



Council for Christian Colleges and Universities

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# MIDDLE EAST STUDIES PROGRAM

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Jerusalem, Israel

## OCTOBER 2011 EVALUATION STUDENT ACADEMIC PROGRAMS COMMISSION



*October 24-29, 2011*

### *SAPC Commission Members*

**Dr. Brock Schroeder**  
VP for Enrollment  
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**Dr. Kathleen Storm**  
VP for Student Life/Dean of Students  
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**Mr. Ken Gilson**  
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**Dr. Robert Herron**  
Senior VP for Academic Affairs;  
Dean of Trinity College  
Trinity International University (IL)

**Dr. Mark Sargent**  
Provost  
Gordon College (MA)

The Middle East Studies Program (MESP) hosted the Student Academic Programs Commission (SAPC) and prepared for this evaluation during a volatile and transitional moment. The review had been originally scheduled for the spring of 2011 in Cairo, but the revolution in Egypt that began last January led to the removal of the students to Turkey and Israel for the semester. Since the civil unrest continued in Egypt, the CCCU decided to relocate the main site of MESP to Jerusalem for the 2011-12 academic year. This fall, MESP includes a trip to Turkey for approximately three weeks and a few days in Egypt. SAPC arrived near the end of the students' lengthy stay in Jerusalem, and left just about a week before their departure for Turkey.

Three CCCU staff members were in Jerusalem during the review. Dr. Paul Corts, president of the CCCU, was present during the first two days; Dr. Ken Bussema, vice president for student programs, and Deborah Kim, director for student programs, remained for the full assessment. The members of our evaluation team were:

**Dr. Robert Herron**

Senior VP for Academic Affairs, Trinity International University (IL)

**Dr. Brock Schroeder**

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## **PROGRAM MISSION, HISTORY, AND TRANSITION**

### ***Mission and Leadership***

The stated mission of MESP is to transform "the spiritual and intellectual life of students by connecting them with people, experiences and ideas that inspire, challenge and unsettle. . . . MESP seeks to anchor such transformations within the context of Christian faith, doctrine and practice." In its vision statement, MESP also expresses the goal of changing students' lives by "using the people and cultures of the Middle East as a mirror," enabling students to "see themselves more clearly and honestly" as "individuals, people of faith and citizens." Elsewhere in MESP's self-study its "basic core mission" is described as an endeavor "to develop a knowledge and appreciation for the peoples and cultures of the Middle East."

Until the move to Jerusalem, MESP was based in Agouza, a lower-middle-class neighborhood of Cairo across from Geriza Island in the Nile. At present, the main home of the program is the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, a short walk from the security wall that divides Jerusalem from Bethlehem and the West Bank. David Holt (Ph.D. in comparative politics from the University of Chicago) has been the director since 2002, having served previously on the faculties of Seattle Pacific and Whitworth Universities. MESP has been substantially enriched by the work of Suzanne Hamid Holt (Ph.D., University of Tennessee), former director of the first-year programs at Lee University, who married David in 2007. The assistant director of MESP is Daa Nashed (M.D., M.B.A., Maastrich School of Management), an Egyptian citizen who graduated from Cairo University and served previously in the Egyptian Army. The program coordinator, Christine Royer (B.A., William and Mary), is a MESP alum, as are the two program assistants—Ben Peterson (B.A., Oklahoma Christian) and Lynn Sommerville (B.A., Gordon).

### ***Program Location***

The timing of our visit—with MESP in its new and transitional setting—gave our team a chance to reflect with the CCCU leadership and Dr. Holt about the future location of the program. On the one hand, we recognize the lure of returning to Cairo, where MESP has long had a successful home base. The location in Cairo was one of the principal attractions of the program. At the same time, there is no indication when the sectarian violence and the ongoing military rule in Egypt will end, so reestablishing the footing of the program in Cairo remains risky. In that light, SAPC strongly concurs with the current intention to remain in Jerusalem for the next chapter of the program (at least 3-4 years), until the political landscape of Egypt is more stable. Given the current instability in Cairo, we fear that MESP would lose credibility if it returned to Egypt only to encounter new violence prompting another evacuation.

### ***Transitional Challenges***

MESP has a strong tradition, with impressive alums doing significant work and service in the Middle East. In our view, it has long been one of the most vibrant of the Best Semester programs. However, the current moment allows little opportunity for MESP to rest on its laurels. There are significant challenges ahead, some of which may put the program at risk. First, MESP will need to shape and promote its Jerusalem chapter in a way that does not make that chapter appear like a second-tier option or merely a temporary holding pattern. After years of robust enrollments and strong applicant pools, MESP had been in a position to be more highly selective. However, with the shift to Israel this fall, the enrollment fell to 19 students and the spring roster looks slim, prompting legitimate concerns about recruitment for the coming years.

Part of the new problem for MESP may be that many Christian colleges already have strong ties to Israel, whereas the Cairo location had been relatively distinctive. Recasting MESP with its Jerusalem base will require a delicate balance. The program will need to be shaped and defined in a way that preserves the particular educational ethos of its long run in Egypt and clearly distinguishes itself from the many other Christian programs in Israel. At the same time, it will need to adapt to the new setting, take advantage of new opportunities provided by the location, and embrace the Jerusalem location with the vigor commensurate with its previous experience in Cairo.

In conducting this review, SAPC has been keenly conscious of these risks and challenges, as well as the program's transitional status. We recognize that many of the self-study materials, prepared for a spring review in Egypt, had to be hastily adapted for Jerusalem. We are grateful for the substantial effort by the staff, notably Christine Royer, to make this adjustment. Our remarks—which are organized into “commendations” and “recommendations”—are designed to signal to MESP, the CCCU staff, and our peers at CCCU institutions our esteem for many of the fine features of the program, even as we offer our perspectives on what is necessary for the program to flourish in its new location.

### ***Clarification on Patristics Track***

One immediate task for MESP is to distinguish its current objectives from some of the plans that preceded the relocation. Prior to the Egyptian revolution, MESP had announced plans for a separate track focused on Christian patristics and centered in Jerusalem. That track had a rather distinct focus and aim from that of MESP in Cairo. Since the full MESP has now moved to Jerusalem, there is considerable potential for CCCU institutions to be confused about whether the current Jerusalem program is now the Cairo program relocated or the new track implemented. Some of the confusion was even slightly evident in conversations during our visit. We recommend that the CCCU and the director clearly communicate that the proposed patristics track has been put on hold and that the current Jerusalem program represents the continuation, in a new site, of the long-term MESP set previously in Cairo.

## COMMENDATIONS

### ***1. The MESP leadership responded remarkably well to the turmoil in Cairo, and successfully relocated the program to Jerusalem.***

The spring 2011 revolution in Egypt took everyone by surprise, including the experts, especially with the swiftness of events. Even the U.S. Embassy was scrambling to get its staff out of the country. Dr. Holt and the MESP staff were able to book 33 seats on a plane to Turkey within 48 hours, and within two weeks had relocated to its current base in Jerusalem. The students were never in danger, and the experience of evacuation was itself an extraordinary learning experience.

Due to the director's foresight in cultivating relationships in anticipation of a possible return to Jerusalem, the current program is as full-orbed and mature as if it had been there for many years. There is an impressive cadre of speakers, a selection of service-learning options, and access to locations of historical and cultural interest beyond that available to tourists, and therefore much more suited to college-level instruction.

### ***2. The leadership team is strong and complementary.***

The entire team works well together, with appropriate empowerment and affirmation for each person. There appeared to be a genuine spirit of teamwork and mutual respect within the staff, and their skills are complementary. David Holt's visionary and teaching abilities are well balanced by Diaa Nashed's careful attention to planning logistics and his nuanced understanding of the Middle Eastern culture, while Suzanne Holt's experience shepherding students through international programs was clearly evident in the planning and support she provided. Relying on recent graduates of MESP as program coordinators and assistants has kept the leaders alert to the students' needs and experience. (This commendation comes with a concern, though, as the Jerusalem site will inevitably make it difficult for Diaa Nashed to continue to serve so many weeks away from his family, and the recent drop in numbers has led to Christine Royer's reassignment by the CCCU to Oxford for the spring.)

### ***3. Students affirm that the program encourages them to think critically about their faith and values.***

The MESP themes of self-understanding (evident in the mission statement's emphasis on "transforming the spiritual and intellectual life of students by connecting them with people, experiences and ideas that inspire, challenge, and unsettle") permeate the program. Students have picked up on MESP's focus on personal growth, recognizing it as a central priority. They describe experiences integrated into the program that help them accomplish that goal; for example, a personally challenging "faith boundaries" paper was described by one student as "the hardest paper I've ever written" and acknowledged by another to be "unlike anything else I've ever done."

In addition, students indicate that service experiences allow them to look differently at themselves through the lens of culture; they also describe the ethos of conversation and reflection that is created at MESP. All of these experiences help clarify and strengthen their insights, enhancing their sense that while this is a strong academic program its impact is larger than that; they are, in fact, being transformed here.

### ***4. The program relies on experiential education that is meaningful and relevant.***

Despite the short timetable after their departure from Cairo, the staff has very quickly developed a program of experiences that complement educational goals, including museum visits, cultural and arts experiences, and occasional contact with local families (e.g., Shabbat dinner). Students report work in settings that offers many positive features: some describe rich relationships that have grown out of service (opening the door to relationships outside of the work setting); others

describe work experience that is relevant to their professional goals; most describe service as a door to valuable language practice. In all, the experiential facet of education through MESP is rich and valuable, and promises only to get better with time.

***5. Coursework is coherent and effective.***

Overall, the coursework is well crafted and coherent. Course descriptions, syllabi, and other activities are specifically aligned with the program's mission and goals. In interviews with students, we were continually reassured about the vitality and quality of the students' learning experience, and many spoke quite energetically about papers that they were writing. We examined several examples of the students' written work; these were worthy assignments requiring good research and reasoning.

During the SAPC visit, we observed the Introduction to Arabic Language course. The instructor is quite skilled, and she engages all of the students in conversation, builds speaking and listening skills, and creates an earnest but comfortable atmosphere. Students had overwhelmingly positive feedback for the course and instructor.

Overall, the MESP staff seem quite alert to the texts and assignments that most effectively engage the students and, in the best sense, are constantly reassessing and refining their approaches.

***6. The program offers an impressive array of guest speakers.***

Due to the relationships that MESP has built from years of trips into Israel, the staff has been immediately able to recruit guest speakers for a semester set primarily in Jerusalem. The range of speakers provides diversity and energy, and the MESP faculty and staff effectively set the context for the speakers and topics of discussion. We were fortunate to hear a high-caliber presentation from a Jewish scholar about the various theological and political shades within modern Judaism.

***7. The program strives to provide balanced perspectives on the key political and cultural issues of the Middle East.***

From our observation, the director and staff are committed to acquainting students with a diverse panorama of viewpoints about the Middle East controversies, most notably the struggle over a Palestinian homeland. In selecting speakers and materials, MESP tries to assure balance. The director constantly seeks out new speakers who can speak to different dimensions of the political and religious issues. Service projects showed a similar balance. Some brought students into contact with Jewish victims of violence while others allowed them to work with Palestinian children in East Jerusalem who spoke openly about the limits on their freedom.

***8. There is a healthy sense of community among students.***

While community tension or detachment can detract from education, in the case of MESP the strong ties between students and sense of community are a great strength. Residential leadership is provided by warm and capable graduates of MESP, who bring the great advantage of having experienced the program themselves. The deep and supportive new relationships nurtured through the program further MESP's goal of transformation, offer opportunity for processing new learning, and promote personal maturity and faith development in powerful ways.

***9. The program makes a strong effort to align program goals and with learning outcomes and educational activities.***

The MESP self-report provides a thorough listing of program mission, goals, course goals, outcomes, and assessments. The efforts of the staff to compile, organize and align their curriculum along these lines are commendable. The various means of assessing students' work are intentionally aligned with the desired learning outcomes.

***10. The facilities are more than adequate for the program.***

Tantur Ecumenical Institute is a spiritual retreat center, with a spacious compound, 50 dormitory-style rooms with private baths, 10 family-style apartments, a chapel, several classrooms and meeting rooms, a dining hall, office space, computer center, and a library with 70,000 books and 400 journals. There is 24-hour security with camera monitoring of the entire facility and, if necessary, an underground shelter. Tantur accommodates the needs of the program and is very hospitable to the MESP students and staff.

***11. The student handbook and written instructions are thorough and helpful for adjustment to community and to new religious and cultural contexts.***

The MESP staff has developed extensive instructions for students to prepare them to live safely and effectively in the Middle East. Admittedly, much of the material reviewed was prepared for living in Cairo, but this is being adapted for this new setting. Meanwhile, the information provided students is exemplary; it not only includes clear instructions as to what is off-limits, but it also provides students with positive and practical instruction regarding how they may live with respect for each other and for this new culture. Guidelines are clear and take safety seriously, and appropriately so. All of the behavioral guidelines and instructions are thoughtful and direct, and seem clearly to have the students' best interests at heart.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

***1. Provide a fuller frame for the students' visits to historic and cultural sites.***

Israel/Palestine is extraordinarily rich in important historical and theological locations, many of them only a short trek from the Tantur site. On occasions when the students travel together to specific sites, the director and staff should consider ways to provide a substantive, though compact, orientation to what the students will see and experience. How can one help them appreciate the historical and religious contours of the place that they are visiting? How can one help them connect the biblical context—which many students know—to contemporary realities? What opportunities do they have to reflect together on what they have seen and experienced? We recommend more intentional framing of the experience in advance, even some short readings or night-before-travel remarks.

For instance, during our review, we travelled to Hebron with the students and staff to visit the "Tomb of the Patriarchs," and saw Abraham's grave both from inside a mosque and from inside the adjacent synagogue. Some orientation to the history of those dual vantage points—and perhaps some discussion of Genesis 25, where Isaac and Ishmael bury their father together—would have framed the visit for students in richer ways.

***2. Sustain MESP at Tantur for the time being.***

While circumstances could require MESP to relocate, we recommend that the program consider remaining at Tantur until such time as a move back to Cairo is obvious or until another Middle East location becomes more suitable. The students seem very satisfied with the accommodations. The bus stop is right outside the compound gate. Taxis readily respond to calls. Tantur appears to have the right mix of access to cultures, security, facilitation of study and contemplation, and affordability.

The facility is within driving or flying distance to many destinations of cultural and historical significance. The MESP leadership has cultivated the relationships and has access to the appropriate resources to give the students a world-class study abroad experience. **Given the modified goals of the program in moving to Jerusalem, Tantur seems well suited to the program's needs.**

### ***3. Strengthen the reflective component of the service-learning experience.***

Currently, students participate in a variety of community service opportunities. They value these experiences, both for work done and for relationships built. On the other hand, to maximize the learning dimension of service-*learning*—and specifically to enhance the rigor of this important educational experience—the program needs to close the loop more often between experience and personal reflection and analysis. Essays, journals, retreats, discussions may, for example, focus on the relevance of service to the students' emerging sense of vocation.

We heard from students that the urgent needs they witnessed in service sites raised significant questions for them regarding their own academic goals. These and other vocational questions can be helpfully addressed if opportunities for reflection and learning are more common and more consistent.

### ***4. Improve the Islamic Thought and Practice course, formerly strong in Egypt but less effective since the relocation.***

Upon interviewing faculty, staff and students, it became apparent that this course had been a source of frustration this semester. This was the first semester for the instructor, due to the move of the program to Israel. We recognize that the MESP faculty and staff are attending to the problems and are, at present, working on a solution, and we concur that a change in instructor will be needed to create a better learning environment for the students.

### ***5. Establish a home stay program for the Jerusalem setting.***

By all reports, the home stay week in Cairo was one of the most transformative elements of the MESP experience, and our interviews with faculty, staff, and students this term revealed that the lack of a home stay component in Jerusalem was impeding cultural immersion. We recommend that some form of a cultural and language immersion experience be developed, ideally allowing students either to stay in both Jewish and Arab homes or to mix regularly with Jewish and Arab peoples.

### ***6. Vary and enrich worship opportunities.***

This recommendation focuses on two issues. First, we'd suggest incorporating regular opportunities to worship with local citizens into the MESP program. Particularly in Jerusalem, with so many different religions represented, local worship can fulfill important educational as well as spiritual goals. For instance, students should not simply visit religious sites, but have a chance to witness the services of—and perhaps even worship with—Orthodox Christians or various strands of the Jewish community. And, with a focus on understanding the “conflict” between cultures and faith in Israel/Palestine, they should see something of the Islamic religious culture and experience firsthand.

Second, we have heard in other programs that when all worship is student-led, it sends a message to students that worship lacks relative importance. Some guidance in worship by faculty and staff, in whatever ways seem appropriate, may strengthen the program and communicate something important about the value of worship as a facet of community life.

### ***7. Assess the program's effectiveness and not simply the students' performances.***

While MESP has effectively crafted course assignments and projects to match program goals, the assessments are focused mostly on students' work rather than on the overall purposes and quality of the program. This plan should not only describe what the staff and faculty present to the students, but should collect data about what students have learned. Since MESP is committed to “transformation,” its assessment plan should include some longitudinal evaluations of students' development, including post-semester reflections and alumni surveys and evaluations.

***8. Define and express the DNA of MESP, especially now that it is located in Jerusalem.***

In conversations throughout our visit, it was apparent that the staff had a strong sense that there was a special DNA to the MESP program that shapes its identity and purpose, whether the program is housed in Cairo, Jerusalem or Turkey. However, that DNA seemed to us to be more implicit than explicit. That common ethos may give coherence to the program and unite the staff, but that ethos is not necessarily apparent to prospective students or the supporting colleges. With the move to Jerusalem, the leadership of MESP needs to take particular care to define and communicate this core spirit and set of values to external constituencies.

In one respect, this is indispensable marketing, especially after a transitional season when the enrollment has fallen. Prospective students and supporting colleges need to know what differentiates MESP from the numerous other educational programs in the Middle East. In another respect, this is a matter of moral vision. In our visit, we saw considerable potential for MESP in Jerusalem to distinguish itself as leading edge of Christian higher education. As compared to more traditional "tours" or "Holy Land pilgrimages," MESP has the opportunity to establish its students as sojourners in the heart of one of the world's most complex political and religious landscapes, and to nurture within the students the knowledge, inclinations, and foresight to become agents for remedy and renewal, drawing upon the wisdom of Christian thought and tradition. Expressing something of MESP's moral vision, as a leading edge for the CCCU, can be part of the vital DNA of the program.