Religious Studies Departmental Assessment Report
Spring 2018

In recent years the Department of Religious Studies has undertaken substantive revisions of its major. The decision to do so arose from student survey results, along with the consensus views of department faculty. We moved away from a model grounded in certain distribution categories that had previously governed the major in favor of one that better supported depth (in the form of a chosen "concentration") in addition to breadth. We also consciously sought to support interdisciplinary work by allowing a course from outside Religious Studies to count toward the concentration, recognizing this as a traditional strength of our field generally as well as in the Hendrix context. In the wake of this change, we embarked upon a revision of our senior capstone course. As one of our objectives in revising the major was to better prepare students to complete a summative project, we focused attention on this culminating feature of our major as a way to evaluate the effectiveness of our revised program. In the process of doing so, we recognized the need to revisit our departmental learning goals, as they related both to our updated major as well as the college's new Vision for Student Learning. More recently, we have begun evaluating the first iterations of the new capstone course, and look forward to making continual improvements going forward.

Areas of Strength

The impetus for the change to the major emerged from a variety of factors. One of the most important emerged from an emphasis on the Hendrix campus, at least in the humanities and related disciplines, on a senior thesis project as the natural culmination of the major, and our collective assessment that some of our students were not fully equipped to bring the major to conclusion in this way. Back in 2010, we conducted surveys of students interested in our curriculum and we also began researching major designs at comparable institutions nationwide. On the basis of our findings, we moved away from what we felt were somewhat arbitrary distribution categories intended to ensure breadth, and instead created a concentration requirement (of 3 courses) that would inform the senior thesis. Given the interdisciplinary nature of our field and the varied interests of students, we opted to allow one of these courses to include coursework taken outside the department. In keeping with the college's emphasis on integrated, hands-on advising, we opted to encourage both breadth and depth in our curriculum through dialogue between individual students and their departmental advisor. The end result was a model with structural flexibility and breadth, along with sufficient depth and focus to result in more high-quality thesis projects.

Despite these noted improvements, the department has long debated the extent to which an undergraduate thesis was the best measure or culmination of student learning in the program, and whether other alternatives were warranted. While exploring the tutorial model informing the Murphy Scholars program, we learned that leading national liberal arts colleges, such as Williams, did not require undergraduate theses for degrees in religious studies. We therefore sought a Wabash Center Undergraduate Departments of Religion Project Grant to investigate possible revisions to the capstone, which we received in 2015. In assessing our initial condition, we began by surveying alumni in recent years who both had or had not completed a thesis, and met a number of times as a department to identify and discuss the advantages and disadvantages

of the model. This processed helped us to recognize that while the thesis model had produced good results for a majority of students, and the revised structure of the major helped to better prepare students to write them, we were not convinced that an undergraduate thesis was appropriate or necessary for all majors. For the faculty, it required significant investment and oversight, and for students, it did not often represent either an essential culmination of their experience in the curriculum or a natural springboard for their lives and careers after college.

As a result, we brought in consultants to help us consider revisions to our capstone course (*RELI 497: Senior Colloquium*). One consultant helped us recognize the need to revisit our departmental learning goals as an important first step, which in turn needed to link to the college's newly drafted Vision for Student Learning. (We finalized our rearticulated learning goals in 2017.) We also recognized the ways in which other departmental courses, especially our required theories and methods course (*RELI 395: Approaching the Study of Religion*), would ideally function to scaffold the skills needed to develop new and expanded possibilities for senior capstone projects. In addition, another consultant helped us to understand the value of helping students identify and articulate how their education in religious studies has supplied them with transferable skills for the future, and how applied work in the field might link to their plans for future work beyond academia. As a result, we adapted the capstone course to include substantial content aimed at helping students to identify, reflect upon and articulate various skills, talents and interests they have developed over the course of the education, as well as to imagine a range of capstone projects that draw upon these. While traditional academic papers continue to serve as appropriate capstones for many, we have increasingly sought to support other types of outcomes informed by previous coursework and continuing research in religious studies.

Initial assessment of the changes to the capstone and its implications for the major have been positive. The most talented and motivated students are still able to invest in academic research papers, but may alternatively engage in community-based project work, curriculum development (such as for K-12 or church-related settings), or creative projects informed by particular skills and knowledge, and have done so in impressive and unanticipated ways. Less talented or motivated students have succeeded in meeting standards for acceptable work, and with more buy-in, less shepherding from departmental faculty advisors in comparison with the previous model, and generally better outcomes.

Going forward, we plan to continue assessing the course itself as well as the curriculum preceding it. We initiated an exit interview process for graduating seniors this year that will help us gather data both directly and indirectly from our students. Already revisions have been made to *RELI 395: Approaching the Study of Religion* in order to help students better prepare for and transition into the capstone course. We also hope to maintain sufficient course offerings (contingent on faculty hires) in future years so that the choice implied by the concentration model will remain functional and appealing to students in the years to come.

Action Plan for Improvement

Given the small size and hands-on approach characteristic of our majors, as well the frequency and quality of face-to-face departmental deliberations in recent years (especially as part of the Wabash grant), we feel as though we have a very good sense of what has been working well for

our students in recent years, along with what might be improved. Based on the feedback we have received, the revised major and capstone have yielded good results. However, we also recognize that our approach to assessment has been grounded in qualitative reports, which we have generally not attempted to analyze or record systematically. This spring we examined a number of surveys and exit interview questions developed by other departments at Hendrix for assessing their majors, and we agreed that it may be useful to generate some data in an analogous way to help us with longitudinal perspective. This year we opted for an in-person, departmental exit interview with our graduating seniors that asked them to reflect upon fifteen questions (see attached). Over the course of this year, we will explore whether to complement this new practice with an anonymous survey. In either case, we will discuss whether there might be some ways we can code or quantify student responses in ways that will help with future planning. We are aware of some rubrics used by others, and we plan to discuss to what extent similar frameworks might be worth adopting for our own planning over the next few years.