**Religious Studies Major and Minor**

**Assessment Report 2011**

**Introduction**

We expect Religious Studies minors to achieve essentially the same learning goals as the majors, but to a lesser extent. Thus, our assessment plan for the minor is nearly identical to our assessment plan for the major.

**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 2011 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 asked majors and minors about their immediate post-graduation professional plans.

We also conducted a “direct” form of assessment. This year, each full-time faculty member chose one assignment emphasizing Learning Goal 2 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

*A. Self-Satisfaction Surveys*

Out of seven graduating majors, three completed the self-satisfaction survey. Out of 12 graduating minors, three completed it. The data are summarized on the attached spreadsheet.

On average, the graduating Religious Studies majors felt that they had achieved all the learning goals of the major. All of their responses averaged between one (strongly agree) and two (agree), except for question nine (“I can analyze the historical origins and development of religions”), which averaged 2.3 – still a satisfactory score.

The average responses of graduating minors were lower (all between 2 and 3), but I believe this is due to one of the three respondents accidentally reversing the Likert scale and assigning fives (strongly disagree) to all questions instead of ones. The evidence for this belief is the student’s answers to the open-ended questions following the Likert-scale questions on the survey. Here, this student indicated several strengths of the minor and no weaknesses or suggestions for change.

The survey also asked open-ended questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the Religious Studies degree programs. Students appreciated the department’s faculty, its non-dogmatic approach to Religious Studies, its emphasis on world religions, and the way that course material showed connections between religions and other historical and cultural phenomena. A consistent theme emerged in the discussion of weaknesses. Four out of six respondents mentioned that the program needs a greater variety of courses in Asian and comparative religion.

*B. Exit Interviews*

In their exit interviews, our majors (three were present) and minors (one was present) expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the department. They especially appreciated the accessibility of the department’s courses to all students, regardless of religious background or prior training. 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.

Suggestions for improvement during the interviews included the following:

* Offer more thematically organized comparative religion courses
* Offer more courses on Asian religions, including East Asian religions
* Offer more social events and community-building activities for majors and minors (including possibly museum field trips and closer ties to students involved in various campus religious life groups)
* Create more internship opportunities
* Help create connections between alumni and current students
* Find ways to advertise the degree programs more effectively

*C. Immediate Professional Plans*

Three majors and five minors responded to our request for information about post-graduation professional plans. Their responses are listed below.

Majors

Jesse McGarity: M.A. program, Seton Hall University Museum Profession

Julia Humenik: M.Div. program, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

Virginia Mapes: Associate degree, massage therapy

Minors

Rhonda Vander Zwaag: M.A. in Higher Education Administration program, Kent State

Dan Willenberg: M.F.A. program in jazz piano

Emily Comella: M.S.W. program at Boston University

Jessica Homrich: M.S.W. program

Sandeep Singh: applying to medical school

Direct Assessment

On Monday, April 25 at 4:00 p.m., faculty members of the Department of Religious Studies met to assess student performance on assignments aimed at one of our learning goals. In attendance were Ron Mourad, Jocelyn McWhirter, Nate DeBoer and Nancy Weatherwax.

Last year we assessed our first learning goal, so this year we focused on our second: “Students majoring in Religious Studies will be able to interpret religious phenomena (including oral and scriptural traditions, teachings, practices, and symbolic forms of expression) using methods drawn from different disciplinary approaches to the study of religion, such as theological, comparative, and historical analysis.

Each faculty member chose one assignment from one course on which student performance toward mastering this learning goal could be evaluated.

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.

Jocelyn McWhirter required students in RS 122 (History, Literature and Religion of the New Testament) to write a 3-5 page paper analyzing a text from the Gospel of Mark or the Gospel of Matthew in light of its historical setting. Students analyzing Mark engaged in literary criticism and students analyzing Matthew engaged in redaction criticism. 18 students completed the assignment. Of these, with respect to the learning goal stated above, student performance was as follows:

8 – very strong

8 – strong

2 – weak

Jocelyn had prepared students for the assignment with weekly Friday discussions in which students practiced historical analysis as well as literary and redaction criticism. She was happy with the outcome of the assessment and felt that most students were acquiring the skills she intended. The weak performances of two students were partly attributable to their generally weak academic skills.

Nancy Weatherwax required students in RS 260 (Myth, Religion, Civilization) to write a short essay on the concept of sacred space as exemplified in either Jerusalem or Constantinople. The assignment drew on theological, historical, comparative, and anthropological methods. Sacred space was a central theme of the course, and students were prepared for the assignment by theoretical readings on sacred space and in-class discussions of sacred geography in myths. Student performance was as follows:

15 – very strong

6 – adequate

1 – weak

Nancy was pleased by the student performance and felt that nearly all the students had acquired the learning outcome she intended. She indicated that the one student who did poorly seemed not to have completed the relevant readings and tried to “fake it.”

Nate DeBoer required students in RS 211 (Hinduism) to answer an exam question interpreting a historical phenomenon (the migration of members of the Hindu priestly class to the warrior class) by deploying methods from the sociology of religion (theoretical models of the tension between political and religious leadership in societies dominated by temple religions). Students performed as follows:

20% - very strong

60% - adequate

20% - unacceptable

Nate was somewhat disappointed by student performance on this exam question. He speculated that the unfamiliarity of the material might have posed challenges for some students, and initiated a discussion of the extent to which comparisons between Hinduism and Western religions might have made the topic more accessible to students. We also discussed whether such comparisons might mislead students about the particularity of the historical situation in India (by reducing the religious and political tensions to abstractions exemplified in many places).

Ron Mourad required students to write a 7-8 page paper in RS 242 (Christian Ethics) analyzing a position in applied Christian ethics using methods of formal theological and philosophical argumentation. Students were required to present an exposition of an author’s theological argument about an ethical topic of their choosing, to offer criticisms of that argument, and to develop their own constructive arguments in favor of their own position on the topic. Students were prepared for the assignment by theoretical readings on the nature and types of Christian ethics in the first half of the semester, and by readings in applied ethics in the second half of the class. Every Friday, students submitted short weekly responses to the assigned readings that required both exposition and criticism. These weekly responses served as the basis for class discussions on Fridays in which students could practice constructive argumentation. Students performed as follows:

11 – strong

11 – adequate

1 – weak

Ron was happy with student performance on the assignment and felt that most of the students had acquired the learning goals he intended. The most common problems in the papers, in decreasing order of frequency, were as follows:

* Lack of clear exposition
* Attacking the author’s conclusion rather than the author’s argument
* Offering little or no support for one’s constructive position
* Failure to make moral presuppositions about authorities and norms explicit
* Failure to complete all parts of the assignment (e.g. only offering exposition without constructive argument)

Faculty members also discussed the broader question of whether we want to require our students to use a single citation style. Since Religious Studies publications use both MLA and Chicago style citations, we agreed that this goal was not desirable. Jocelyn McWhirter offered to share the handout she gives students summarizing the citation style she requires on student papers.

**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.

Religious studies faculty members feel that no changes are warranted by the Likert-scale questions on the exit interviews or by the students’ reported post-graduation plans.

We agree with the students (in responses to the open-ended questions on the surveys and in the exit interviews) that the department needs to offer a fuller range of Asian and comparative religion courses. We have not been able to do so consistently in the past several years due to the lack of a tenure-track faculty member in this position. With the resignation of Mark Soileau, we hope to be able to hire a new tenure-track faculty member with primary expertise in Asian and comparative religion and secondary competence in Islam to address this concern.

We also hope to create more connections in 2011-2012 between Religious Studies and the social, educational, and recruiting opportunities offered by the Chaplain’s office to address some of the other concerns voiced by students in their exit interviews.

Outcomes from the direct assessment are left up to the discretion of each individual faculty member. Nate DeBoer indicated that he will experiment with making some of the material in his Hinduism class more accessible to students by drawing more comparisons between Hinduism and Western religions. Ron Mourad indicated that he will experiment with making citation requirements more explicit and prescriptive on writing assignments.