Two-Year Progress Report

Religious Studies (BA)

March 2015

Introduction

A review of the undergraduate program in Religious Studies was conducted in 2011. In April of 2012 the chair of the department responded to the fourteen recommendations of the review committee (see appendix A). Two recommendations were rejected (#3 and #13), two were considered to be beyond the control of the department (#1 and #5).

This report (2014) outlines the progress made to date in implementing the recommendations made in that review.

The department has taken the steps and initiatives below as part of a strategy to arrest the decline in majors through better communication and to better position the program within the Faculty of Arts.

Action taken since submission of the report (2012)

1. In January 2014 a department retreat was held at CIGI and facilitated by Veronica Brown and Kyle Schultz of the UW Centre for Teaching Excellence. There are 17 members of the department. Of those 17, 11 attended (65%). Those who did not attend: 2 on sabbatical (both of whom were either out of the country or KW); 1 out of town; one ill; 1 with a conflicting appointment (Chair of Sociology); one religious obligation. Given the difficulty of scheduling meetings, we were pleased with the attendance and the enthusiasm. The department discussed the outcomes they wished for students, examined the current areas of strength and weakness in the department curriculum, and administrative obstacles that make it difficult to achieve those objectives. Following the retreat the department, again with the assistance of CTE, held a ‘mapping’ session where several required and elective courses were tested to see if they met the pedagogical objectives established at the retreat.

2. As a preliminary step to the revision of the program, the department has de-activated a large number of courses (33) in order to make room for new courses that will better fit the pedagogical objectives of the department and the needs of the various constituencies that make up the department. There have been discussions with the department at large, and proposals by the curriculum committee dealing with all aspects of the program (course requirements, distribution of courses across our areas of expertise (Biblical, Jewish Studies, Asian religions, Christian tradition and theology, religion and society), course levels and progression through the major. The department met with the Arts Undergraduate Office March 16th to review our progress and receive any suggestions they felt might be helpful.
3. The Undergraduate Affairs Committee is currently putting together a curriculum that will better co-ordinate our offerings at all levels and provide a clear progression for students as they proceed through their degree. This RS Plan adjustment will be in line with the Faculty of Arts Plan Standardization initiative. Course syllabi will contain a statement of how the course learning outcomes relate to the RS program, and assignments will contain a statement explaining the role of the assignment in accomplishing the learning outcomes. This clear communication of requirements and progression will assist in attracting new majors. The Arts Undergraduate Office has scheduled two extra meetings of Undergraduate Affairs Group (May/June) to approve revised Plans. The Religious Studies Plan will be presented at one of those meetings (likely June).

4. The department, with the support of AFIW academic Deans, has agreed to share courses to a greater degree than has been the case previously. For example, RS100, formerly a St. Paul’s course, is currently being offered by Conrad Grebel online (W) and Renison (S) online as well as on campus by instructors from St. Paul’s (F), St. Jerome’s (W) and UW (S). This pattern will be also implemented with RS110. This decision will allow the various constituencies to meet their RS equity levels more consistently and provide variety for both faculty and students. Required and upper level courses that draw fewer students will also be rotated so that no one constituency will be adversely affected. As well as assist in a fair distribution of equity, this measure should assist the department in increasing its majors.

5. New minors with an applied focus are currently being considered. The Chair of RS and the Dean of Renison College would like to explore the possibility of a minor with both RS and SDS components. Since the report, Renison has a new Principal, Dean, and Chair of SDS. Thus, discussion of this possibility has temporarily been put on hold. We will continue to explore the possibility of developing applied minors with other departments.

6. The department engaged a consultant to advise on improvements that could be made to the department website. Changes have been made within the UW parameters on standardized websites. Some videos of faculty members have been added to the site and news of events is updated on a regular basis. In addition, another department member has committed to creating a department blog regarding faculty activities, publications, and other events in the department, including the activities of our undergraduate student society. The creation of this blog (at least once a term) will also serve as a vehicle for alumni outreach. The first installment of the blog is in the process of being formatted by the professor who created it (currently on sabbatical in Asia) and will be posted as soon as possible. The Student Society has created a Facebook page with a link to the department. The page has postings from both professors and students. Not only are student events listed but numerous articles pertaining to the study of religion and religion in the news. Our Administrative Assistant is creating an e-newsletter for distribution to alumni with undergraduate, graduate and alumni profiles, professor research and publications, and
news of current and coming events. The website improvements, blog, Facebook page and newsletter are important tools in communicating to others about the department in ways that have not been done before (professor videos, students talking about the program and their experience with it). These tools should generate more student activity, inquiries and hopefully, more majors.

7. The department engaged a graduate student (1/2 TA) to assist in rejuvenating the student society. While small, it is active and has offered a series of events throughout the last few years that drew in not only undergraduate students but also graduate students and professors. Since then, we have instituted a position of ‘faculty liaison’ to assist the students if necessary and keep the department apprised of student events.

8. The meeting room/lounge is used extensively. Graduate classes are held in the room, meetings are held there, as are student events and department events; moreover, it is used for studying by all students. Along with the two initiatives listed above, increased use of the room has helped in developing RS student cohesion. Pictures of room in use (classes, meetings, social) are posted to the website and will be updated on a regular basis.

9. Undergraduate students will be consulted regarding major structural changes. Consultation with students is an ongoing process. There has always been student consultation through the student society via e-mail and their meetings. The addition of a faculty liaison enhances this process. The fact that the students do not have direct representation at the department meeting level does not imply that they have no voice. Their voice, individually and collectively, has always been and always will be heard. Students frequently express the comfort they feel interacting with RS faculty and staff. There is also a good rapport between our graduate and undergraduate students.

10. Since the review there have been funding changes that address the recommendation that a sessional instructor be hired to cover a course release for the Associate Chair, Undergraduate. The undergraduate officer now receives a stipend ($3,000) and a course release that is constant rather than the formerly ad hoc basis.

11. The Associate Chair, Graduate now receives a stipend ($3,000) and a course relief thanks to the Dean of Arts.

Recommendations not acted upon or pending

1. The department is very interested in adding an experiential component to our Plans. There has been little progress in developing experiential opportunities beyond the Beyond Borders program and the India Study Term (2012). RS 100 has not yet been offered in a small seminar format with community visits however a smaller offering of
RS 100 using a blended-block pedagogical style has been initiated. Discussion on this issue will become more of a focus as we move through our curriculum adjustments.

2. The department is unable to address the gender imbalance and lack of diversity in the department as it only hires two of its faculty. It can only encourage the five agencies to consider this factor when making hires. Since the report, Conrad Grebel University College has hired a new female professor. This means that there are now 4 female faculty out of 15.

3. The first recommendation of the external review was a position in Islam. The department has repeatedly requested a position in Islam from both the Faculty of Arts and the other agencies of the department, including the idea of sharing an appointment with another department. This was not successful. What was accomplished was an appointment by the Faculty of Arts in Anthropology (Anthropology of Religion). The person hired will teach one course for the RS department on Islamic ritual in a global context. Further, since the submission of the 2 year report, St Jerome’s University will be offering the course for the department. They will be offering the course twice a year. Thus, we now have 2 offerings in Islam, one historical and doctrinal, one rooted in Islamic experience.

Conclusion
The Department of Religious Studies has made significant progress in implementing the recommendations of the external reviewers. In terms of curricular matters (Appendix A #5, #7, #8), teaching and assessment, quality indicators and declining enrolments (shared by all departments in the Faculty of Arts), we are constructing a streamlined program that will better suit the needs of our students. We anticipate being able to bring this new program to the Undergraduate Affairs Group in Fall 2015. Students will be consulted on structural changes but they will not have a seat at the department (Appendix A # 11). Although the equity agreement between the AFIW and the University of Waterloo is something over which the department has no control (Appendix A #6), we have managed to achieve the objectives of the equity agreement without the necessity of revisiting it. While we are supportive of experiential learning, we have not yet had the opportunity to research possible positions from which our students might benefit. We expect that our revised website (Appendix A #4), department blog and alumni outreach plans may provide these opportunities. Issues regarding proper compensation for the associate chairs (Appendix A #14) have been settled. In terms of new initiatives, a faculty wide minor will be created. It is hoped that this will be ready to present to Undergraduate Affairs Group in Fall 2016 for implementation in 2017.
We have been unable to secure a faculty appointment in Islam and, given current budgetary restraints, it is unlikely that we will in the near future (Appendix A #1). We will however, be able to offer an additional course in modern Islam once a year. The addition of a new female hire has increased our gender diversity but further progress is unlikely due to fiscal restraint (Appendix A #9).

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APPENDIX A
Recommendations from the 2011 external review of Religious Studies

Objectives
1. That a position in Islamic studies be created in the Religious Studies Department;
2. That the Department explore the integration into the program of experiential learning and engagement with the wider community through co-op placements and/or internships;

Admissions
3. That the Department produce a handbook for undergraduate students;
4. That the Department give special attention to creating a more navigation friendly website;

Curriculum
5. That the Department continue to review and revise their course offerings as per the suggestions offered above;
6. That the university revisit the equity document in light of the uniqueness of the Religious Studies;

Teaching and Assessment
7. That each course syllabus articulates how the student outputs (e.g., assignments) are linked to the program outcomes;

Quality indicators
8. That the Department establish clear, focused program-specific learning outcomes linked to specific types of student engagements within the program.

Faculty
9. That the university, the Department, and the colleges that contribute classes to the program address the imbalance in diversity in the Department of Religious Studies;
Students
10. That the Department use half of a Teaching Assistantship to foster community among Religious Studies undergraduate students;

11. That the Department normally include student representation in structural discussions whenever possible;

Graduates
12. That the Department design and implement a periodic survey of its graduates;

Other issues
13. That (name removed) job grade be raised from its current level;
14. That the University of Waterloo through the Department of Religious Studies fund the cost of a sessional instructor to teach a course to cover the course release of the Undergraduate advisor.