

UNH Offers New European Cultural Studies Major

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UNH News Bureau

DURHAM, N.H. -- Recognizing cultural studies as one of the liveliest areas of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, a group of University of New Hampshire faculty has launched a new cultural studies initiative, the European Cultural Studies major.

The faculty involved come from a variety of disciplines and departments: English, European languages and literatures, history, philosophy, political theory, art and music history, communication and sociology.

"They are drawn together by shared interests in European societies and cultures past and present, and, still more importantly, a scholarly dialogue about the study of cultures that spans disciplinary boundaries," explains Mary Rhiel, associate professor of German, who serves as director of the program with Michael Donnelly, professor of sociology.

Rhiel and Donnelly explain that, in the conventional curriculum, the study of Europe -- and other culture areas -- has been divided among traditional disciplines: for example, learning foreign languages has been confined to the separate language departments, while the study of European arts, history, philosophy, and society takes place in their respective departments, using English-language materials or texts in translation.

"By contrast, the cultural studies approach is interdisciplinary," says Donnelly, "driven by the belief that language is an integral part of culture and not merely a tool for the study of literature; and that by the same token the study of European history, philosophy and politics can only be enriched by the addition of critical perspectives and theories developed in language and literature study."

Rhiel and Donnelly see the new program as timely in light of current events, such as the push for unification of European countries through a common currency and related political and cultural movements. "The vast changes in Europe right now give special relevance to this major," Rhiel points out.

The project has been in the works for several years, growing from informal discussions and

interdisciplinary seminars sponsored by the Center for the Humanities; it crystallized in 1996 in an intensive summer workshop organized by Rhiel and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Rhiel and Donnelly report the proposed major has generated a good deal of enthusiasm, particularly among faculty members already working in this vein.

"Instituting European Cultural Studies will in effect recognize formally links across departments that already exist informally; it would allow interested faculty significant new opportunities for innovative teaching, bringing their interdisciplinary research into the classroom," says Rhiel, who adds that surveys of UNH undergraduates indicate a good deal of interest likewise among students.

The curriculum of the major would involve a team-taught proseminar to introduce students to the field; core courses chosen by the majors from appropriate language, social science and humanities offerings; and a senior thesis. The major would also allow students wide scope for individually defined programs. vThe first proseminar will be offered in the fall semester of 2000.

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