

Renewing the PhD at Yale University: The 2-4 Project

African American Studies

February 2007

During December 2006, approximately seven African American Studies faculty met with about fifteen of our graduate students for a round table discussion. The central item on the agenda was the 2-4 Project and its relationship to policy actions the department might take to improve graduate student's professional development and their overall academic experience at Yale. Faculty also studied graduate student responses to the 2-4 survey, conducted subsequent discussions, and corresponded by email about the issues. The conclusions submitted in this report were formulated by the graduate studies committee composed of Elizabeth Alexander (DUS fall term), Robert Stepto (Chair), and Gerald Jaynes (DGS).

The graduate School's 2-4 initiative occurs at an opportune time for African American Studies. During the past two years we have been engaged in an ongoing assessment and revision of many of our practices. The 2-4 Project provides us an opportunity to incorporate the diverse views and experience encompassed within the graduate school into our overall assessment of our policies. The December meeting was one of several the DGS and faculty have had with graduate students during the past eighteen months to discuss a variety of subjects related to the 2-4 Project. We take this opportunity to report on some of the initiatives we have already started to address and to outline further improvements revealed necessary during the 2-4 process.

All six of the "critical areas" in the humanities and social sciences cited by the graduate school's 2-4 memo are areas the department will address in the spring term of 2007. This memo summarizes our evolving thoughts concerning each category of concern.

Course work. Our graduate course curriculum needs revision to meet the evolving needs of students engaged in diversified academic pursuits. Two common threads dominate our revisions: concentration on Afro-diasporic subjects and

emphasis on honing students' interdisciplinary research skills. The core-required courses are a special concern. During 2006, we initiated a reformatting of our two-semester workshop for 3rd year students. The spring workshop for pre-dissertation prospectus writing took great advantage in utilizing Steven Shoemaker to provide seminars on writing the dissertation. The graduate students received these seminars well, and we are extremely pleased the graduate school provided departments this wonderful resource. For the spring 2007 workshop, we prevailed upon Steve to add a special workshop dedicated to writing the dissertation prospectus. This workshop was also quite successful. This past fall we introduced a new format and content for the 3rd year students' workshop in research methods. The new format for the fall research seminar is a success in substantial part because of greater faculty participation and because of the mentoring component inherent in faculty presentations of their own early research projects.

Our plan is to hold faculty meetings this spring to reassess the curricula of the three core courses: *Theorizing Racial Formation in Early 21st Century*, the humanities requirement, and the social science requirement. Current thinking is that the core material of each course should be more stable from year to year and better connected to illustrate different disciplinary approaches to race, class, and culture in the Atlantic diaspora. To facilitate this we believe faculty should commit to taking turns teaching the same set of courses on a revolving basis. To that end, Gerald Jaynes is teaching a new course, "Interdisciplinary Research in the social sciences (African American Studies 827b) that will serve as the social science core requirement. That course approaches material covered in *Theorizing Racial Formation* (505a) and *Transnational Imaginaries* (749b) from a more social science perspective.

Program structure. This is a difficult area to address because, with our students pursuing joint PhD programs in many departments in both the humanities and social sciences, there is no one configuration of exams, prospectus writing and first-time teaching to be examined and reconfigured. A large amount of effort has gone into working with participating joint degree departments to work out suitable arrangements conducive to the needs of each department and African American Studies. What we can do,

certainly, is to identify any feature of a given configuration that impedes a student's progress. A special concern would be detecting any feature that complicates the proper "jointness" of a PhD program.

We plan to add a permanent subcommittee to the Graduate Studies Committee (composed of faculty and one or two graduate students) to review issues of concern with joint degree departments. The graduate students would come from the program (American Studies) and a department with which we have frequent interaction.

Mentoring: We recognize the need for more shepherding of our students, particularly our more advanced students. First year students are currently assigned a faculty advisor. We believe the kind of changes in course work and program structure discussed throughout this memorandum will better serve students in the first 3 to 4 years than would changing the methods of assigning students to faculty advisors. However, we will be strongly encouraging faculty to in effect assign themselves to one or more students.

African American Studies currently does not have a placement officer to supervise student job-market activities. We will move to address this immediately. A related and important new activity will be the scheduling of mock job talks and interviews.

Evaluation. We feel that evaluation begins when faculty actually know and have worked with given students. Our revisions to the core-required courses, for example, should lead to better faculty knowledge of and evaluation of students because of greater faculty participation in all students coursework. We also sense that an annual faculty meeting devoted to a shared discussion of the progress of all the graduate students is both feasible and an advance over what is now haphazardly in place. The first of these student evaluations will occur this spring. Faculty will inform students about the outcome of such evaluation whenever it is necessary. As currently practiced, each student receives an informal evaluation from the DGS during the 3rd year spring prospectus workshop. To provide both students and faculty clear information concerning student progress at this stage that evaluation can be formalized.

We plan to discuss whether each student should submit a written self-evaluation at some point or points during his/her tenure at Yale. The self-evaluation would require a response and would add a greater interactive dimension to the evaluation process.

Expectations. We can do a clearer job of stating and publicizing programmatic expectations. We suspect the best means of accomplishing this is to produce a new department handbook for students. Again, this is an area involving coordination with other departments because it is difficult to draft a statement that fits all the various joint degree programs. What we need to do is to state and publicize all the foreseeable variations of significance.

Collaborative frameworks. We applaud all that we have learned about the research, reading, and dissertation-writing collectives that have been initiated independently over the years. There is interest in discussing further a chapter meeting framework for students writing their first dissertation chapters. These meetings could be coordinated with those in the departments that already use this framework, or they could occur just in African American Studies. The point would be that students would have chapter meetings and those meetings would always involve African American Studies faculty, in some cases exclusively.

Time to Degree. Our sense is that in African American Studies, time to degree is most sensitive to a lengthened process during years 4 and 5. This may well reflect the difficulties of writing truly interdisciplinary dissertations. The demands of interdisciplinary research and writing is difficult to appreciate until one has attempted to actually do it. Our sense is that the reorganization and reconceptualization of courses will improve student's preparedness to embark on the dissertation. The recommended faculty evaluation of student progress during these crucial two years will also enable dissertation advisors and students to move through this hurdle period more fluidly.