

## SUMMARY OF DELIBERATIONS ON AREA STUDIES

### Historical Context

The term “Area Studies” has emerged within the American academy to refer to specific sets of approaches to constructing and assembling knowledge about the peoples and cultures of the world. Area Studies complements but stands in distinct contrast to 1) professional schools; which primarily group knowledge in functional bundles essential to the performance of discreet occupations, i.e. law, medicine, management, public health, etc., and 2) disciplines; which immerse students in theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches and repertoires of practices that can subsequently be applied, or at least tested, in a variety of novel contexts. In the Area Studies model, however, the object of analysis is a clearly defined geographical unit. It is implicitly recognized that to ‘understand’ that object requires one to grapple with the dynamics of its geology, geography and environment as well as the social, political, economic and symbolic systems of its inhabitants. Area Studies is an inherently interdisciplinary pursuit. It is not simply the act of practicing one’s individual discipline on the global stage. Secondly, Area Studies is a site of experimentation; an intellectual space for testing the explanatory force of discipline-derived paradigms, and the utility of discipline-derived methodological approaches. In other words, Area Studies is the place where a variety of theories and practices interrogation one another. Thirdly, Area Studies often provides the most direct path for knowledge created in the academy to enter the world of policy.

The theoretical and applied contributions of the Area Studies model have led an increasing number of universities to elevate their Area Studies programs to the status of departments; with regularized budgets, faculty lines and administrative responsibilities for managing degree programs.

Additionally, Area Studies has experienced a dramatic boost in government, business and foundation support in recent years as a result of globalization, the events of and after 9/11 and other strategic motivations. In the mid-1990s Ford, Rockefeller and a number of other foundations decided to down-size their investments in Area Studies and emphasize thematic concerns instead. For both compelling intellectual and practical reasons, that trend has been decisively reversed in recent years.

Boston University currently offers the BA degree in Russian and East European Studies, East Asian Studies, and Latin American Studies. Additionally there is the ten-year old *Writing in the Americas Program*, an externally-funded initiative in Latin American Studies in the Humanities, the externally-funded International Center for East Asian Archaeology and Cultural History, and the fifty-three year old, jointly-funded, African Studies Center.

### The Two Major Models of Area Studies at Boston University

#### 1) The African Studies Model

The African Studies Center at Boston University is well known for resisting the trend to move African Studies toward departmental status within the academy. It has long been our belief that Africa is simply too big a geographic place and too grand a cultural concept to be mastered in all its complex dimensions, or to be reduced to a single field of study. The epistemological hybridity and the ad hoc juxtapositions at the core of many African Studies departments often produce students insufficiently grounded in any particular intellectual domain to contribute meaningfully to the great scholarly debates, pragmatic initiatives or development challenges of the day. Yet, theoretical advances and methodological innovations continue to emerge through rigorous disciplined-based training and research, demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach in generating knowledge of Africa. Concomitantly, the African Studies Center, through its wide ranging seminars, workshops, community outreach and publications programs, has long served as an interdisciplinary crucible from which generations of students have emerged, well grounded in their own disciplines and confident in their abilities to appropriately integrate the advances of other disciplines as well. The African Studies Center has thus chosen to remain a program, rather than a department, and seeks to infuse the study of Africa widely and deeply throughout the university's many curricular programs.

However, there is increasing awareness that as a program, without faculty lines, the African Studies Center has little control over the curricular options available to our students, and few ways to respond to emerging areas of interests and exciting shifts in foci occurring within the field nationally. At this historical moment we indeed seek greater structural involvement in curricular matters, particularly those related to foreign language instruction.

A new Institute for the study of Muslim societies is under-development at Boston University whose area of focus will extend essentially from Morocco to Indonesia and China. Its structural elements, however, are quite similar to those of the African Studies Center. It is a free-standing unit, within CAS/GRS, with affiliated faculty representing a range of departments, a small staff, a few graduate fellowships, and a mandate (perhaps) to oversee an undergraduate minor and a graduate certificate program. With judiciously applied support, it may evolve into a Title VI program.

## 2) The International Relations Department Model

With perhaps the largest undergraduate student body at BU and a faculty whose members each specialize in a particular world region, IR sees itself as a natural site for the development and management of Area Studies programs. As noted above, centers and programs can fail to reach their fullest potential due to the absence of clear faculty lines, lack of curricular control and an uncertain role in the college-wide budgetary process. The IR model aims to provide Area Studies programs space for autonomous development under the protective umbrella of a more highly developed unit. Russian and East European Studies, East Asian Studies, and Latin American Studies are currently being developed under this arrangement.

### Major Issues for discussion

- 1) Should we attempt to prioritize the world regions most deserving of immediate support?
- 2) Need all Area Studies programs at BU adhere to a single institutional or administrative model? What are the advantages and disadvantages of structural consistency?

### Agreements

- 1) There is a pervasive sense that before we move to prioritize the world regions most deserving of support, we need to better publicize the forms and functions, and the possibilities inherent in all the programs currently available. None of the Areas Studies program Directors is comfortable that she or he has fully “captured” either the range of faculty expertise present on campus or the depth of student interest in any particular geographical region.
- 2) There is a pervasive sense that it might be prudent to defer on the question of single institutional model for the moment, allowing programs to evolve, as they will. The differences in mandate (degree versus non-degree programs), in fiscal arrangements (internally versus externally-funded), in relations to department (linked versus autonomous) reflect a fragmented landscape of incomparable units. Time and further development might eventually suggest models of “best practices.”
- 3) There is a pervasive sense that because Area Studies is an inherently interdisciplinary pursuit, cooperation among units is essential to the effective creation of synergies, the avoidance of needless duplication and the most efficient use of limited fiscal resources within the college. It is proposed, therefore, that regardless of the type of Area Studies programs that ultimately emerge at BU, there needs to be *i.*) A CAS/GRS Council of Area Studies Programs to facilitate the flow of information about current and future programmatic initiatives, and to coordinate strategic thrusts, *ii.*) A pan-university (inter-college, inter-campus) mechanism to involve SMG, SPH, MED, THD, SED, ENG and others into the program planning and research agenda of Area Studies, and *iii.*) Greater transparency in the faculty hiring process, allowing a wider array of program leaders to offer insights into the most effective allocation of personnel resources.
- 4) There is a pervasive sense that because government, foundation and private funders require firms demonstrations of institutional support as part of grant consideration, BU needs to greatly increase its base-line of support for area studies, particularly with regards to foreign language instruction, graduate fellowships and faculty travel and research.