**August 2009 Assessment Report Feedback – Religious Studies**

**Assessment Committee Contact**: Scott Hendrix, Academic Skills Center

*\*Note*: Assessment report/feedback was reviewed/provided by Vicki Baker, Mark Bollman, and Scott Hendrix

 Overall, your program assessment plan is an effectively detailed document that provides helpful presentation of program goals, key program components that connect back to these goals, and some helpful discussion about methods and instruments you plan to use for assessing the extent to which specific program components are helping students meet RS learning goals/outcomes.

 The feedback below is intended to help you reconsider and/or revise and update your assessment plans, as needed, as you move through the next steps of the assessment process.

 *Step 1: Mission*

 Your mission statement seems appropriate given your departmental goals and beliefs. In addition, your departmental mission seems in line with overall college goals for developing student awareness of diversity (especially in terms of religion, history, and cultures).

 Note the following tentative suggestions regarding your mission statement, however.

 You might emphasize student learning goals/outcomes more directly in your statement, especially for use with assessment plans and reports: doing so could help external audiences (e.g., Assessment Committee, Accreditation Team members) understand the connections between your theoretical justifications and the learning goals for majors in your department.

 You perhaps should (or might wish to) clarify pronoun usage in your statement, since the “we” that is subject of several sentences is unclear (Albion faculty in RS, RS scholars in general, or students and faculty within the RS department, etc.).

 *Step 2: Outcomes*

 Your department’s learning goals/outcomes seem appropriate given your mission. In addition, dividing the major learning goals into three general categories is helpful and effective, both in terms of presenting more general terms for your goals and as a means to provide focus for your own planning for assessment and curricular development (more on this topic below).

 Indeed, in terms of assessment plans, you (and your students) would probably benefit from focusing on *fewer* learning outcomes for the RS major (perhaps starting with those goals listed under “Substantive and Theoretical Knowledge,” since these are most numerous and perhaps most important, as well?). That way, as you move forward with assessment plans, you would provide yourself with opportunities to pilot methods and/or instruments for assessment, and revise these as appropriate before moving on to other learning goals.

Moving forward then, you could simplify and clarify your assessment plan by focusing on those (A.1-5) KEY learning goals/outcomes for students in the RS major. For example, you might begin your assessment efforts by focusing on student learning of “basic knowledge…of the world’s major religious traditions.” Then, your program components (Step 2) to assess this outcome would be those specific RS courses that are designed and taught so that students learn “basic knowledge.” For this particular learning goal, the specific methods or instruments to assess student learning of this “basic knowledge” (Step 3) could be one or more specific element of that course: exam, paper, class exercise or presentation, etc. (see further discussion below).

 *Step 3: Program Components*

 The program components listed here are clearly significant for the RS major. However, the relationship of these components back to specific student learning goals/outcomes is not clearly presented here. It may be *assumed* that 100+ courses are intended to help students acquire “basic knowledge…of the world’s major religious traditions,” but that relationship is not presented in your proposed plan.

 In addition, your statement that the learning goals are fulfilled by “all of our courses…in one way or another” is not very helpful, since undoubtedly courses differ in terms of content, pedagogical emphasis, and learning outcomes, plus courses may vary in terms of student demographics (intro courses vs. 300-level major courses, 35 vs. 10 students, etc.). As noted in the previous section (Step 2), focusing your assessment efforts more narrowly on a few specific student learning goals/outcomes would allow you to present in this section only those RS courses (or components, whether part of a course or not) that are relevant for the specific learning goals/outcomes. (This kind of narrower focus would likely be both internally and externally valuable, as it would reduce your workload and report requirements, and would also help clarify the RS major goals, components, and assessment methods/instruments for outside audiences).

 Creating a departmental assessment matrix may help you better organize your learning outcomes as they relate to your courses. For example, one column heading could be the learning outcome, another column heading could be “Courses (required and elective), and the last heading could be Course Activities/Assignments. Ultimately, you need to link specific courses/specific assignments to the specific learning outcomes to show the connections.

*Step 4: Methods/Data*

 The questionnaire discussed in this section is certainly a valuable indirect measure of student learning (since you are collecting student self-report data/information); however, for more comprehensive and useful understanding of student learning/outcomes, you will want to augment this with other assessment methods and instruments that are direct measures of student learning and outcomes. Examples of direct measures include tests/examinations, assignments, papers/projects, exercises, portfolios and field experience evaluations (to name just a few), most of which you are probably already requiring of students in your courses. As an example, you could develop common grading rubrics that are used within the department to evaluate students’ achievement of learning outcomes on a per assignment/activity basis (This is not necessary for every class or every assignment, but there might be larger capstone assignments that this approach would make the most sense). Then, keep a record of these rubrics which would be considered a direct measure of student learning. [*See following page for definitions and further examples of direct and indirect measures/evidence*.]

For your next round of assessment plan updating, please consider the comments, suggestions, and recommendations above, and incorporate these as feasible and appropriate. Our hope is that departments will be able to use these assessment efforts to inform program and pedagogical improvements and the ultimate goal is that your assessment plans and reports will show how your departmental assessment efforts have informed your program improvements. Overall, a good start toward developing and presenting an effective assessment plan for the RS major.

 Direct & Indirect Measures

In assessing student learning, there are direct and indirect sources of evidence. Direct evidence is clear and convincing information about student learning, such as: tests, examinations, papers, projects, assignments, field experience assessments, and portfolios. These are particularly strong sources of evidence especially when accompanied by articulated standards (such as a rubric). On the other hand, with indirect evidence there is room for other factors to affect the outcomes either positively or negatively. Examples of indirect evidence include: retention, graduation, and placement rates (may be impacted by economic conditions or college policies); surveys of students and alumni (may indicate feelings about college experience); grades (standards and even content may differ across instructors and institutions).

**Next Steps:**

In coordination with your Assessment Committee reviewers and their written and verbal feedback, please observe the following deadlines for your assessment cycle:

* September 15: Revisions to Steps 1-4 due (if necessary)
* October 1: Completion of Steps 5 & 6 using preliminary data
* November 2: Final Fall 2009 plans due

**Fall 2009 Religious Studies Department:**
The updated RS assessment plan clarifies program student learning outcomes and presents specific future plans for direct assessment of student learning; on the other hand, although the report includes some information for Steps 5 & 6, the information in Step 5 is based only on indirect measures of student learning; and the discussion is Step 6 has little clear connection back to the student learning goals or other details presented earlier in the assessment plan/report.
So, while the report is complete in the sense of all slots being filled, and includes some sense of future assessment plans, these requirements were met only at a basic level.