its first recommendation, to faculty appointments. It recommends that we “[r]evitalize regional studies at Princeton through a series of incremental joint faculty appointments between the social science departments and PIIRS [the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies]” (Recommendation 1). It also urges that we “[e]xperiment with other modes of appointment for enhancing [the] regional studies curriculum, such as providing PIIRS with a small amount of flexible FTE and the appointment of distinguished practitioners” (Recommendation 4). We endorse both recommendations.

We pair these two recommendations because they go to the core of recent trends affecting the production of teaching and research about regional studies in social science departments. Tenure-track appointments in regional studies must meet the highest standards of their discipline. Princeton must not compromise that commitment. Finding scholars who combine the relevant methodological and area-specific expertise is, however, very difficult: they must have world-class expertise in the techniques that define their discipline *and* expertise in the regions that they study.

We agree with the task force that adding flexible faculty lines (FTEs) in PIIRS is an appropriate response to this challenge. The lines provide PIIRS with the incentive to identify, and the capacity to recruit, regional studies scholars who meet Princeton’s high disciplinary standards. The flexibility of such FTEs increases the ability of PIIRS either to form fruitful partnerships with other units to attract an appropriately eminent disciplinary scholar, or, if such a scholar is not available, to pivot in the direction of a non-tenured “distinguished practitioner” who might meet important curricular or other objectives. Though the case for these FTEs depends in significant part on their value in the social sciences, we believe that they should also be flexible enough to allow PIIRS to support the hiring of humanistic scholars who study the contemporary world, as PIIRS may do now when (for example) it conducts searches to fill the Wendt and Niehaus professorships. Moreover, locating these faculty lines in PIIRS will increase that Institute’s capacity to catalyze seminars, conversations, and other projects that bring together scholars who seek to understand the world’s regions and cultures.

We have already piloted the appointment strategies recommended by the task force with some success. We will authorize fundraising to supply PIIRS with additional, flexible FTEs for the purposes recommended by the task force. We agree with the task force that a gift to name

PIIRS would provide the best possible support for the faculty positions, research initiatives, and curricular improvements that are critical to the success of regional studies at this University.

The Office of the Dean of the Faculty will work with the director of PIIRS to design faculty search and appointment processes suited to the Institute's mission and goals. The dean's office is already working with department chairs to create appropriate procedures for appointing distinguished practitioners. Though this latter initiative is not specific to regional studies, it will help to implement the recommendations of the task force.

Regions deserving special emphasis

Our charge to the task force specifically requested that it consider whether Princeton should "focus its energies on particular regions of the world, and if so, which ones"? The task force recommended that Princeton hire faculty and create "centers of excellence" focused on China, India, and Brazil (Recommendation 2). We are grateful to the task force for recognizing that Princeton cannot cover every region, and for its thoughtful analysis of how best to allocate resources among parts of the world that Princeton might study.

As the task force correctly noted, we are already fundraising for the Center on Contemporary China. The need for high quality teaching and research about China is evident: as the task force observes, "China is the second largest economy in the world after the United States and the world's most populous country. Its importance as a rising international power is well established." Its economic and environmental significance are extraordinary. The social changes that have occurred in China over the past few decades arguably rank among the most rapid and large-scale transformations in world history. We are excited about the new Center, and we agree with the task force that it "represents an excellent model for how Princeton can develop its distinctive approach to the study of world regions within the social sciences."

We also agree with the task force that India is an attractive priority for the University's efforts in regional studies. Its religious and ethnic diversity, rapid economic growth, rich literary and cultural traditions, and status as the world's largest democracy (projected soon to become the world's most populous country) make it both consequential and fascinating to a wide range of social scientists. As with China, it has immense significance for issues pertaining to health and the environment, the world economy, domestic and international security, and other subjects that are critically important to society.

Given the challenges that complicate the pursuit of regional studies in the social sciences, we think it important to maintain a flexible approach as we build faculty strength with regard to the study of India. We believe it is too early to decide whether we should create a center like the one on contemporary China, or whether some other structure will prove more appropriate to Princeton's developing strengths. We will work with the director of PIIRS to design a strategy and begin raising funds.

The task force report also makes a thoughtful case for investment in the study of Brazil, which it describes as "a major player on the world scene" and as a country where Princeton can build upon "existing strengths." Princeton has a valuable and important strategic partnership

with the University of São Paulo, and that partnership in turn capitalizes on the expertise and connections of faculty members in multiple departments. We agree that Brazil may eventually be an appropriate focal point for additional programmatic efforts by the University. We think it premature, however, to make that decision now. As numerous students and faculty pointed out when commenting on the task force report, there are other areas—including in Africa and South East Asia—where the University could usefully build strength. There are cases to be made for each of these areas. We accordingly think it best for the University to remain nimble, and to seek creative ways to build strength in various regions, while it creates peaks of scholarly excellence focused on China and India.

The organization of regional studies at Princeton

The organizational structure for regional studies is a topic frequently reviewed at Princeton and, we suspect, other universities. Experience shows that the impact of organizational reforms is limited unless they are coupled to faculty leadership, support, and engagement. We approach the task force's recommendations with that point in mind and in a pragmatic spirit: our goal in the responses below is to facilitate faculty initiatives and energy rather than to impose logical order on domains where independent directions are inevitable or desirable.

- *“Mak[e] all regional studies programs on campus member-programs of PIIRS and ... consolidat[e] existing European Studies programs into a single European Studies program”* (Recommendation 3). The exact relationship of PIIRS to the University's regional studies programs has been contested ground for nearly 15 years. When PIIRS was created, some, but not all, regional studies programs were placed under its umbrella. The resulting ambiguity has complicated the mission of PIIRS, which might seem to have been assigned the responsibility, but not the requisite authority, to represent and develop regional studies at Princeton. We agree with the task force that it would be desirable for all regional studies programs to have some affiliation with PIIRS. That arrangement would, at a minimum, allow for greater exchange of information among the various programs, and it could be fully consistent with the level of independence and autonomy now enjoyed (and fiercely guarded!) by some long-standing and independently endowed programs.

The exact nature of this affiliation will depend on the interests of the various programs. We admire and support the shuttle diplomacy that has taken place to make affiliation possible. This is one of the areas where, to be effective and lasting, organizational change must follow faculty energy rather than substitute for or confine it. Nassau Hall stands ready to facilitate affiliation on terms that accommodate the interests of the programs involved.

Ultimately, what will best increase the scope of PIIRS's influence is a range of activities and resources that make it an attractive focal point for all of regional studies. The opening of the Louis A. Simpson *60 International Building this fall should help. Because of a generous gift from Lou Simpson and his

wife Kimberly Querrey, PIIRS will at last have a centrally located scholarly home that connects it to other international initiatives at Princeton and nurtures the creation of new intellectual relationships and research communities. The addition of FTEs will further increase the Institute's intellectual force, and a naming gift for the Institute could transform its stature and resources.

The relationship among Princeton's European studies programs is another recurring and long-term question. The prospects for meaningful coalition among the multiple existing programs depend on whether the participating faculty can come together around a shared vision and structure for a combined program. The Offices of the Provost and the Dean of the Faculty can help to facilitate the discussions if faculty are interested in a combined program, but the task force itself notes that, for the moment at least, the programs wish to retain their independent identities.

- *“Consider the development of an international studies certificate”* (Recommendation 5). The task force members were divided about the merits of an international studies certificate: their report accordingly recommends that we *consider* the development of such a certificate, rather than that we *create* one. This disagreement is not for us to resolve. We are sympathetic to the arguments in favor of the certificate, but its viability ultimately depends on whether a sufficient number of faculty members wish to commit themselves to it. If PIIRS wishes to develop a proposal, the Office of the Dean of the College will assist the faculty in doing so.

Other recommendations

The task force report makes three other recommendations aimed at enhancing language pedagogy; strengthening financial support for graduate students; and changing the University calendar. We offer a brief response to those recommendations below.

- *“Build unique strength in ‘shared classroom’ language pedagogy in order to diversify language-learning opportunities”* (Recommendation 6). Recognizing that Princeton cannot hire faculty to teach every language of interest to students, the task force recommends that the University enter into cooperative agreements that would use interactive technology (shared, real time audio/video feeds) to enable Princeton students to participate remotely in classes at other universities. We believe that this solution is an attractive one, but as the task force correctly notes, there are logistical barriers (in terms of facilities and schedule, for example) that must be overcome to make it feasible. We will ask the Office of the Dean of the College to investigate and pursue the possibilities.
- *“Strengthen financial support for graduate students seeking to engage in summer research and language study, and consider a new year-long fellowship program for post-graduates graduate students”* (Recommendation 7). We address this recommendation against the background of more general

improvements to graduate student funding. In the course of the University's strategic planning process, multiple task forces identified pressures on the funding available to graduate students. In the social sciences and the humanities, the most urgent need was for an increase to the funding available for sixth-year students. The provost, the dean of the graduate school, and the dean for research have responded to this need by providing new support for sixth-year students making appropriate progress toward degrees. We expect that this significant enhancement to graduate support at Princeton will help to ease some of the more specific pressures that are the focus of this recommendation. In addition, the recent increase to the endowment spend rate will provide departments with greater flexibility to support summer research and learning opportunities for their graduate students, as may future fundraising.

- “*Revise the academic calendar to add a January term*” (Recommendation 8). The task force on general education is considering possible reforms to the academic calendar, and it will consider this recommendation along with others.

Conclusion

We close by again thanking the task force for its excellent work. Princeton is fortunate to have a longstanding and distinguished tradition of excellence in regional studies. As we prepare students and generate scholarship for an increasingly interconnected world, it is vitally important that we sustain and grow that tradition in both the social sciences and the humanities. We look forward to working with the task force members, and colleagues throughout the campus, to achieve that vision.