

Narrative in Response to Rejection of Proposed Russian and Eurasian Studies Minor

Jonathan Acuff
Russian and Eurasian Studies Coordinator
Associate Professor
Department of Politics

The documents I have submitted in furtherance of this proposal were drafted by faculty from six different departments. As coordinator, the leadership model I employed was entirely participatory, with committee discussion regarding every aspect of the minor and then a vote on every decision regarding its curriculum. Thus far, all of the votes have been unanimous. When this minor was initially rejected, the previous Chair of the Edwards Curriculum Committee asserted “this minor is a broad area studies program that now belongs to COHFA and not to one department (e.g. Politics/Intel).” The suggestion that I have been a partisan advocate for the Politics Department over the interests of the Russian and Eurasian Studies Minor is simply inaccurate. This comment was also completely unnecessary.

In addition, the previous Chair asserted that “courses on the Ottoman Empire or Turkey [were] deemed irrelevant to this minor.” This is also an inaccurate depiction of the minor. The courses HIST 358, Borderlands and HIST 366, Comparative Empires both include lengthy treatments of Turkey/the Ottomans as a case. We combed the relevant curricula of multiple departments. These are the only courses we could find in the catalog that are actually taught on a frequent enough basis to be included.

Finally, the previous Chair wanted to “know why RELG courses like RELG 322 Intro to Islam were excluded from the curriculum of this minor. Islam is a key component of many Eurasian cultures.” We were/are well aware of this. We discussed RELG 322, Islam during a meeting in March and decided not to include it for several reasons. Although Muslims around the world are discussed, the core of 322 understandably deals with the history and practice of Islam in the Middle East, particularly the Sunni-Shia divide. In the geographic area we are trying to cover, the Middle East is consciously excluded, both because we did not want to step on the toes of our colleagues working on the Middle East Studies Minor and because of admittedly cluttered, historically-embedded arguments concerning where “Eurasia” ends and begins. We wanted to concentrate on, please forgive the term as it is somewhat loaded, “post-Soviet spaces” because of their connections with Russia. This includes the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, which otherwise would be included in the Middle East Minor (they're not in the region) or the Asian Studies Minor (they don't share many cultural attributes with any of the major Asian nation states).

We recognize Islam is an important part of the cultures of the Central Asian peoples. But given that they are not Arabs, Persians, Indians, Malays, Rohingya, or Indonesians and the derived social, economic, and political practices are rather different from their co-religionists elsewhere, we felt that there might be too much drift away from the core of the minor's content. It is also worth noting in this context that the European Studies Minor does not offer a course on Islam as an elective, despite the fact that there are now over 25 million Muslims in Europe, comprising 5% of the region's population and more than 10% in countries such as France and Germany.

The decision to not include a course on Islam is not unproblematic, as we do include Turkey in some of the minor's course coverage and several regions in Russia itself have significant Muslim-practicing populations. The countries of Central Asia are also predominantly

Muslim, though we have no course coverage in the minor of these states because there are no such courses at CCU, apart from study abroad opportunities in Kazakhstan that have had mixed results. Similarly, RELG 323 was also not included because so little of it covers Orthodoxy, by far the largest Christian belief system in Russia, which is the primary focus of the minor. Discussions related to Lutheran and Calvinist splits with Catholicism that would figure prominently in any survey course of Christianity are entirely irrelevant to our minor. We do not want to dilute the minor with a kind of “content drift,” which has been a problem with some course sequences in a variety of degree programs, not least in my own (Intelligence and National Security Studies). If my characterization, which follows from our aforementioned discussion, of either RELG 322 or 323 is inaccurate, I would be happy to have the advisory committee review some course syllabi and reconsider whether or not to add these courses as electives. However, this should not be the basis for rejecting the minor. Religion is an important aspect of culture. But so are a lot of other activities that we are covering in our course sequence. Moreover, the faiths of the culture and identity groups in the Russia and Eurasia region are of course discussed in the courses we already have in the sequence, they're just embedded in analytic and/or historical frameworks that differ from approaches employed in Religious Studies.