**Religious Studies**

**Assessment Report 2010**

**Step1: Department/Program Mission**

Religion has always been an important component in human history. In its many configurations religion has played a critical role in shaping diverse and distinctive forms of culture and has also been shaped by culture. The faculty members in Religious Studies seek to stimulate in students an appreciation of the spiritual teachings, ethical principles, myths, symbols and rituals of a variety of societies, believing that in them we encounter legitimate human attempts to envision the sacred and to live in the world as a spiritual arena. We have made this explicit in our first learning goal. Conscious of Albion's heritage as a college related to the United Methodist Church, we give special attention to the monotheistic traditions in the development of our Western culture and intellectual life. This focus is reflected in our program components, as three of the four distribution requirements for the major expose students to monotheistic traditions.

Contemporary society sometimes represents religion only as a set of subjective beliefs. Because of this misrepresentation, people may view themselves or others as fundamentalists or atheists without understanding the variety of spiritual expressions and their roles in society over the course of history. For this reason, the factual knowledge we aim to impart to our students (as summarized in our first learning goal) includes not only religious doctrines or beliefs, but also a variety of other phenomena essential to a more comprehensive understanding. While not required at Albion, we believe that the study of religion is central to the liberal arts experience as a means of gaining a broader understanding of the depth of one's own and others' religious beliefs and practices.

Since we are concerned with the academic study of religion, our department does not promote any particular, narrow "brand'' of theology or spirituality. We subscribe to the assertion made by Friedrich Max Muller who said, "Whoever knows only one religion, does not know religion.'' We encourage our students to explore religion using various modes of analysis, including historical-critical, philosophical and comparative approaches that keep the life of the mind and the life of the soul in creative tension. This approach is reflected in our second learning goal.

We also consider the cultivation of communication skills appropriate to our discipline an essential part of the student learning process in Religious Studies, hence our inclusion of the third learning goal below.

**Step 2: List goals/outcomes**

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Learning Goals

Students majoring in Religious Studies will be able…

1. To display basic knowledge of how the world’s major religious traditions emerge from and shape their historical and cultural contexts, as manifested by their oral and scriptural traditions, teachings, practices, and symbolic forms of expression.

2. To interpret these religious phenomena using various methodologies drawn from different disciplinary approaches to the study of religion, such as theological, textual, comparative, and historical analysis.

3. To speak and to write in short and long papers about the world’s religions.

**Step 3: Identify program components**

Required courses, elective courses, out-of-classroom or other experiences that are designed to achieve each educational objective. NOTE: Every class will not, nor is it expected to, achieve each outcome. The goal is to get an even distribution of experiences that achieve the outcomes.

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Requirements for Major

A minimum of eight units in religious studies, including Religious Studies 101--Introduction to Western Religions, and Religious Studies 102--Introduction to Eastern Religions. The major must include at least six other units, selected on the basis of a student's post-graduate interests. (See the description of "Tracks for the Major" below.) No more than four 100-level courses can be counted for the major.

TRACKS FOR THE MAJOR

Students may choose one of two tracks for the major: a general track or a graduate studies track.

General Track--This track is intended for students with a broad interest in religious studies, or who may be planning a career in ordained ministry, social work or other work in the field of human services. Requirements of the General Track: Religious Studies 101, 102, one course in each of the four areas in religious studies at Albion listed below, and at least two other courses, chosen in consultation with a religious studies faculty adviser.

Graduate Studies Track--This track is intended for students planning to continue religious studies at the graduate level. Requirements of the Graduate Studies Track: Religious Studies 101, 102, one course in each of the four areas in religious studies at Albion listed below and at least two other courses, chosen from the single area in which a student intends to do graduate studies. Students electing the graduate studies track for the major must register for at least one unit of directed study for advanced research in their senior year or before.

AREAS IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES AT ALBION

(1) Biblical and Jewish Studies

Current courses in this area include: 121, 122, 215, 221, 320, 321, 322.

(2) Theology and Ethics

Current courses in this area include: 131, 232, 234, 242, 250, 270.

(3) Islamic Religions

Current courses in this area include: 104, 204, 205.

(4) Asian and Comparative Religion

Current courses in this area include: 210, 211, 212, 311, 313, 363.

In Religious Studies, all of our courses fulfill the learning goals outlined above in one way or another. Breadth internal to the goals outlined above is achieved with the distribution requirement. However, each course in the curriculum emphasizes certain goals more than others. And, within the courses, certain assignments aim to assess certain learning goals more than others. Since the assignments in our classes vary from semester to semester, we do not attempt to maintain a constantly changing inventory of class assignments in relation to our learning goals. We offer here, instead, an assessment matrix relating our learning goals to the courses currently included in our curriculum that include these goals as a primary or secondary emphasis. We also list a few, relatively stable, representative assignments from some of these classes that serve to assess student mastery of particular learning goals.

Learning Goal 1

Classes with Primary Emphasis

RS 101, RS 102, RS 104, RS 131, RS 204, RS 205, RS 211, RS 212, RS 215, RS 250, RS 312

Classes with Secondary Emphasis

RS 210, RS 220, RS 222, RS 242, RS 270, RS 311, RS 313

Representative Examples of Current Forms of Assessment

In RS 101 (McWhirter), a final exam essay question that asks students to show how particular religious phenomena either emerge from or shape their historical and cultural contexts.

In RS 101 (Soileau) each of four exams

In RS 101 (Mourad) Unit exams 2, 3, and 4

In RS 102 (Soileau) each of four exams

In RS 104, Mid-Term Exam, Final Exam

In RS 121, a written assignment in which students show how a passage from the Hebrew Bible addresses the historical context in which it was written.

In RS 131, Mid-Term Exam, Final Exam

In RS 205, Mid-Term Exam, Final Exam

Learning Goal 2

Classes with Primary Emphasis

RS 121, RS 122, RS 210, RS 220, RS 222, RS 232, RS 234, RS 270, RS 311, RS 313, RS 322, RS 363

Classes with Secondary Emphasis

RS 101, RS 102, RS 104, RS 131, RS 204, RS 205, RS 211, RS 212, RS 242, RS 250, RS 312

Representative Examples of Current Forms of Assessment

In RS 101 (Mourad) Unit exam 1

In RS 122, a written assignment in which students interpret a New Testament passage in light of the historical context in which it was written.

In RS 222, a report that asks students to explain the historical and doctrinal forces behind changes that Matthew makes to his written sources.

In RS 242, two papers in which students engage in critical ethical reflection on topics of their choosing, making use of explicitly Christian norms of a type discussed in the class

In RS 270, a paper examining a Christian ministry emphasizing social justice and intentionally using theological concepts and categories learned in the class

Learning Goal 3

Primary Emphasis

RS 411/412, Dir. Study/Honors Thesis

Secondary Emphasis

RS 101, RS 102, RS 104, RS 131, RS 204, RS 205, RS 210, RS 211, RS 212, RS 215, RS 232, RS 234, RS 242, RS 250, RS 270, RS 311, RS 312, RS 313, RS 322, RS 363

Representative Examples of Current Forms of Assessment

In RS 104, Book Essay (students read a book and write an essay on how Islam affects the lives of people in the book)

In RS 204, Book Essay (students read a book and write an essay on how the book exemplifies themes explored in the course)

In RS 205 Book Essay (students read a book and write an essay on how the book exemplifies themes explored in the course)

In RS 215, an 8-10 page research paper on the life and thought of a specific Jewish community.

In RS 234, a paper attempting to argue philosophically for a religious significant conclusion, in conversation with published philosophical work on the same topic

In RS 250, a paper discussing some aspect of the Christian mystical tradition and making use of some of the definitions, concepts, and critical theories discussed in the class.

In RS 322, a 10-12 page research paper and class presentation on some facet of gender and biblical interpretation in the world today.

**Step 4: Select methods/data sources and instruments**

...that you will use to gather information about whether expected outcomes and learning objective are being achieved. NOTE: You do not need to collect data from the same sources every year. Rather, some kind of assessment rotation will be sufficient (e.g., Years1 & 3, collect data from graduating seniors, Years 2 & 4 collect data from employers and alumni, etc.).

In the spring of 2010 Religious Studies assessed its learning goals for majors and minors “indirectly” with surveys and exit interviews of graduating seniors. The surveys asked questions derived directly from the learning goals articulated in our assessment plan. We also conducted a “direct” form of assessment. This year, each full-time faculty member chose one assignment emphasizing Learning Goal 1 from our assessment plan and reviewed student performance on this assignment. The faculty members met to discuss, summarize, and respond to their students’ strengths and weaknesses in mastering this learning goal as reflected by their performance.

**Step 5: Analyze and interpret the data**

*Indirect Assessment*

Despite four separate emails requesting completion of our assessment survey, only one graduating minor (and no graduating majors) completed it. Although this student’s responses indicate satisfaction with the minor, we judge that these data are incomplete and statistically insignificant. Furthermore, we could not ask our students to complete the survey at our assessment exit interview, since only two graduating majors came to this meeting (again, despite repeated email reminders), and the students’ responses would therefore not have been sufficiently anonymous.

In their exit interviews, our students expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the major. They especially appreciated the breadth of courses offered and the emphasis in the major on exposure to many different religious traditions. They also emphasized the value of field report assignments, in which they were required to visit religious communities and to describe and analyze their experiences there.

The weaknesses of the major, according to these students, include the department’s reliance on adjunct professors to teach Asian religions and the general turnover in faculty personnel they experienced over the past four years. When asked for curricular suggestions, they requested the inclusion of courses on less mainstream historical religions and new religious movements. They also made a few suggestions for improvement regarding particular classes.

*Direct Assessment*

On Wednesday, April 14, 2010, faculty members of the Department of Religious Studies met to assess student performance on one of the learning goals we had established last year. In attendance were Mark Soileau, Jocelyn McWhirter, David Fiordalis and Nancy Weatherwax. Ron Mourad was on sabbatical.

The learning goal we decided to assess was: “Students majoring in Religious Studies will be able . . . 1. To display basic knowledge of how the world’s major religious traditions emerge from and shape their historical and cultural contexts, as manifested by their oral and scriptural traditions, teachings, practices, and symbolic forms of expression.”

Each faculty member chose one assignment from one course on which student performance toward mastering this learning goal could be evaluated. The assignments chosen were all short papers ranging from two to five pages, in which students were to analyze a text by applying concepts covered in the course. The texts included: a letter by Martin Luther King, Jr., Biblical apocalyptic literature, a modern Buddhist book, and a film on Islamic art. Students were thus expected to demonstrate an understanding of how texts and artistic expressions emerge from and shape their historical and cultural contexts.

Each faculty member described: his/her assignment, how students performed (in general but also with respect to specific problems), and how the assignment drew on material and concepts presented earlier in the course. These initial presentations then became discussions as other faculty members asked questions. After discussing the individual assignments, the group discussed some of the broader questions emerging from the assessment.

Faculty members were generally satisfied that students were able to demonstrate mastery of the learning goal. Some minor problematic areas were then discussed. Some students, for example, demonstrated an understanding of historical and cultural context, but only in general terms (dates, but not necessarily the broader trends that the dates signify). Some students basically fulfilled the requirements of the assignment, but did not provide enough detail from either the text or the context to establish a solid connection between them. And some (very few) students seem to have misunderstood the assignment, or made very basic errors (one student, for example, confused Martin Luther King, Jr. with Martin Luther). Faculty members agreed that explicit and detailed instructions should be provided to students for assignments like these to ensure students understand the assignment and prompt them to demonstrate mastery of the learning goals.

Some of the broader problems and questions discussed included: the problem of sustaining the attention of today’s students, the difficulties students sometimes face in understanding historical developments (change over time), the need to deal with students’ limited experiences and worldviews and their tendency to think of the world in terms of “us” and “them”, and the challenges of helping students to understand diversity in the world. Faculty members agreed that these are especially important when the subject matter has to do with religion.

Faculty members also agreed that the assessment meeting was beneficial in giving us the opportunity to share our experiences with our colleagues, to discuss pedagogical matters, and to develop strategies to help our students achieve our learning goals in the future.

**Step 6: How will the data collected be used for decision-making, strategic planning, etc.**

NOTE:You will need to submit a summary report of your findings to the Assessment Committee for review. In that report, please include details of how the data will be used, any program changes that will be made (or not made). Questions to ask yourself/to include in the report are as follows:

• How, exactly, will your data be used to help with program planning and improvement?

• Will your program form a committee to review assessment findings, and make recommendations for change or improvement in a timely manner?

• Will your entire department convene to discuss assessment results and program changes?

• Who will make formal recommendations for curricular or other changes—the chair/head? The committee?

The tenure-track faculty members in the Department conduct the assessment interviews and discuss the results together. Suggestions for changes can be initiated by any member of the Department and are subject to discussion and approval by the others. If the faculty members agree that programmatic changes are warranted, the chair will appoint a task force to make a formal recommendation for approval. If an individual faculty member wishes to make pedagogical changes on the basis of assessment data, such changes will be the sole responsibility of the faculty member concerned.

As mentioned above, we did not receive sufficient data from our surveys to generate meaningful conclusions. Regarding the students’ responses to the open-ended questions, the inclusion of additional courses on esoteric or new religious traditions is not possible at present, given current staffing. We also cannot avoid reliance on adjunct faculty to teach our Hinduism and Buddhism courses. However, Mark Soileau will be offering a new course fulfilling the Asian and Comparative Religion requirement this spring, entitled Myth, Religion, and Civilization. This change should give students the option of exploring Asian religions with a full-time faculty member in the coming years.