PRINCETON GLOBAL COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH FUND

Project: ESTABLISH THE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FOR COMPARATIVE HUMANITIES (INCH)

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OVERVIEW:

We request support to create the International Network for Comparative Humanities, conceived as an international consortium that would provide Princeton faculty and graduate students a genuinely collaborative and interdisciplinary environment in which to pursue research. We will initially draw on faculty and students from English and Comparative Literature, since these departments have no established international ties with other institutions. It is one of the oddities of our current situation that Comparative Literature and English, departments rich in faculty and students
whose work is international and interdisciplinary—comparative in the broadest and yet most meaningful sense—lack any regular, much less sustained contact with their counterparts overseas. History and Art and Architecture have prospered in exciting and transformative ways because of their affiliation with Oxford. INCH is designed to effect a similar transformation in the way literature is studied at Princeton.

INCH would provide the institutional home for faculty and students eager to learn from, and work with, scholars drawn from across Europe, indeed from around the world. It would connect Princeton faculty and students to the active research communities that, despite the financial woes of the European Union, continue to thrive as centers of innovative research. The Centro de Estudos Comparatistas at the University of Lisbon, which already collaborates with Hermes, a comparative network with a distinguished reputation and an international presence, has offered to sponsor a workshop. Our affiliation with the Centro will open up lines of communication and interchange previously unavailable to us. We anticipate similar benefits to accrue from our collaboration with Patrizia Lombardo, who is affiliated with the NCCR (National Center for Competence in Research) in Affective Sciences at the University of Geneva, and with Florian Mussgnug, of University College London. We also have a letter of commitment from Notre Dame, who are eager to work with us in internationalizing the outlook and activities of our Humanities faculty and has offered us the use of their campus in Rome for our gatherings.

One absolutely unique feature of our proposal is that it builds on the existing strong professional and personal ties fostered by Synapsis, a school in comparative studies committed to the study of literature, the arts, cinema and theatre in an international and interdisciplinary context. Synapsis was founded on the principle that teaching and research are ideally indissociable, rather than separate intellectual endeavours. The success of the School has proved the viability as well as attractiveness of such a conception of academic interchange.

We are excited to partner with Synapsis because of its success in developing a model of dialogue and debate that exposes students to the international dimension of research and to the various approaches and methods guiding the most sophisticated interdisciplinary investigations. At Synapsis, these investigations have involved writers, movie directors and scientists along with scholars in the humanities. In the decade since its founding, Synapsis has succeeded in creating an intellectually vibrant community of scholars, artists and scientists that is now ready to go “global.” It is to Princeton’s advantage to lead Synapsis in transforming that community into a global network.

We thus believe that INCH represents a unique academic and intellectual venture, one that has the potential of transforming the way international research networks in the humanities are established and how they might function:

1. INCH will be a research network that puts teaching at the center, not at the periphery of its institutional activities. It will provide opportunities not just for established scholars but also for graduate students to pursue their research in an international context. Princeton graduate students, especially those specializing in literature, will be able to collaborate with their counterparts in overseas centers of
learning that represent somewhat different scholarly traditions, research agendas and cultural history. Such contacts cannot help but expand and enrich the intellectual horizon of students exposed to them.

2. INCH will thus provide a new model for “networking” in the humanities, one that stresses the importance of collaboration across generational as well as national and institutional boundaries.

3. By incorporating the Synapsis summer school into the network’s activities, INCH will provide scholars and graduate students with rare, arguably unique opportunities for more intense interchanges over extended periods of time. INCH will offer its participants more than weekend workshops or one-day colloquia, which, valuable as these can be, are different in kind from the experience of spending a week together both inside and outside the seminar room and lecture hall. Proof of this assertion is offered below, in the testimony offered by Princeton graduate students who attended Synapsis this last fall, an experience that proved transformative for each one of them.

NETWORK FOCUS

For the three-year period of the grant, INCH will dedicate itself to the theme of the Emotions, a subject that will be explored in different context each year. For example, the launch year will be devoted to continued research on the Passions (political, social, ideological, religious, vocational as well as erotic), the subject of this past year’s successful summer session. Future years might be devoted to the Social Emotions (love, hate, compassion, guilt, altruism, etc.) or to the theme of Desires.

The themes for subsequent years will be chosen to reflect the continuing concerns of the INCH community, themselves reflections of current academic and intellectual debates. The character, role and value of emotions—in literature and other forms of artistic expression, as a factor in political life, as a horizon of groundbreaking research in the neurosciences—is currently an exciting, if vexed and often controversial subject of study in both the sciences and humanities. The rise of so-called “affective” studies attests a renewed fascination with human behavior and the literature that purports to represent and explain it. Indeed, several disciplines are undergoing what can be called the affective turn, a development most strikingly represented by new inquiries into the somatic as well as ethical nature of literary and artistic phenomena. In revisiting questions that date back to Aristotle and that were the focus of the aesthetic and cultural debates of the eighteenth century, these inquiries are shattering the structuralist, poststructuralist, deconstructionist, and postmodern accounts of language, of the subject, of human feelings and capacities.

This is precisely the kind of inquiry that invites and indeed validates the comparative, interdisciplinary exchanges that occur at the Synapsis Summer School and which INCH will be uniquely suited to provide.
PROGRAM PLAN

Our proposal encompasses two major initiatives: first, to establish new ties to important European research centers, specifically the Centro de Estudos Comparatistas, Lisbon, the UCL Centre for Intercultural Studies (CIS), and, as mentioned above, Notre Dame’s overseas campuses in Dublin, London and Rome, and, second, to formalize institutional links between Synapsis and Princeton. To launch INCH, we plan to initiate a series of workshops involving our Core Faculty, at least one of which will be held at Princeton, the other on the campuses of our international partners. We have already secured a commitment from Professor Helena Buescu, who runs the Centro de Estudos Comparatistas at the University of Lisbon, to host a workshop during our launch year. We have also received strong expressions of interest in hosting future workshops from Florian Mussgnug, who can offer us the institutional hospitality of the UCL Centre for Intercultural Studies (CIS), and from Barry McCrea, a Princeton graduate who went on to Yale University and was recently appointed Keough Family College Chair at Notre Dame. Among his new responsibilities is developing Notre Dame’s international programs in the Humanities, especially in its new Humanities Center in Rome which is opening next fall. In this capacity, Barry has secured a letter of enthusiastic support from Notre Dame’s English department, which shares our commitment to forging international links for its Humanities faculty and students. Notre Dame has offered the facilities at their overseas branch campuses in Dublin, London and Rome as venues for the workshops envisioned as integral to the work of INCH.

The purpose of these workshops would be twofold:

1) to present work in progress and further individual research by members of the faculty and the students working under them

2) to plan future research initiatives and plan the program for the Synapsis Summer School scheduled for the second year of the grant;

These workshops will allow participating members of INCH to include younger colleagues developing new research projects and, equally important, to draw together senior scholars and graduate and postdoctoral students at the beginning of their professional lives. Once INCH is fully established, we hope to institute a graduate seminar to be held, at least initially, at Princeton. This seminar will build on the work begun at the workshops or at Synapsis and will be also be open to those students who were unable, because of other professional or personal commitments, to attend.

We also hope to experiment with the formats of each workshop. For example, one workshop would be devoted to specific texts. This format has proven to be quite effective in generating genuine interdisciplinary dialogue, since there is a common object that solicits different interpretations and makes evident diverse methodological and disciplinary approaches to the same issue—the essence, in other words, of what comparative studies aims to encourage and achieve.
Our second major initiative is to commit to a three-year affiliation with the University of Siena, under whose aegis the Synapsis School for Comparative Studies is held. We have already secured their agreement to collaborate with us if our proposal is funded. Under this agreement, the Synapsis Summer School would be held biannually; this would be our main opportunity to foster longer and more intense contact with our colleagues at other institutions. We will retain the format of the School, which is organized as follows: Once a year, traditionally in the early fall, Synapsis will convene a group of scholars and students for a week. The program will consist of 10 morning lectures (largely in English), 6 or 7 afternoon seminars (held in English, Italian, French, German and Spanish) where small groups of students (about 10 each seminar) are provided with individual tutorial. Students will also be given a chance to participate in a theater workshop—one of the most popular as well as artistically successful features of the program—and attend film screenings, followed by discussion and debate, in the evening.

Under the terms of our partnership, the weeklong School would be held at the medieval Charter-House of Pontignano (University of Siena: www.pontignano.unisi.it). The residential quarters and technical facilities at Pontignano are ideal for Synapsis and the staff is familiar with the special character and requirements of the Program. Holding it in Pontignano will ensure that the launch years of partnership go smoothly, allowing us to concentrate on planning for the next and crucial phase of consolidating the contacts and research initiatives begun in the school into an active and sustained network. Equally important, Pontignano physically ensures that faculty and students share meals, spend time together outside the classroom and get to know each other in an atmosphere that has proven to be conducive to open, frank and productive exchanges.

Our hope and intention is to establish the institutional foundations for what promises to become a preeminent research consortium in the humanities. INCH will ensure that Princeton faculty and students, especially those in English and in single language departments who are seldom given opportunities to teach and collaborate with scholars in other fields, can become part of a unique research and teaching community of international scope.

**THE SYNAPSIS CONNECTION**

Princeton is by any measure already a “natural” partner in the Synapsis educational and research mission, given our strong tradition in comparative studies and the depth of our intellectual commitment to the humanities. Moreover, the didactic philosophy of Synapsis, which encourages faculty-student interchanges both in the more formal setting of the lecture hall and seminar room and in the informal conversations that invariably occur during communal meals and leisure time, is very much in keeping with the collegiate model that prevails at Princeton, which stresses the importance of students and teachers feeling part of an intellectual community that extends beyond the classroom. It is this sense of community that we wish to expand and deepen into a
genuinely international research network of enduring and substantive intellectual relationships. We are invoking the concept of a network here to designate not just the formal structure of our association, but also the personal as well as institutional links (or synapses, as the school’s name is meant to convey) that has made this School so exemplary and, in fact, as popular and successful as it is.

Our hopes in creating a global network that brings together faculty and students in productive and exciting ways is, we believe, well founded. The originality and international scope of the Synapsis experience has helped many participants to obtain permanent positions in European and American academic institutions. Princeton has already benefited from this unique educational opportunity. Brooke Holmes, presently associate professor in the Classics department, attended Synapsis during its first years, as did Barry McCrea, who now will assume a central and pivotal leadership role in INCH. Recent Princeton students who have attended include Masha Mimran, now at Barnard, Ana Navas, who has just begun a new job at the University of North Carolina, and Jacqueline Shin, who just took up a position at Towson University.

Princeton thus already has a de facto relation with Synapsis, one that has unquestionably benefited the graduate students who have attended. But let the students speak for themselves. Here is what graduate students who attended last fall had to say about their experience and their hopes that they might continue to work with the people and on the subjects they encountered there:

Amelia Worsley, English

The name 'Synapsis', referring to the fusion that occurs at the start of a process, is well chosen, since the process of learning and connecting continues well after the conference has ended. The unusual seminar format in which a semester long number of classes are condensed into one week allows students to spend protracted time with a scholar from another university (in my case, the renowned critic Gillian Beer): due to this commitment, professional relationships can be built that are simply not possible in other conference environments. The conference also offers the chance of a publication: I plan to work with Prof. Beer to ready an essay on Winnicot for publication in the book that will be published next year. I am astonished and also very grateful that the professors who teach for Synapsis offer up their time to continue working with us in this way.

Moreover, I have never experienced anything like the diversity of the community of scholars that Synapsis brings together. The conference brings together students and faculty from all over the world, with a rich mosaic of interests. We had frequent opportunities to compare the methodologies of different traditions of literary study: the differences were more stark than I had previously understood--so that different theoretical approaches were constantly under debate. One of my favorite things about Synapsis is that the exposure to learning is open and continuous; faculty and students not only have seminar and attend several lectures per day together; they also listen to concerts, watch films, walk in the countryside, eat meals and even make
plays together. This last detail gives a sense of the rarefied sense of enthusiasm that the conference creates.

Maayan Dauber, English

My time at Synapsis in September 2012 was exciting, engaging, and most importantly, academically enriching. Over the course of just a week, I read and studied eight novels with one of the most respected scholars in my field; I attended over ten lectures on a wide range of topics, delivered by a diverse group of academics; And I met students from all over the world, whose experiences both resembled and differed so much from my own. I made lifelong colleagues and friends at Synapsis, and my academic life feels forever broadened. I would return again and again.

Robert Barton, Comparative Literature

Synapsis is unique in its evasion of the categories we are used to using to describe our work - it was neither exactly a conference, a seminar, nor a symposium. In part this was due to the variety of degree programs represented by the international students in attendance. The ground at Synapsis was quickly leveled and the participants, students and professors, recognized each other as rigorous scholars whose great variety in their approaches to the question of the "Passions" was strength rather than an impediment. That the program only lasted a week continues to astonish me, because the relationships that I formed still seem as strong as some that I undertake to maintain every day here in the States. We were not networking, we were working.

None of this is to say that Synapsis was only valuable as a kind of retreat from the tough, professionalized world of academia. I plan to deepen my friendships with the many students I met who are studying at the University of Toronto when I travel to that campus in April for the annual American Comparative Literature Association conference, and to travel to Cambridge this summer to reconnect with several European students who will be at Harvard for the World Literature symposium taking place there. Beyond that I hope to submit a paper based on the discussions we had in our seminar on Willa Cather's A Lost Lady to be considered for inclusion in the event's published proceedings.

Regardless of our ambitions, however, what connects me to the people (from Princeton and elsewhere) that I met at Synapsis is a shared belief in the power and utility of the intellectual curiosity we share, our passion, that was allowed a strange and rare opportunity for free play even as it was restricted to the grounds of a monastery and olive grove outside Siena. I would be greatly disappointed to learn that such an opportunity might soon not be available for others.

SUMMARY OF INSTITUTIONAL BENEFITS:

The students who attended Synapsis put the case most eloquently: The International Network for Comparative Humanities would ensure that
1. the “shared belief in the power and utility of intellectual curiosity” uniting students and teachers at the *Synapsis* School would continue beyond the term of their first meeting.

2. the “diversity of the community of scholars” that most of our students and many of our faculty have never had the chance to experience will now become a regular feature of their time at Princeton.

3. students inspired and energized by what was a one-time opportunity to work with faculty from overseas will now be able to attend workshops at esteemed centers of international research and to continue to meet with faculty who can mentor them.

4. Institutional means exist to preserve and deepen the relationships among students as well as among faculties from different institutions.

We see this as an opportunity to enrich and indeed multiply the opportunities for our colleagues and students in the languages and literatures departments to participate in the genuinely international, interdisciplinary and comparative encounters. The departmental structure of university governance can discourage, when it does not outright impede, sustained interdisciplinary and international projects that involve more than a few people and that are extended over time. Moreover, INCH’S emphasis on the *continuity* of discussions and relationships among teachers and students outside of the formal precincts of the lecture hall or seminar room differentiates it from most existing models of international collaborative organizations in the humanities, and offers a model of intellectual interaction that will help create strong and lasting bonds of scholarly as well as personal affinity. We in fact hope that INCH will set the standard for such global partnerships, that it will eventually become a model for how research and graduate mentoring can be integrated and as such a bellwether for the future of the humanities at Princeton and within the international community INCH hopes to create and sustain.