HBS Prof. Robin Ely's Appraisal
of Peter Alan Smith

"Peter's thesis, based on a careful analysis of data gathered in interviews with over 50 local and foreign business people in three host countries--Dutch and Japanese businesspeople working in the Netherlands, Puerto Rican and Dutch businesspeople working in Puerto Rico, and American and British businesspeople working in New England--contributes importantly to our understanding of how cross-national cultural factors influence foreign nationals' effective use of trade associations to facilitate their business activities in host countries. His design—to focus on trade associations, which bring two different national business cultures together, in order to examine cross-cultural relations in business—is creative. The pay-off is a very interesting read that provides new insights into the way foreign nationals' own national business culture interacts with the national business culture of their host country to shape their approach to business and business relationships in the host country. Peter's initiative and effort in the data-gathering phase were no less than extraordinary. I suspect that Peter's friendly, easy-going manner combined with his clear intelligence were instrumental in helping him gain access to these organizations and their members, and in encouraging his respondents to provide clear and candid descriptions of their experiences and attitudes. Peter was also rigorous in his efforts to maintain his objectivity throughout the data collection process, and these efforts have clearly paid off in a thesis that rings true, in part, by virtue of its tight links to the experiences of his informants.

The quality of the data on which this thesis is based is paralleled in the quality of Peter's analysis. His careful and conscientious reading and coding of hundreds of pages of transcription, which he did himself, is truly astounding. The thesis reads as if the categories of his analysis simply fell out of the data, but this is only because the analysis is so clear and clearly presented. In fact, the categorical scheme and conclusions were the result of months and months of hard work, reading, rereading, discussing, and revising the set of ideas currently presented in the thesis.

The thesis is well-crafted, well-organized, and well-written (and in this respect is much better than many doctoral dissertations I've read).

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not also mention that Peter's accomplishments—outstanding by any standard—are all the more noteworthy because of his sight-impairment. Peter is legally blind. Although clearly a handicap in some logistical respects (making his data collection method, which involved extensive travel in foreign surroundings, all the more remarkable), I have often wondered whether Peter's sight-impairment may have enabled him to "see" connections in his data more clearly than might otherwise have been the case. Or perhaps I am simply trying to understand how a person with so little research experience (and, quite frankly, little guidance from me) could have made such clear sense of so large and unwieldy a dataset as these methods always produce.

For all of these reasons, I believe that Peter's thesis warrants attention as a candidate for a thesis prize.

FINAL LETTER GRADE: A