**2009 Religious Studies Report**

**Step 1: Department/Program Mission (Any updates due September 15, 2009)**

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 (Any updates due September 15, 2009)**

**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 (Any updates due September 15, 2009)**

**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) **Islam and Comparative Religions**
Current courses in this area include: 104, 204, 205 210, 211, 212, 311, 313, 363.

(4) **Asian Religion**
Current courses in this area include: 104, 204, 205.

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 (Any updates due September 15, 2009)**

**METHODS/DATA**

For the past three years, Religious Studies has assessed its learning goals for majors and minors “indirectly” with surveys of graduating seniors.  The surveys asked questions derived directly from the learning goals articulated in our assessment plan.

The department also meets with graduating majors and minors for exit interviews each year.

Currently our assessment program does not include any type of external validation by way of standardized tests or reviews by outside experts.  We have not used standardized tests because no such instruments are currently available.

Starting in 2009-2010 we will add a “direct” form of assessment.  This year, each full-time faculty member will choose one assignment emphasizing Learning Goal 1 and review student performance on this assignment.  The faculty members will meet 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 (Due October 1, 2009 with preliminary data; Due November 2, 2009 with final data for this assessment cycle)**

Four of the twelve graduating majors completed our anonymous questionnaire, and five of the graduating minors completed it.  Students answered a series of questions on a Likert scale ranging from one (strongly agree) to five (strongly disagree) and were invited to comment on the Department’s strengths and weaknesses and to suggest changes.  The questions, along with the average responses, are summarized below.

Majors

 1. I possess basic knowledge of the historical emergence, cultural situation, oral and scriptural traditions, teachings, practices, and contemporary expressions of the world’s major religious traditions.

**AVERAGE – 1.5**

 2. I possess an in-depth knowledge in one of the following three tracks: Biblical and Judaic Studies, Theology and Ethics, and Asian and Comparative Religions.

**AVERAGE – 2.25**

 3. I appreciate the importance of and conceptual difference between various religious phenomena, including ritual, myth, symbol, doctrine, and theological reflection on religion.

**AVERAGE – 1.5**

 4. I understand how religion shapes and is shaped by the larger social and cultural fabric of historical and contemporary societies.

**AVERAGE – 1.25**

5. I possess a basic knowledge of different methodological approaches, including the comparative approach, to the study of religion.

**AVERAGE – 2.25**

 6. I possess a basic command of the disciplinary language and vocabulary of religious studies.

**AVERAGE – 1.75**

 7. I have written about religion and religious phenomena in short papers.

**AVERAGE – 1.00**

 8. I have written about religion and religious phenomena in long research papers.

**AVERAGE – 2.5**

 9. I have written and communicated orally about religion and religious phenomena by working on an individual project.

**AVERAGE – 2.5**

 10. I have developed a critical posture toward religious truth claims.

**AVERAGE – 1.25**

 11. I have developed an attitude of curiosity and an appreciation of diverse cultures and religious traditions.

**AVERAGE – 1.25**

 12. I have developed an attitude of tolerance and respect for cultures other than my own.

**AVERAGE – 1.00**

 The only consistent theme which emerged from the open-ended questions about the strengths of the major were that students were very satisfied with the courses offered by tenure-track faculty and felt that they were introduced to a broad range of religious traditions and critical approaches to the study of religion.

Regarding the weaknesses of the major, all four students commented that they would have liked to see more courses and more faculty members in the department.  Some commented that it would have been nice to have some courses with prerequisites.

Minors

Religious Studies Minors were asked the same set of questions except for numbers 2 and 9, which reflect learning goals not applicable to the minor.

Question          Average Response

1                      2.2

2                      N/A

3                      1.6

4                      2.2

5                      2.4

6                      2.0

7                      2.2

8                      2.8

9                      N/A

10                    2.4

11                    2.0

12                    2.0

As with the majors, the most consistent theme emerging from the open-ended questions was that a larger body of course offerings would strengthen the Department.

**Step 6: How will the data collected be used for decision-making, strategic planning, etc. (Due October 1, 2009 with preliminary data; Due November 2, 2009 with final data for this assessment cycle)**

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.

Regarding this year’s data, the average responses to the survey questions reveal that most majors agree or strongly agree that they have met the Department’s learning goals, and most minors agree that they have met these goals.  The slightly better scores in the majors’ responses as compared to the minors’ responses is to be expected, since majors complete more courses in the Department than the minors and therefore should be expected to have fulfilled the learning goals more fully.  We are therefore satisfied that no changes to the current structure of the major or minor are warranted in response to these data.

Regarding the students’ responses to the open-ended questions, we fully agree that a broader range of course offerings would benefit students.  Given current staffing in the department and the need for service courses in religion that benefit the College as a whole, however, we are not able to make changes that would address this concern.  We encourage the administration to take these concerns into consideration as it makes future personnel decisions regarding the allocation of faculty lines.