



**Middle
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Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

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25 September 2019

Robert L. King
Assistant Secretary for the Office of Postsecondary Education
U.S. Department of Education
Attn: Patrick Shaheen
U.S. Department of Education, Office of the General Counsel
400 Maryland Ave. SW, room 6E300
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Dear Mr. King,

We, the official representatives of the undersigned American academic associations, read your letter of 29 August 2019, addressed to Dr. Terry Magnuson, Vice-Chancellor for Research at the University of North Carolina and subsequently published in the Federal Register, with considerable concern and surprise. The allegation contained in that letter that “most” of the activities of the Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies, a Title VI National Resource Center, are “unauthorized” under Title VI funding, appears to be based on a fundamental misunderstanding of how expertise in foreign languages, cultural competencies, and area and international knowledge in general is obtained. The letter also 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.

Title VI of the Higher Education Act recognized that “the security, stability and economic vitality of the United States” depended upon “American experts in and citizens knowledgeable about world regions, foreign languages, and international affairs...” and that the best way to meet this need was to support centers, programs, and fellowships in institutions of higher education that could teach modern languages and offer instruction “in fields needed to provide full understanding of areas, regions, or countries in which such language is commonly used” (20 U.S.C. 1122 (a) 1 (B)). Title VI grants are made through a highly competitive process to academic institutions that have demonstrated that they have the faculty and the administrators to design and run courses and programs to meet the stated goals of Title VI grants, namely to teach students the languages as well as the political, historical, and cultural knowledge they need for this full understanding. NRC Centers are staffed by top specialists who have spent many years learning, researching, and teaching about their respective regions. They have a well-honed grasp of how to design courses and activities that impart their regional expertise to others. Your letter, in tone and content, suggests an intention not only to significantly narrow the scope of Title VI activities, but also to micromanage them. It is unclear why these changes are being demanded and which experts, if any, in the field of international studies have been consulted.

International studies in the United States is a real success story: Title VI centers have provided this country with several generations of regional experts and have led the way in regional studies nationally and globally. The education and training provided by academic programs supported by Title VI have consistently linked language

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training to international education in a range of disciplines that enable students to attain the depth and breadth of knowledge they need to become regional experts. These experts have gone on to use their skills and knowledge in a variety of sectors — government, private, academic and non-profit — fully in accord with the goals of Title VI to meet national needs for regional expertise across the board. We are very concerned that the approach outlined in your letter, tying funding to considerations that have little to do with developing and supporting area studies of the highest quality, will undermine the mission of Title VI, and set back the cause of international studies in this country.

Respectfully yours,

African Studies Association
American Academy of Religion
American Anthropological Association
American Historical Association
American Sociological Association
American Studies Association
Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies
Central Eurasian Studies Society
The Joint National Committee for Languages
Latin American Studies Association
Middle East Studies Association
Modern Language Association
National Communication Association
The National Council for Languages and International Studies
The Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study
Society of Architectural Historians
The Society of Biblical Literature
World History Association