



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
**OFFICE OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

October 9, 2019

Middle Eastern Studies Association  
3542 N. Geronimo Avenue  
Tucson, AZ 85705

Dear Members of the Association and Affiliated Organizations:

The U.S. Department of Education (Department) is in receipt of your letter dated September 25, 2019, regarding the National Resource Center (NRC) grant to the Duke University-University of North Carolina Consortium for Middle East Studies (Consortium). The Department greatly appreciates the work your organization has done to educate thousands of students with expressed interest in language acquisition, foreign cultures, business practices, and governmental structures.

As you note, when passing Title VI of the Higher Education Act, Congress expressly recognized the important work of colleges and universities in advancing our national security and economic prosperity. To those ends, Congress has charged the Department with administering a grant program under Title VI to support American higher education in the preparation of fluent speakers of foreign languages. With that statutory responsibility comes the legal obligation for the Department to administer the Title VI program in accordance with requirements imposed by Congress and to conduct oversight of that program to ensure that recipients use grant funds as Congress envisioned. In the case of Title VI funds, the Department must ensure that recipients use the funds to develop programs that increase the number of foreign language speakers (and their level of fluency) and to design area studies instruction to support and expand foreign language acquisition with balanced perspectives. In exercising this responsibility, the Department must look beyond course and program titles to ascertain whether recipients have fulfilled the statutory objectives established by Congress.

You assert that our letter “constitutes an unprecedented and counterproductive intervention into academic curricula and programming that threatens the integrity and autonomy of our country’s institutions of higher education.” The Department respectfully disagrees. As a general rule, the Department has not, is not, and will not dictate the content of courses, programs, and curriculum standards. However, activities at NRCs supported by Title VI funds must adhere to legislative

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*The Department of Education's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.*

requirements and fulfill the purpose of Title VI, which includes the presentation of diverse perspectives to students.

The Department has a clear oversight obligation concerning the use of Federal funds where, as here, Congress has created a program, established its legal requirements, and directed the Department to administer and obligate grant funds in accordance with those requirements. In this case, Congress requires each National Resource Center to ensure that “activities funded by the grant will reflect diverse perspectives and a wide range of views and generate debate on world regions and international affairs.” 20 U.S.C. § 1122. The Department’s duty is to provide sound fiscal stewardship of taxpayer funds in order to assure the Congress, taxpayers, and students that the funds are being used in accordance with the intended purpose. *See generally Gebser v. Lago Vista Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 524 U.S. 274, 286 (1998); *U.S. v. Miami University*, 91 F. Supp 2d 1132, 1142-44 (S.D. Ohio 2000).

Faculty are free to teach whatever they choose, but federally supported, taxpayer financed NRCs must offer courses, programs, or activities that serve the statutory purposes established by Congress. To that end, we are simply encouraging the Consortium to offer more perspectives, not fewer, in accordance with the law. In that regard, our request was never to reduce the focus on Islam and its unassailable importance in the region. Rather, our letter made clear that the Consortium must expand its offerings to include, in addition to Islamic studies, the study of other religions that are practiced by significant numbers of people in the region.

Your charge that our purpose is to “...significantly narrow the scope of Title VI activities [and]... to micromanage them” is inaccurate, unwarranted, and unfounded. Congress has expressly defined the scope of the program in statute, and the duty of the Department is to ensure that NRCs like the Duke Consortium disburse grant funds as directed by Congress in Title VI. The Department appreciates that the acquisition of foreign languages may incorporate elements of culture, customs, and traditions relevant to understanding the use of language and the ways in which people communicate within a region. The Department does not dispute that film may serve as an important vehicle for learning about the cultural context of a region, but it is unclear to us how entire courses focused on cinematography and film studies advance the statutory purpose of Title VI. According to the Consortium’s Annual Progress Reports, such courses and programs appear to dominate its work.

Title VI funds cannot serve as a financing vehicle for political, religious, or ideological advocacy, elevating certain religions or ideological points of view over another. Although the Consortium claims that it gave equal attention and fair treatment to diverse perspectives in the region, its Annual Progress Reports do not support that conclusion. Accordingly, our letter to the Consortium emphasized the need for diverse perspectives to ensure program compliance with statutory requirements. Federal grants are not blank checks from public coffers, and the

Department intends to ensure that taxpayer funds are spent in alignment with Congressional directives.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Robert L. King", with a long, sweeping flourish extending downwards and to the right.

Robert L. King  
Assistant Secretary