

Hendrix Religious Studies 2022 Departmental Assessment Report

*Submitted by
William M. Gorvine
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Student Learning Goal for Assessment

For 2021-22, the department is assessing Learning Goal 2. That goal reads:

“thinks critically and constructively about religion through engagement with appropriate cultural resources.”

Assessment Meetings

As only one full-time member of the Religious Studies program was present on campus in 2021-22, no formal assessment meetings were held. Nevertheless, a number of informal discussions took place during the year between Drs. Gorvine and Williamson amidst ongoing work, which included a number of curricular proposals and a faculty search. These conversations included some in-depth discussion of the students currently progressing through the program and our plans for implementing a new curricular structure as well as new courses in 2022-23.

Assessment Data

The department assessed Learning Goal 2 both directly and indirectly following our assessment plan. In light of a prior recommendation from the Assessment Committee and their appreciation of the aggregated data we presented in 2021, we continued the practice of analyzing cumulative data from the past two years, in this case 2020-21 and 2021-22.

Direct assessment data for Learning Goal 2 focused on assessment of the student senior projects, with some additional consideration given to faculty assessment of overall student performance in Religious Studies courses, and assessment of the senior exit interview for 2021. (Exit interview data was not collected in 2021 due to the presence of only one graduating senior and the absence of full-time faculty due to a planned leave and end-of-year professional travel). Direct assessment data for Learning Goal 2 is presented in Appendix A.

Indirect assessment data for Learning Goal 2 was collected through a student survey. For 2020-22, we received a total of 2 responses to the survey out of 4 graduating seniors. (An outstanding request for feedback remains for our graduate for '21-22; if a response is submitted after the submission of the SAP it will be included in the aggregate data going forward.) Indirect assessment data for Learning Goal 2 is presented in Appendix B.

In addition, the complete data for all learning goals collected in 2022 is presented in Appendix C (direct assessment) and Appendix D (indirect assessment).

Interpretation of Data

Direct assessment of Learning Goal 2 over the past two years indicates that while students are generally achieving competence in the stated learning goal, there is room for improvement. The one data point we have from this year reflected a minimal level of achievement. Of the six departmental learning goals, this goal scored the lowest in direct measures this year, though the overall portrait is better when considered over the past two years.

The assessment data focuses on three different aspects of Learning Goal 2: critical thinking about religion; constructive thinking about religion; and thinking about religion through engagement with appropriate culture resources. Students generally rate higher for engaging appropriate resources and constructive engagement than for critical thinking or analysis. In our direct assessment, three out of four students ranked in the “Needs Improvement” category with respect to their ability to demonstrate critically informed analysis of religious subject matter as measured via their senior project submissions. By contrast, other features of this goal were generally met in a satisfactory or exemplary way, with students appearing capable of offering constructive contributions and engaging appropriate resources. Indirect assessment of the learning goal varies from these results, however, with those responding indicating that they strongly agreed they had achieved the learning goal as a result of majoring in Religious Studies. Our interpretation is that a more wholistic appraisal of student performance that considers upper-level seminar work confirms that student achievement is often better than what has been demonstrated exclusively in the senior project.

Future Directions

The pathway toward and the nature of the capstone experience in Religious Studies has been the focus of considerable attention over the past decade. On the basis of collaboration with an outside consultant and a series of grant-funded workshops in 2016-18, we launched a new model that creates space for reflection upon intellectual interests and priorities developed over time as well as on career competencies acquired through the major. The experience also supports project-oriented, constructive work related to the field as an alternative to a traditional senior thesis paper. As part of the process, the department re-envisioned its learning goals and began work to scaffold skills across the curriculum with the hope that seniors would be adequately prepared to develop capstone projects, whether in the form of academic research papers or other types of applied endeavors that incorporated students’ academic study of religion.

The model that emerged remains a promising one, but a variety of structural factors have created barriers to success when it comes to students’ ability to demonstrate strong critical acumen in their work in particular. Most obviously, the retirement of three faculty, including Dr. Sanders who had pioneered the new course, disrupted momentum that had been growing. This past year the course was taught as an independent study and required more self-directed effort on the part of the senior major involved. Moreover, in light of staffing constraints and limited numbers of majors, the department was unable to offer RELI 395 (“Approaching the Study of Religion,”) our theory and methods course, over the past two years.

As RELI 395 was primarily concerned with helping students to orient themselves within the field intellectually and to develop modes of analysis that best suited their interests, it is not surprising to see that some senior projects have been less successful in deploying particular theories or methods in their work. While the results of the present assessment show that our best students have continued to excel in Learning Goal 2 as shown in their senior project, others have struggled. Anticipating this, we initiated changes to our curriculum that we expect will improve outcomes.

In particular, the department has revised the major in 2020-21 to ensure deeper student engagement with critical tools for thinking about religion. This will particularly take place through a new course that will be more sustainable in terms of enrollment than RELI 395, which appealed exclusively to majors. Specifically, we have eliminated RELI 109 Religion and Contemporary Culture and RELI 395 Approaching the Study of Religion, replacing them with a new course, RELI 209 What is Religion? that will draw on elements of both for a broader audience. This course will be required of majors and will facilitate meta-reflection on the assumptions and scholarly tools available for investigation in our field, among other aims. We anticipate that this type of work will directly support Learning Goal 2.1 in the major and will likely improve performance in the senior projects that represent our current assessment artifact for this goal. Moreover, a new iteration of RELI 497 will be taught as a regular course again in the fall of 2022, involving peer work and accountability in a structured format that remains a promising model.

Appendix A.
Cumulative Direct Assessment Data for LG 2
2020-22

Students in Category			1	0	3	
2.1	thinks critically and constructively about religion through engagement with appropriate cultural resources	Senior Project	The project engages in a sophisticated critical analysis of the chosen topic.	The project engages in critical analysis of the chosen topic but lacks sophistication.	The project engages in analysis but lacks critical discernment.	The project lacks critical analysis or asserts points without support.
Students in Category			1	2	1	
2.2	thinks critically and constructively about religion through engagement with appropriate cultural resources	Senior Project	The project makes an original contribution to the field of religion, whether intellectual or practical.	The project makes a contribution to the field of religion, whether intellectual or practical, resembling similar contributions of others.	The project makes a contribution, whether intellectual or practical, merely by replicating the work of others	The project makes no discernible contribution to the field of religion, whether intellectual or practical.
Students in Category			2	1	1	
2.3	thinks critically and constructively about religion through engagement with appropriate cultural resources	Senior Project	The project draws on well-selected cultural artifacts going beyond the most obvious.	The project draws on appropriate cultural artifacts but only the most obvious.	The project engages cultural artifacts but omits relevant artifacts or includes irrelevant artifacts.	The project fails to address relevant cultural artifacts.

* The senior project for 2021-22 was carried out separately from the departmental capstone course RELI/LBST 497 as an independent study with one participant.

Appendix B.
Cumulative Indirect Assessment of LG 2
2020-22

	As a result of my major in Religious Studies I have...	# Respond	AVG	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Comments
3.	developed the capacity to think critically and constsructively about religion through engagement with appropriate cultural resources	2	5.00	2	0	0	0	0	