October 23, 2019

TO: Members of the Board of Trustees

FROM: John A. Elliott, Ph.D.
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

RE: New Master of Arts Degree in Politics and Popular Culture

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Board of Trustees approve a new Master of Arts Degree in Politics and Popular Culture.

BACKGROUND:

Popular culture influences and reflects how societies think about themselves, especially their politics. Many more people experience politics through mass culture – Star Wars, Game of Thrones, World Cinema, museums and monuments – than through formal works of political science. Increasingly, politics is popular culture, and with continual reflection on power dynamics in all aspects of life, everything is political. The new Master’s in Politics and Popular Culture (MPPC) gives students the skills, concepts, and the vocabulary to move fluidly between in-depth study of political science, with all the rigor and specialist knowledge that entails, and popular culture, with all the analytic, creative and communicative possibilities that come with a mass medium.

Students who graduate from the MPPC program will be able to read a regression table and read the latest Marvel movie. They will be able to write an academic research paper, and write an 800-word newspaper op-ed. They will be able to communicate, with equal facility, with a professor, a high-school freshman, a general audience, and their friends and family about the political meanings encoded into popular culture. As a unique combination of social science rigor and popular culture analysis, this career-enhancing advanced degree gives students a competitive edge in the contemporary job market. The wide range of skills delivered, the innovative approach to the subject matter, the multiple student populations served, and the use of multi-modal instructional methodologies identifies this as an entrepreneurial degree program. The new workplace requires that employees think creatively and across traditional boundaries of knowledge and skills. They must communicate clearly and with multi-cultural competence, in ways that translate specialized ideas into quickly cognizable forms. They must be conversant with rapidly changing themes in popular culture and in power dynamics, and in new technologies of knowledge creation and dissemination. The MPPC program foregrounds the development of these skills and opens significant areas of career advancement.

As this is an entrepreneurial MA program, the department of political science will receive a proportion of tuition and fees from enrolled students. Once established, therefore, the program will be self-sustaining in financial terms. No additional or unique resources are necessary for program success.
Request for New UConn Academic Degree Program

General Information
Name of degree program: Master's in Politics and Popular Culture (PPC)
Name of sponsoring Department: Political Science
Name of sponsoring College: College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Campuses: Storrs
Contact persons: Prof. Stephen Dyson, Co-coordinator
Prof. Jeff Dudas, Co-coordinator
Type of Proposal: New
Type of Program: MA (Master of Arts)
Anticipated Initiation Date: Fall 2020
Anticipated Date of First Graduation: Spring 2022
Entrepreneurial program, approved by Provost’s Office: Yes
CIP Code: 45.1099 (Political Science and Government, Other)

Justification and need for the new program

Popular culture influences and reflects how societies think about themselves, especially their politics. Many more people experience politics through mass culture – Star Wars, Game of Thrones, World Cinema, museums and monuments – than through formal works of political science. Increasingly, politics is popular culture, and with continual reflection on power dynamics in all aspects of life, everything is political. The new Master’s in Politics and Popular Culture (MPPC) gives students the skills, concepts, and the vocabulary to move fluidly between in-depth study of political science, with all the rigor and specialist knowledge that entails, and popular culture, with all the analytic, creative and communicative possibilities that come with a mass medium.

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Research undertaken on our behalf by Kay GRODER, Assistant Director of Graduate Student Career Programs and Services in the Center for Career Development at UConn, has identified the following professional areas as key career connections for the proposed MA: • Communications professions, including journalism, public relations, science writers. • Teachers • Market researchers • Public culture workers (e.g. museum workers). Labor market analysis shows these areas are growing faster or as fast as average. Interviews with communications professionals at UCONN reveal significant interest in the unique combination of skills and education provided by the PPC MA. Tom BRENN, a former journalist for the Associated Press and a writer and editor for UCONN’s University Communications, commented that the program was “definitely interesting,” noting that many current and prospective journalists would find it appealing. BRENN said he will enroll in the program once it is established. It would offer, in his judgement, an extremely valuable certification in career terms, and would “make a resume stand out,” give a distinctive edge, and signify several different types of valuable expertise. Kim KRIEGER, a research writer for UCONN’s University Communications and freelance writer for popular science magazines, stated that most scientists find it difficult to communicate their ideas beyond their internal community, and that most of her job implicates the ways of thinking and communicating at the core of the MPPC. The proposed degree would be highly desirable for professionals in her line of work, and would attract significant publicity, raising the profile of both the department of political science and UCONN more broadly.

To understand the career enhancement potential of the MPPC program for teachers, we engaged Brian BOECHERER, UCONN’s Executive Director, Office of Early College Programs and Director of Research and Development. Brian tells us that high school teachers would be very interested in the program, as it goes to their core competency of transmitting complex ideas to non-specialists. CT law now requires teachers to have a substantive MA, and political science can increase the value of its MAs by attaching ECE-certification to them. A graduate of MPPC would be “super-credentialed” in a way that responds to current market demands, as evidenced by job advertisements. The MPPC program offers, in Brian’s judgment, “a very dynamic option.”

Student Interest. Enrollment in traditional political science degrees is significantly down in recent years, a phenomenon we have experienced here at UConn. Yet political engagement is at fever pitch. Americans feel disconnected from traditional ways of thinking about politics, yet more motivated than ever to become politically aware and involved. There is vast untapped potential for an approach that recognizes how politics has become a mass cultural phenomenon and provides the tools to navigate this new political reality. In creating this program, we are serving the need for a new way to do politics. A survey of current and former students of UCONN political science (responses = 381) shows that 75% are either actively planning for, intend to plan for, or have already completed, graduate education. Contemporary undergraduates with career ambitions overwhelmingly seek graduate qualifications. These students rank “pursuing intellectual interests” and “getting a job” as equally important rationales for pursuing an MA: they want to simultaneously develop their careers and have a challenging and stimulating intellectual experience. New career-enhancing programs in political science must offer a mix
MA in Politics and Popular Culture

of “training” – skills that are directly and immediately transferable into the workplace – and “education” – a broader and deeper way of thinking that allows for continued learning as the worker continually renews their skills and knowledge base. By combining rigorous social science training with a toolbox for the analysis of the ever-changing interplay of politics and popular culture, MPPC offers this combination.

The MPPC will improve recruitment prospects through careful scheduling and the use of innovative teaching modalities. The above-referenced survey of UCONN political science majors and alumni shows an overwhelming preference for evening classes (6:30pm start time): these are preferred to daytime classes by 57% to 13%. Respondents desire instead a mix of purely in-person classes (29%) with those that combine in-person and online modes (44%). The MPPC will schedule in-person classes no earlier than 4pm and with 6:30pm as preferred start time. Several MPPC classes will be mixed-modality. DYSON and Jane GORDON, POLS graduate director, have met with staff from the registrar’s office to understand the full range of flexibility regarding scheduling options within Fall and Spring semesters.

The program will be high-profile, as the opportunities for linking its curriculum to attention-grabbing op-eds and events, as well as more traditional academic publications, is clear. DYSON publishes regular essays on politics and popular culture in venues such as The Monkey Cage (hosted by the Washington Post) and The Conversation. Statistics from The Conversation show that these pieces have been read by 154,129 people over the past four years. A single essay, on the 50th anniversary of Star Trek, was read by 51,319 people. The Washington Post, of course, offers a national, highly educated audience and substantial page views for every op-ed. By continuing to place PPC pieces in these venues, we will attract interest from applicants across the country. Thinking locally, we will continue to exploit the inherent public fascination with the interplay of politics and popular culture with public events that promote the program. These will be similar to the UConn Science Salon on “Science Fiction Meets Reality,” held on 9/17/2015 at the bar NIXS in downtown Hartford. This event attracted over 100 paying guests. Similarly, an event on “Star Trek at 50” at Simsbury Public Library on September 8th 2016 attracted a sizeable audience and led to follow-up requests for the creation of an academic program along the lines proposed herein.

Are there similar programs in Connecticut or elsewhere?

An online search reveals many classes at the undergraduate level on politics and popular culture, yet very few programs at the graduate level. 87 syllabi for undergraduate classes were recovered using the search term “politics and popular culture,” while only two MA programs were found – one in the United Kingdom and the other focused on popular culture without the political component. We read this as indicating that there is a large, untapped market of students with interest and familiarity with politics and popular culture, yet no venue in which to pursue further study.

1. MA Program one: World Politics and Popular Culture, University of Newcastle, UK. A recently created master’s degree that “examines the changing dynamics of contemporary international relations in the context of the politics of the forces shaping and being shaped by popular culture. It focuses on key theories, policies, and events in world politics, in relation to both traditional
and new media.” This is an exciting MA degree, and we are familiar with the interesting scholarship of its faculty members. We do not consider the program a rival, for several reasons: Geography – it is a UK program; Breadth of coverage – it is purely focused on international politics, whereas we treat politics domestically, comparatively, and internationally, in theory and practice; Depth of coursework: this MA offers just one dedicated politics and popular culture class; our proposed curriculum has more content at this intersection.

2. MA Program two: Popular Culture, Bowling Green State University. A well-established program. BGSU is the only institution in the nation with a department of popular culture. The UCONN MPPC program compares favorably, nonetheless. First, BGSU’s MA is in “popular culture” whereas our proposal more specifically targets “Politics and Popular Culture.” We thus offer more focused social science training to go with the mass culture referents. Second, while BGSU is a fine institution, UCONN is a top public research university. Our MA can be expected to carry more weight, and therefore we do not believe we would lose substantial applicants to the BGSU program.

What are the desired learning outcomes of the program?
As a career-enhancing master’s degree, MPPC offers skills in the following areas:

- Substantive knowledge of major trends in politics and popular culture.
- Quantitative and qualitative data analysis.
- The ability to identify, analyze, and deconstruct social narratives.
- A range of skills and tools for reading political and cultural texts.
- Multi-stage research skills from problem identification through presentation of findings.
- Competency in new technologies of knowledge creation and dissemination.

Program Description:
Our target audience are 4+1 and 2 in 1 students, as well as more "traditional" MA students. A sample four semester course sequence for the program:

- Fall One: POLS 5700 Proseminar in Politics and Popular Culture POLS 5600 Nature of Political Inquiry POLS 5615 Seminar in Qualitative Methods in Political Science
- Spring One: POLS 5710: Political Science Fiction POLS 5100 Proseminar in Political Theory POLS 5605: Seminar in Quantitative Methods in Political Science OR LCL 5020 Digital Humanities, Media Studies, and Multimodal Scholarship
- Fall Two: POLS 5300 Proseminar in International Relations POLS 5010 Film as Contemporary Political Theory POLS 5620 Master’s Project I Spring Two: POLS 5621 Master’s Project II Program Requirements:

The MA requires 30 credits. All MPPC students take the core “Proseminar in Politics and Popular Culture.” (3 credits.) All students will take at least one other POLS Prosem (3 credits). All students take the core POLS sequence: Nature of Political Inquiry, Qualitative OR Quantitative methods. (6 credits) All students take Master’s Project I and II (6 credits). MPPC students will then take the remaining credits from POLS classes with substantial PPC content. Preapproved classes (in addition to those listed

1 Or other core DHMS equivalent.
in the sample sequence above) are Political Science Fiction, Law and Popular Culture, Politics and Literature, Politics, Propaganda, and Cinema, Arts, Literature, and War, Political Theory and Popular Music, Heroes and Villains in American Politics. Students are encouraged to take at least one class with PPC content in a department other than POLS, with MA coordinator advice and consent.

**Proposed Graduate Catalog copy**

The MA in Politics and Popular Culture requires 30 credits. All MPPC students take the core “Proseminar in Politics and Popular Culture.” (5700) (3 credits.) All students will take at least one other POLS Prosem (5100, 5200, 5300, 5400) (3 credits). All students take the core POLS sequence: 5600, 5605 or 5615. (6 credits) All students take Master’s Project I (5620) and II (5621) (6 credits). MPPC students will then take the remaining credits from POLS classes with substantial PPC content. Preapproved classes are 5710, 5720, 5105, 5100^2 (Special Topics, repeatable with different content) 3426, 3822. Students are encouraged to take at least one class with PPC content in a department other than POLS, with MA coordinator advice and consent.

**Faculty involvement**

- Prof. Stephen Dyson, Co-coordinator
- Prof. Jeff Dudas, Co-coordinator
- Prof. Alex Anievas
- Prof. Fred Lee
- Prof. Michael Morrell
- Prof. Jennifer Sterling-Folker
- Prof. Christine Sylvester

**Enrollment & Graduation Projections**

This program is one of two new MA proposals from POLS (the other is in Race and Ethnic Politics, and the proposals are being submitted simultaneously.) Across both programs, we envision early years cohorts of about 10 MA students. We are thinking of cohorts comprising 4+1 students (5th year MAs), 2 in 1 students (students who earn a BA in 3 years and an MA in their 4th) and more traditional MA students entirely new to UCONN.

**Program evaluation**

Assessment of students would be based on their ten course grades, and assessment of their Master's project portfolio. Program assessment would be based on placement writ large and in-job promotion of program graduates. We would collect information on their whereabouts 6 months, 1 year, and 3 years after their graduation, relying heavily on major advisors to help the DGS and MA program director facilitate this communication.

**Program administration**

^2 Or other core DHMS equivalent.
Administration will be the responsibility of the PPC MA program directors, with support from Christine Lounsbury, the Graduate Coordinator in Political Science and the Director of Graduate Studies. Staffing for all courses is provided by faculty in departments. The POLS Graduate Affairs Committee will read admissions files and determine who is admitted. The logistics of preparing files and corresponding with interested and accepted students will be handled by the POLS Graduate Coordinator, Christine Lounsbury, with the assistance of the department’s Director of Graduate Studies.

**Funding and financial resources needed**

As this is an entrepreneurial MA program, the department of political science will receive a proportion of tuition and fees from enrolled students. Once established, therefore, the program will be self-sustaining in financial terms.

**Other resource needs**

No additional or unique resources are necessary for program success.

**Consultation with other potentially affected units**

The program was approved last year by Interim CLAS Dean Davita Silfen Glasberg. The program proposal, as well as course proposals for its constituent aspects, were scrutinized and passed by the CLAS C&C committee. As part of this process, we consulted with potentially affected departments, in particular Languages, Cultures, and Literatures, Communications and English. We also had several meetings with Anke Finker with regard to the Digital Humanities and Media Studies Program. We see great potential to have students in this program and PPC cross-enroll in classes to broaden their skill sets.

**Admissions requirements**

Applicants would be required to submit (1) an official transcript, demonstrating a GPA of 3.5 or higher in courses relevant to the MA (2) two letters of recommendation that speak specifically to the applicant’s research potential and interest in/commitment to PPC, (3) a personal statement outlining the applicant’s aims for seeking admission in the program, and (4) a writing sample. Potential applications would be urged to meet with the MA Program Director to assure that their interests can be well met by the program. Students would not be required to take the GRE.