

January 25, 2009

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**RE: Proposal by the University at Albany for a
Combined MA Women's Studies / PhD Sociology Program.**

Dear Dr. Bringsjord,

Thank you for your letter of January 14, 2009 giving me an update on the status of the recent UAlbany proposal for a combined MA/PhD program involving two degrees from different departments.

You are of course right that my letter contained some matters that clearly are internal to UAlbany and that will need to be resolved locally. However, I only included that additional information in order to provide some context and background for the "approval" of this program by UAlbany. In particular, I wanted to put on record that once UAlbany Senate Officers became aware of more complete and relevant information regarding this proposal in May 2008, they recognized the precedent setting and questionable integrity of this proposal and immediately asked Interim President G. Philip to delay approval until more complete information was received and reviewed. The president's final approval in early December 2008 was an administrative decision that did not take into account the full implications of the information that was received.

On the other hand your response seems to miss the two main points concerning programmatic/ curricular and academic quality/integrity issues that I brought to the attention of Provost Palm in my January 8, 2009 letter. In order to be absolutely clear, I will try to briefly summarize these points for you. More details and full documentation are contained in the material I sent to Provost Palm.

1. The proposal introduces a **new type of formal dual degree program** that combines an MA from one department with a PhD from a different department. There exists no precedent within SUNY for this type of program. Some departments at some SUNY campuses may have **informal** arrangements which cover comparable situations – certainly the Women's Studies and Sociology departments at UAlbany **informally** operated a non-registered dual degree program for many years – but creating a new **formal** program of this type, for which no precedent and no regulations exist within SUNY, and that furthermore needs to be registered with the State Education Department, obviously is a very different matter. To be accurate, at UAlbany there does exist *one* registered combined MA/PhD program, namely the *Joint M.S.W./Ph.D. Program in Social Welfare*. However, since this program is offered by the equivalent of what is just a single medium sized department, it is not a precedent for the proposed WSS MA / SOC PhD cross disciplinary program. Furthermore, if one wants to apply the Social Welfare program as a standard, one needs to observe that this particular program limits double counting to just 12 out of a total of 96 required course credits if the degrees would be pursued separately. (Double counting is discussed in the next point.) Looking beyond SUNY, the UAlbany committee charged with researching comparable programs at the national level "was unable to find any such cross disciplinary MA/PhD programs that are officially registered with a University or state that could be used as a model for the proposed Women's Studies MA / Sociology PhD." Thus the proposal under consideration

would appear to set a national precedent. Consequently it would appear that a most thorough review and formulation of relevant policies would be in SUNY's best interest in order to ensure that high standards of integrity are observed for the current proposal as well as for any future one.

2. Unfortunately, in its present form, the proposed combined MA/PhD program immediately raises major questions about its integrity. **All credits** required for the WSS MA automatically apply towards the SOC PhD, i.e., the proposal formalizes in a program to be registered with the State Education Department a **100% double counting**. De facto, by choosing courses appropriately, sociology PhD students would obtain for free an MA in Women's Studies "while pursuing their PhD". This is, in fact, what has been happening over a number of years with the vast majority (12 out of 14 according to the proposal) of the students that have gone or are going through the informal existing arrangement involving the two departments. By approving such a formal dual degree program, SUNY would endorse a "two for the price of one policy", something that Distinguished Teaching Professor and UAlbany Senate Chair John Delano characterized with these words:

"It's also important that UAlbany not become known as the educational 'WalMart'."

(May 16 2008 e-mail by Delano to Collier, Dewar, Hoyt, and Range, in the context of discussions about the proposed MA/PhD program.) Let me add that all other formally registered dual degree programs (BA/MA, MA/MA, etc.) known to us, have substantial limitations on the number of credits that can be double counted. Furthermore, the *student initiated dual MA/PhD degree program at the University of Michigan* (the closest analogue to the proposal that the UAlbany committee could identify) also explicitly limits the credits that may be double counted, in order "to preserve the integrity of each Rackham degree." Finally, one also should note that the proposed program differs significantly from the typical case by case review by doctoral faculty to determine what prior graduate course work of an applicant to a PhD program may be accepted towards the PhD requirements, i.e., it differs from admission to a PhD program with "advanced standing". In fact, a first year graduate student (i.e., a student without any advanced standing) admitted to the Sociology PhD program would enjoy the benefits of the proposed combined degree program (two for the price of one) by simply choosing appropriate course work.

Clearly the two issues described above involve educational policy matters related to programs, curricula, degree requirements, academic quality and integrity. Since no policies and/or guidelines concerning such cross disciplinary dual MA/PhD programs exist within SUNY, it would appear to be incumbent that such policies and guidelines be developed cooperatively by the SUNY Provost's Office and the SUNY Faculty Senate. My 1/08/2009 letter to Provost Palm was focused on suggesting that such policies and guidelines be developed as part of a thorough review of the MA/PhD proposal, and it included all relevant information already collected at UAlbany that might be useful for such purpose.

Unfortunately, I now hear from you that Assistant Provost Sandoval already has approved the UAlbany proposal and sent on to the SED on December 11, 2008, i.e., within a few days after the proposal was approved by the UAlbany President. This surprisingly short time frame did not leave any room for the thorough review and research that would appear to be necessary when dealing with a new, unprecedented type of dual degree program, as well as with the associated questions of academic integrity that arise concerning double counting of course credits in combined programs. Even more disturbing is the fact that University Faculty Senate, the official agency through which the University Faculty engages in the governance of the University and which is charged to concern itself with effective educational policies, has not been involved at all in this process. De facto, within a matter of days in early December 2008, Assistant Provost Sandoval approved and set the standards for a potentially nationwide precedent for a new type of dual degree program, and thereby implicitly

formulated and approved policy matters without any involvement and consultation with the SUNY Senate.

Perhaps it is not too late to retract the proposal from the SED, develop and approve relevant policies and guidelines in cooperation with the University Faculty Senate, and to thereafter review and evaluate – in the frame work of such policies - the current proposal and any other similar proposals that may be submitted in the future. Indeed, I very much urge you to consider such a course of action, so as to avoid the potential of a major embarrassment for SUNY.

Let me conclude by adding that a cross disciplinary combined WSS MA / SOC PhD program may very well be a valuable addition to SUNY's programs, provided the concerns about double counting are addressed so that appropriate standards of integrity are maintained. It should be simple to explicitly limit the credits that may be double counted, for example by following the criteria of the UAlbany Social Welfare joint degree program mentioned above, or those of the program at the University of Michigan. Another option might be the creation of a Women's Studies track of the Sociology Ph.D. It seems that either way would allow to achieve the academic goals of the cross disciplinary program.

Sincerely yours,

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