

*AQUAD REVIEW: REPORT OF THE VISITING TEAM ON THE SOCIAL THOUGHT AND  
POLITICAL ECONOMY PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS*

May 6, 2005

1. Overview

The Social Thought and Political Economy major is a thirty-year-old “experiment” that has long passed the experimental stage, and seemed to the visiting committee to have a track record of tangible accomplishment, with a national reputation that, as we discovered in talking with current and past majors, attracts students from around the country. We were initially impressed above all by

the extraordinary fact that approximately 51% of the program's enrolled students are also honors students at the University. None of us has ever before encountered a program or major of which that could be said; the further fact that a significant percentage (40%) of STPEC students are in Commonwealth College, and many more are double majoring, also speaks well of the program. Rather than being an interdisciplinary major, STPEC would be more correctly called a "non-disciplinary" major, enabling its students to achieve a greatly desired degree of flexibility (a word emphasized by many of them) and curricular expansion, in their programs; the popularity of the major suggests that this provides a particular service for undergraduates who have not yet fixed on one specific disciplinary interest.

Our general impression, moreover, was borne out by the interviews we conducted with current majors and alumni, as well as by classes (required for the major) that we attended. The level of preparation of the students, past and present, was quite high; they were articulate, informed, and strikingly reflective, both in class and in our interview sessions. The alumni all felt that, as one put it, STPEC had provided them with a world-class education, in which they were taken seriously as students, and educated for both academic and non-academic careers. It was also very interesting to see that the program had imbued all of them with a strong sense of affiliation to the University; in our meetings they all created and recreated the kinds of stories and anecdotes that provide the stuff of a memorable and consequential undergraduate learning experience. In our estimation this sense of affiliation could be used to advantage both for student recruiting and for alumni giving (see below under "Recommendations"). This community-building quality of the program was evident in the continuity of generations (for example, one former STPEC student is now teaching a senior seminar); in their shared commitment over time to the program; in the critical perspective that they all brought to their shared experiences, demonstrating both the kind of critical thinking and at the same time the intellectual rigor that have become a hallmark of STPEC; and in the collegial interactions and cooperative habits--encompassing both work and study--among the current students. As far as the student body is concerned, our only question has to do with its notable lack of diversity--a concern expressed also by the Director and the majors. We do not have any specific recommendation here, but it is obvious that this problem ought to be addressed, in line with the University's recent initiative on student diversity.

## 2. Structure

### A. Curriculum

In that the STPEC curriculum is that of a major without a discipline, the question obviously has to be raised whether it has enough structure to it. In itself, the curriculum is both eclectic and, despite or perhaps because of its flexibility, very demanding of both students and faculty. In one sense, to be sure, its greatest strength--the ability of its Director, Professor Sara Lennox, to draw on many strong courses and faculty members from across the 5 colleges--might also be considered a potential weakness, that is, a decenteredness and sometime lack of focus that may occasionally make for difficulty in coordinating an individual student's progress toward a degree. It was not always clear to us, for example, what is the relationship between the core requirements, that in and of themselves form a distinctive substructure, and the other courses that might be selected in any given semester. The students themselves at a recent retreat addressed this problem, and suggested creating various curricular tracks within the major as a way of dealing with it. Although we do not particularly endorse this suggestion (like good students everywhere, the STPEC majors seem to think they can cram two more years worth of courses into a four-year degree), we do take it as evidence of a perceived lack, that poses important challenges for all concerned--faculty, students, and especially advisers as well (see "Recommendations").

We emphasize, however, that despite its lack of a disciplinary center we are very impressed by the curriculum's strengths, most notably the core curriculum--the junior and senior seminars; the internship program with its mandatory community service component; and the student-taught colloquia. As to the seminars, the combination of canonical paradigms with critical perspectives and historical background, as well as the evident intellectual rigor of syllabi and lectures, is striking. The

internships and colloquia are also crucial to the major. They not only cement the intramural and extramural aspects of the program, creating and sustaining the sense of community we have referred to earlier; they also highlight the increased exposure to and investment in the larger world, on the part of both students and faculty. In this respect, the academic component of the credit-granting aspect of the required internships should be noted. Every internship, no matter where or what, requires at least one academic paper supervised by a member of the teaching staff, and so among other things the students learn from these assignments that every activity they engage in is susceptible of the kind of critical intellectual analysis the university wants them to develop. It is also important to note that over three decades the core curriculum has changed, subtly but significantly, in response to students' degrees of preparedness (e.g., the writing requirement) and market demand--a condition that is true of most humanities and social science majors with which we are familiar, and that is essential for maintaining any program's stature.

In any event, no matter who replaces Professor Lennox when she retires, that person is unlikely to have the 5-college faculty contacts that she has nurtured and developed over many years. In addition, visiting faculty from the other colleges or other UMass departments often give courses for the major (e.g., senior seminars), and securing these commitments has required an ability not only to identify relevant courses and potential faculty but to cajole the latter into lending their services to the program. The major challenge of the future will therefore be to find a director who can sustain and extend these 5-college ties.

#### B. Staffing: Teaching

Despite its vulnerability to outside pressures on and from contributing faculty, and even taking note of the recurrent need to recruit staff for courses on a semesterly basis (see "Recommendations" below), at the moment the program seems very definitely to be meeting the standards of both substantive content and pedagogical principles. Pending future determinations about regularizing staffing procedures, the program presently works with a cohort of willing and committed teaching faculty, dedicated office staff, and student contribution to both governance and office workload (see below). We particularly want to note the intelligent use that is made of the various non-academic instructors, from such venues as local historical societies (the Director of Historic Northampton is a UMass Ph.D. in History) and community organizations, who complement and enhance (albeit on an ad hoc basis) the contribution of the academic teaching staff. The student-taught colloquia also seem for the most part to be well-designed, and are an especially valuable preparation for those STPEC students who are interested in teaching careers. The participation of all these types of instructors is well-instantiated and enviable, given the efforts that are currently underway at peer institutions to bring about a more effective and positive relation between the classroom and careers.

#### C. Staffing: Administration

Currently, the administrative staff of STPEC consists of the Director, one program coordinator (Deborah Reiter); a graduate student director of interns who both directs the intern program and supervises its academic requirements; a graduate student adviser (these last two also teach one of the major's core courses); and a changing group of student interns who help out in the program's office. In practice, though, STPEC could not continue without the voluntary assumption of multifold duties above and beyond the formal requirements of their positions by two women, one of whom (the Director) will soon be retiring, and the other of whom (the program coordinator) is grossly overworked and under-valued: in addition to the normal duties of running a program office, including book-keeping, arranging campus visits, etc., she must supervise the volunteer student staff, do all staff and advising training, give informal advice to students (as the person most fully cognizant of the program's curricular requirements and possibilities), deal with obsolescent office technology without any technical support from the University, and many other tasks that all together add up to what ought to be purview of two people. Her task is made more difficult by the existence of university-wide policies that make it impossible for her to devolve much of her work load on the student assistants (e.g., signing students into classes, which can only be done by her and only into

the appropriate computer site). STPEC clearly takes pride, as well it might, in the cost-efficiency of its programs, but this virtue clearly has immense human costs.

In addition to the obviously unsustainable workload of the sole paid office staff, one other administrative problem was made manifest to the review committee. Students, alumni, the director, and the program coordinator, all agreed that the advising process, while effective on the whole, definitely needs professionalization, to insure its consistency and regularization. This need seems to be twofold: 1) with regard to current students through the usual morass of registration, graduation requirements, major requirements, etc.; and 2) post-graduation career and further academic advising: what to do next, how to apply, where to find applications, and general information about career possibilities.

It is clear to us that the best way for the University to acknowledge the benefits that the program has brought to its statewide and national profile is to look again at the resources it is willing to commit to such a valuable program. Beyond the obvious needs we have already identified, the greatest administrative lack is in the area of technical support, specifically computer technology. At the moment, for example, the program coordinator is attempting (when she has time, which is rarely) to transfer program data from an obsolete operating system to new software, without any help from the University's IT center; often the office is unable to interface with software in the University's various offices, from semester registration data to potential donor lists and alumni databases that could be used for purposes of recruiting, grant procurement, and evaluation. It is astonishing to us that such data is simply not available to the STPEC staff, and that no assistance from IT is ever forthcoming. (See Recommendations).

### 3. Recommendations

STPEC's major need, very clearly, is that a transition process be initiated as soon as possible, well before the retirement of Professor Lennox, in order to enhance the program's continuity, retain historical memory, and manage necessary change. None of this can happen as it ought unless Professor Lennox is on hand to help her successor master the program's many aspects. STPEC has been a crucial component of the University's work for more than three decades; if that contribution is to continue, planning for the future has to begin now.

Beyond that, our specific recommendations are based on a recognition of STPEC's inherent potential, the need to build on past strengths, and to anticipate future needs; and to give appropriate support the *esprit de corps* and tireless commitment that now sustain it.

#### A. Staffing: Administrative

The internal self-study seems to us to point in the proper direction. A satisfactory level of staffing would consist of 1) a half-time director, fully committed to the program, with senior level responsibilities including: faculty recruitment and curricular development, general oversight of academic affairs, and program accountability. 2) A full-time associate director, tenured or tenure-track, with day-to-day program responsibilities, that is administrative rather program oversight: scheduling, curriculum coordination, 5-college and Valley outreach, office and staff supervision. 3) A professional adviser; and 4) an administrative assistant, such as the position now filled by Deborah Reiter, but with a reduction of responsibilities to one rather than (as is now the case) one and a half fulltime jobs. The purely secretarial work could then be handled by a part-time secretary, perhaps shared with another program such as Labor Studies. In that case a level upgrade for Ms. Reiter's position from blank to blank would be appropriate. In any event it is clear that various aspects of the administrative work that are now handled by her should be devolved upward, to an associate director, and downward, to a secretary.

We cannot comment on the cost implications of this recommendation, except to note that the Director, in her internal study, has costed these positions out and believes that most of the cost, particularly that of the director and associate director, could be borne by a reallocation of various TA's, so that released time for the director would be the only budgetary add-on (and we would add, a full or part-time secretarial position as well).

#### B. Staffing: Curricular

We endorse the recommendation by the current Director that the University offer positions to new faculty that include a six-year commitment to the STPEC program involving one/eighth of the faculty member's time over that period: a commitment that might be called "renewable permanence." This is essentially the staffing procedure adopted by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and has worked very well for that institution. The reputation of the STPEC program as a quasi-honors program should not only prove attractive to new faculty, but could even turn out to be a useful recruiting tool.

### C. Support

No matter what changes in staffing are made to the program, STPEC cannot function properly without technical assistance from the University, assistance that as far as we are aware is ordinarily available to all departments in institutions of higher education. Two things in particular are essential. First, the University's IT center should provide the STPEC office staff with needed assistance to make its computer operations fully functional. Second, other offices on campus, such as the registrar, the admissions office, and especially the alumni organization, should make their databases available to the program to enable it to fulfill basic organizational needs, such as knowing the numbers of students who have followed particular curricular paths. The cooperation of the alumni office is especially crucial. One of the key components in evaluating any undergraduate program is the institution's ability to know what has become of its graduates, how many go on to graduate school, how their career paths compare with those of other departments and like programs at other institutions. At the present moment we have only hearsay and a limited amount of first-hand knowledge on which to base the judgment that STPEC performs very favorably in this respect.

Above all, we believe that STPEC could be very useful to the University not only as a recruiting tool but also as a potential donor base. This cannot happen, however, without access to the alumni data base for appropriate parties. We strongly recommend that such access be granted forthwith.

In summary, we conclude that the Social Thought and Political Economy Program at the University of Massachusetts is an excellent academic program, worthy of the strategic planning and additional support necessary to sustain its past and present excellence.

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