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Dear Gregson:

I am writing to request a department name change from Asian & African Languages & Literature (AALL) to Asian & Middle Eastern Studies (AMES).

I. Brief institutional history:

Asian and African Languages and Literature was established as a Section in 1988 for the purpose of consolidating in an identifiable unit instruction and research in a limited number of non-western languages and literatures. At the time, it was limited to five tenure or tenure-track appointments. In the spring of 1992, the Section was authorized to offer both an undergraduate major and an undergraduate minor. In 1998, following one internal and two external reviews, the Section was upgraded to full departmental status with 15 faculty of varying ranks (4 tenured/tenure-track faculty, 6 Professors of the Practice, 3 lecturers, 2 instructors); the department offered instruction in Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Persian and with Swahili as the sole African language taught on campus. In 2004, Swahili was terminated due to the then administration's perceived lack of enrollment and student interests (6-7 per semester).

Currently, the department offers instruction in six language/literature and culture areas: Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese and Korean with 25 faculty (9 tenured/tenure-track faculty (2 currently under search), 4 Professors of the Practice, 6 lecturers, 6 instructors). The overall enrollment surpassed 1,450 last academic year and the department conferred 13 first/second majors and 41 minors. Enrollment in Chinese is third among all languages offered at Duke only behind Spanish and French. Arabic is the fastest growing language on campus and in the nation as well.

II. Rationales for name change:

A. Anachronism

The placement of a number of non-Western languages and cultures under an all-encompassing rubric of Asia and Africa is reminiscent of a forgettable and regressive organization of the world from an Eurocentric point of view (the West and the rest) that used to go by the name of Oriental studies. The most representative of that tradition at the University of Pennsylvania has changed its name from Oriental Studies to Asian and Middle Eastern Studies in 1992 and further separated into two distinctive departments of East Asian Languages and Civilizations and Near Eastern Languages and Cultures in 2005. Currently, there is only one other department in the country that includes both Asia and Africa in its name: the Department of African and Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Florida, Gainesville.

Since the termination of Swahili in 2004, there has not been an attempt to teach an African language on campus. (Currently, 3 semesters of Wolof are being offered through AALL, but that is only a temporary and the enrollment has been minimal). With the establishment of African and African American Studies and its increased effort to augment faculty positions in African studies, it is better to relinquish Africa from our nomenclature to better reflect the true composition of the department and to avoid confusion and redundancy.

B. Consolidation

The department has decided to focus our instructional and intellectual efforts in developing and enhancing the existing six language/culture areas in Asia and the Middle East: Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese, and Korean. The strategy is to develop sustainable and foundational language/culture programs on the one hand and to cultivate comparatist and transcultural approaches in inter-regional and intra-regional studies on the other. To this end, we are seeking approval for majors in Hebrew and Korean and are also in the process of creating combined majors (Arabic/Hebrew, Chinese/Japanese, for examples) so students can develop majors that go beyond singular national language/culture. We are already offering courses such as “Intro to East Asian Cultural Studies” and “The Israeli Palestinian Conflict” that address regional and transnational concerns. Moreover, a number of students have expressed interest in majoring in more than one languages that we currently offer.

The faculty has engaged in numerous discussions on the name change. It was agreed that the current designation is inappropriate for the department. On 11/29/07, the faculty voted (12 yeses and 1 no) to change the department name to Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. Given the anachronistic nomenclature and our effort to consolidate and innovate our existing offerings in Asia and the Middle East, we think it is high time for the department to adopt a name that realistically and truthfully reflect the research and curricular foci of the department.

Thank you for your kind consideration. Please feel free to contact me if you need further information regarding this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Leo Ching', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Leo Ching