The Committee for the Future of the Humanities
June 20, 2006

Committee Members:
John Gager, Princeton University (Chair)
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The Committee for the Future of the Humanities was appointed by President
Menachem Magidor to consider a wide range of issues relating to the future of the
Humanities at the Hebrew University. In particular, the Committee was asked to identify
fields of strength or weakness within the Faculty of Humanities and to suggest ways to
further develop and correct them. We sought to examine both undergraduate and
graduate studies and to suggest ways to achieve and maintain high-level, inspiring
teaching, and to envisage various structural possibilities that may foster high quality
research in the Humanities and encourage cooperation between scholars. On three
separate visits to the University, committee members met with many members of the
faculty, administration and student body, and the ideas, concerns and suggestions that
emerged in these meetings largely shaped the recommendations that follow.

It is the strong belief of the committee that the members of the faculty of
Humanities at the Hebrew University rank among the leading scholars of the world. It is,
however, clear that there are specific areas of the Faculty of Humanities that require
attention and improvement, particularly in light of the ongoing reduction in the number of
faculty positions and the prospect of numerous retirements. We propose significant
changes in a number of areas. Only full co-operation on all sides will make this possible,
but we believe that the work of our Committee has already sparked new conversations on
a wide range of issues.

It is the conclusion of the Committee that the Hebrew University must pay special
attention to three general areas as it makes new hires in the faculty: the contemporary
world in all geographical areas (without at the same time losing the traditional emphasis
on earlier or classical periods); the study of gender in all areas; and Israeli culture and
society, including social, ethnic and religious groups of all kinds. The Committee also
recommends that the following specific areas currently under threat be strengthened and
maintained: Yiddish, American Studies, the teaching of modern Arabic and more
teaching of courses in Arabic, Russian language and literature, and folklore, theater and
musicology. At the national level, the Committee believes that certain fields of study,
such as African studies, Romance languages and literature, and ancient Semitic epigraphy are in danger of disappearing altogether and their survival depends on the development of serious cooperation among Israeli universities at the national level. The Committee holds the view that at this crucial stage in the development of the Faculty, there must be a strategic plan that will serve as the basis for making new appointments. It is our view that the set of priorities listed above might serve as the basis for such a strategic plan.

The Committee has given careful consideration to what we take to be weaknesses in the current BA curriculum. Specifically, we have attempted to address the widely held perception that many students arrive at the University with deficiencies in writing modern Hebrew and the equally prevalent opinion that many students lack a solid grasp on reading and writing in English. We have also sought to provide students with the currently lacking foundation in basic academic disciplines, while keeping in mind that most students arrive at the University after military and other forms of service and have consequently been separated from the classroom and from the culture of academic and intellectual skills. With these factors in mind, the Committee has proposed changes in the BA curriculum, beginning with required courses for first year students in English reading and writing AND in Hebrew writing. We also recommend that students will no longer be required to choose two majors fields of study in order to qualify for the BA. In effect, students will major in (1) a Department or in (2) a Department and a Program or in (3) two Departments.

The Committee has approached the delicate issue of how the existing structure of academic departments might be modified and simplified. It is the view of the Committee that the current structure of departments and programs is no longer appropriate to the proper functioning of a major university, and some departments are too small to maintain an adequate level of academic and intellectual strength. In its own deliberations, the Committee has approached the issue of reorganization from the perspective of the BA curriculum. We propose the creation of four divisions within the Faculty of Humanities: Languages and Literatures, History, Arts and Expressive Culture, and Modes of Thought, with specific departments each being part of one of these Divisions. In addition to the departments, students may also concentrate in one of several Programs, which will be interdisciplinary in character and as complementary to the Departments, though working in close cooperation with them. Each of the four major divisions will be required to develop one or more team-taught gateway courses for first-year students. The teaching of the new BA first year will require a cultural change in much of the over-specialized approach to teaching among the faculty who will need to implement it. But it is the belief of the committee that a principal goal of the Hebrew University is the education of citizens, not merely specialists. More than in the past, many first-year students will be exploring their options rather than plunging into a ‘major’ at the very beginning. Thus, advising by faculty members will be essential in this new model and the administration of the University will need to provide resources so that faculty will be well trained and willing to undertake this important task.

The Committee has dedicated much thought to the graduate programs of the Faculty. We have found that the MA programs were of unequal quality, and serious attention needs to be directed at elevating their quality and articulating their goals. We have also recommended that all MA programs offer a first-semester methodological seminar every year. With regard to both MA and PhD programs, the Committee strongly
recommends that admissions standards and procedures should be a matter of Departmental concern and authority. In more general terms, graduate students should be seen as working in a department, not just with a single member of the Faculty. The Committee also strongly supports a program whereby outstanding BA students can be identified and granted generous stipends at the MA level. The Committee is also concerned about the low level of funding for all graduate programs.

We have also made some recommendations for improving the physical plant of the Faculty, including renovating offices to make them more inhabitable for faculty members, and updating classrooms into “smart classrooms.” We have also proposed that every department and program prepare an up-to-date website in English and Hebrew. Finally, we have addressed some concerns about the library and future role of the library and its staff as an instructional unit of the university. Personnel must have first-hand experience with the processes of research and writing in order to properly guide students in these areas.