



University of Colorado **Boulder**

2016 Program Review

Department of Religious Studies

Academic Review and Planning
Advisory Committee Report

Approved

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul H. Wood".

04/18/2017

Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs: Date

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Process Overview

The review of the Department of Religious Studies (RLST) was conducted in accordance with the 2016 review guidelines. The Academic Review and Planning Advisory Committee (ARPAC) conducts and writes the final reviews of all academic units on the Boulder campus. The unit prepared a self-study, which was reviewed by an internal review committee (IRC) of two CU-Boulder faculty members from outside the Department of Religious Studies. An external reviewer, an expert from within the discipline outside of the University of Colorado, visited the unit over March 17 and 18, 2016, reviewed the relevant documents, and met with faculty, students, staff, university administrators, and members of ARPAC. ERC comments and recommendations are cited at appropriate points throughout the report. This public document reflects the assessment of and recommendations for the Department of Religious Studies as approved by ARPAC.

Academic Review
and Planning
Advisory
Committee
(ARPAC)

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Unit Overview

The campus' standardized description of the Department of Religious Studies, and information regarding comparable units, can be found on the Office of Data Analytics' (ODA) website (<http://www.colorado.edu/oda/institutional-research/institutional-level-data/information-department/academic-review-and-0>). ODA updates profiles annually in the fall semester. This report cites the ODA data for Religious Studies posted in November 2015, reflecting the state of the department as of academic year (AY) 2014-2015. More recent data from the Religious Studies self-study are cited where appropriate.

The Department of Religious Studies (RLST) is an interdisciplinary department devoted to the scholarly understanding and interpretation of religion through careful study of history, texts, rituals, narrative, art and media. RLST faculty draw on language studies, art, history, philosophy, anthropology, politics, economics, sociology, psychology, comparative literature and literary studies, and legal studies, among other approaches. Students of the department gain the skills and habits necessary to participate responsibly in public discussions of religion and to appreciate that diverse traditions inform the formation of pluralistic societies in a globalized world.

Personnel and governance

The department has ten tenured and tenure-track (TTT) lines (an increase of two lines since the tabulation of the standardized description): three full professors, two full professors on 50% appointments in other departments (including the current RLST chair), three associate professors, and three assistant professors. Three of the faculty are female. None are identified as members of underrepresented minorities. RLST also employs a student advisor, a program assistant, and a graduate secretary.

Research, scholarship, and
creative work

The Department of Religious Studies faculty specialize in Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Daoism, and indigenous traditions. Areas of thematic strength include politics, law, and religion; gender and sexuality; media; dance, play, and religion; religion and the body; and political studies. Department faculty have recently published a number of notable books, and output of refereed articles is high. Since the 2009 review, the faculty have won numerous awards and grants, including some of the highest honors in the field, such as the Jordan Schnitzer Award for Best Book in Jewish Arts and Performance, the Middle East Studies Association Albert Hourani Book Award, and the Walter Prescott Webb Essay Prize. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ford Foundation are among the many organizations from whom RLST faculty members have won grants.

Undergraduate education

The department offers a BA, an MA, a minor, and concurrent BA/MA degrees. In academic year (AY) 2014-2015, the department awarded nine bachelor's degrees, a decrease from 15 during the 2009 ARPAC review. Religious Studies has one of the smallest degree programs on campus (both in absolute numbers and in numbers relative to TTT faculty). With 24 majors and 24 minors over (AY) 2014-2015, it was the smallest of undergraduate degree populations analyzed by the Office of Data Analytics, down from a count of 50 majors and 32 minors during the 2009 review; however, the self-study notes that this trend reversed in 2015 and the department now has 49 majors and 28 minors.

Most of the teaching load serves other departments: according to the 2014 figures, non-majors account for 94 percent of student-credit hours in the department. Although one of the smallest in terms of total student-credit hours, RLST nevertheless

ranks higher in terms of teaching non-majors (13 out of 54 in the division), indicating a greater service teaching students in other university departments as compared to its own majors.

Requirements for undergraduate majors appear rigorous. Of the 36 required hours, majors must take RLST 4830: Senior Seminar in the Study of Religion and also fulfill a “cluster requirement” by taking three courses in either a single religious tradition or a particular theme. These requirements are new since the 2009 review and apply to those students who registered for the major after August 20, 2016. Religious Studies ranks highest among the arts and humanities departments in the percentage of majors graduating with honors (33 percent).

In AY 2013-2014, the MA program had 15 students and awarded three degrees; in 2016, Religious Studies grew the MA cohort by 11 additional students. Currently, the Religious Studies MA is the terminal degree offered at CU Boulder. Total graduate-level student-credit hours for AY 2015-2016 indicate that the program is small in comparison to other departments, consistent with a relatively small faculty.

The masters degree requirements appear appropriately demanding. Graduate students must take RLST 6830: Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion, three seminars in the academic study of religion, and three research concentration courses (to be determined in consultation with one's advisor). Religious Studies MA students must demonstrate satisfactory reading knowledge of a language other than English. Students may select a thesis or non-thesis option. The thesis option requires a publishable, article-length thesis; the non-thesis option requires a written examination on a reading list of secondary scholarship. All degree students must pass a final oral

examination based on the thesis or written exam.

Budget	The Department of Religious Studies has an annual operating budget of approximately \$50,000, including \$21,000 for summer incentives; \$19,000 for operating costs, including for staff professional development, visiting scholars, office operations, and workshop and conference support; and \$10,500 in gift funds.
Space	The Department of Religious Studies is housed on the second floor of the Eaton Humanities building. The department footprint includes a reception area, a space for the office manager, ten faculty offices, two graduate student TA bullpens, a copy machine room, and a storage closet. Two professors share offices with one instructor. The two faculty members with shared appointments use space elsewhere, including the current chair, who has an office in the University Club through the Program in Jewish Studies. A professional undergraduate advisor is located in McKenna 236.

Past Reviews

The Department of Religious Studies last underwent program review in 2009. The 2009 review report specified recommendations directed to the unit, the college dean, and the provost. To the college, ARPAC recommended that the dean authorize a senior hire to serve as department chair with a mandate to improve undergraduate advising, and to evaluate the adequacy of instruction across the college in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Since 2009, the department has hired a full professor as department chair who is appointed 50 percent in RLST and 50 percent in the Department of History, it has hired a new undergraduate advisor, and it has developed new procedures for faculty undergraduate advising.

ARPAC made five recommendations to the unit:

1. Increase involvement of tenured faculty in lower-level classes. Outcome: the department has increased the credit-hour production by tenure-track faculty.
2. Draft a strategic plan to add and streamline requirements for the undergraduate and graduate programs. Outcome: undergraduate course requirements have been changed since the 2009 report.
3. Increase undergraduate majors. Outcome: the department notes that, as of 2014, it stopped the downward trend in undergraduate majors; in December 2015 it had 49 RLST majors and 28 minors (a 122.7 percent and 27.2 percent increase, respectively).
4. Strengthen and develop ties with other departments. Two full professors moved half of their appointments to the RLST

department, forming connections with the Center for Asian Studies and the Department of History.

5. Add new bylaws relating to instructors. Outcome: RLST revised its bylaws in 2013-2014; however, it is not clear from the self-study if the revision addressed instructors.

Campus Context

The Department of Religious Studies has undergone, in the words of the self-study, a “metamorphosis” since the 2009 report. A 2012 assessment by the CU Boulder director of faculty relations identified a number of serious concerns, including full professors unwilling or unable to serve as chair, an absence of well-established policies to guide departmental business, and staff who were not supportive of faculty needs. As a response to this assessment, an external interim chair, a professor of Physics, was appointed and served for three years. The interim chair implemented new budgetary and merit evaluation procedures; conducted successful searches for new faculty members; hired new staff, one of whom received a campus-wide award; and recruited a new department chair into a 50 percent appointment.

Within the larger university, RLST has stepped into an interdisciplinary role. This is partially through the merits of its two new full professors who work in dual appointments with other departments, its two affiliate faculty members (both in the College of Media and Communications), and its role in the Tibet Himalaya Initiative.

National Context

The field of religious studies is currently experiencing what the external reviewer called “unsettling transitions.” This uncertainty touches on questions about what religion is and what its boundaries are with respect to many other lines of scholarship, including psychology, politics, aesthetics, and secularity. As a result, the field is subject to dissipating into studies within other fields. These transitions and challenges coincide with uncertainty regarding the future of the humanities as a result of a nationwide focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (the STEM disciplines).

Analysis

Since the 2009 review, the Department of Religious Studies has undergone many positive changes. ARPAC commends the interim chair for having provided good leadership. The external reviewer described the department as vibrant and collegial with an “excellent, well-deserved reputation for both research and teaching.” The department plays a positive, interdisciplinary campus role with several centers and initiatives and makes important contributions to other departments. As the external reviewer observed, the department’s campus ties are “confidently and contagiously reciprocal.”

Personnel and governance

The external reviewer lauded the new department chair as “the ideal person to build on the solidified foundation and new momentum gained over the last three years” under the leadership from the interim chair.

The external reviewer recommended a new faculty line in East Asian studies, focusing on Buddhism, that would fill a gap in current course offerings, as well as enable the department to compete for top graduate students interested in Asian religions. Such a hire may also benefit the Center for Asian Studies, which already involves several RLST faculty, and this individual could also work with the newly established Tibet Himalaya Initiative.

The department also requests support for an additional half-time administrative staff member to perform organizational functions, including graduate program administration, student data management, event coordination, and general office support.

Research, scholarship, and creative work

The department is research-active with an impressive record of publications and awards. Recent hires have further broadened the department’s focus. The self-study and internal review committee (IRC) both cite a need for expanded library resources,

including Noorlib, an Islamic Studies database, as well as the Bar-Ilan Responsa Project, a Jewish Studies database.

Undergraduate education and support

The department's broad teaching reach contributes significantly to the College of Arts and Sciences mission to offer students a liberal education. The unit has updated and streamlined undergraduate course requirements in response to the 2009 ARPAC report, and newly enrolled majors and minors are entering under these requirements as of the fall 2016 semester. The internal review committee cites the high satisfaction rate of Religious Studies majors and minors, whose numbers have increased in recent years.

Graduate education and support

The Department of Religious Studies serves a hardworking group of MA students who receive less tuition and financial support than students in other departments, resulting in longer periods of time in the program. The internal review committee found that graduate students were most satisfied with the ease of identifying an advisor, help with determining research topics, and opportunities to attend conferences; however, students were less satisfied with the availability of required courses and electives, financial support, and opportunities to publish and to present at conferences.

The ERC notes that a majority of Religious Studies faculty members support establishment of a PhD program, viewing it as central to the department's future development and to keeping some highly-qualified MA students who currently finish at CU and subsequently pursue further studies at other universities. The ERC report suggested this may ameliorate stagnation among some MA students, motivating them to graduate more quickly and providing them with a richer array of course options. The interest in expanding graduate degree offerings should be

balanced with efforts to repair and improve the quality of the current MA experience.

Inclusive excellence

With recent hires the department gender balance has tipped to male faculty. Moving forward, the department has made the recruitment and retention of female faculty a pressing priority; recruitment of faculty members from minority populations should also be prioritized. Graduate student diversity deserves equal attention. Although not directly named a hindrance to diversity in any of the documents provided to ARPAC, it seems reasonable to assume that the environment described as challenging by MA students might be particularly so for students from minority populations. The unit should concentrate on recruiting for broader racial and ethnic diversity. As an example, a new MA student was recently recruited with the support of a Chancellor's Fellowship in conjunction with the Center for Native American and Indigenous Studies.

Given that the department's core intellectual mission is to address religion in a global context, it is ideally positioned to take on issues of diversity. The self-study suggests that RLST has emerged as a leader in critical discussions about diversity in the historical and current contexts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and their intersections. It also suggests that the department could make a similar impact with regard to immigration and changing demographics in Colorado and the American west, particularly with regard to Latino/a populations.

That said, the self-study also acknowledges the department's shortcomings and lack of expertise in areas of race and religion. They intend to address this as an area for a potential future hire in religion and Latino/a studies and religions of the global South.

Recommendations

The members of the Academic Review and Planning Advisory Committee (ARPAC) address the following recommendations to the Department of Religious Studies and to the offices of the dean and chancellor. It is the committee's intention that the recommendations serve to benefit program improvement and development and to further the mission of the University of Colorado at Boulder.

To the unit:

1. Improve the quality of MA student experiences by ensuring availability of course offerings, identifying sources of financial support that would allow a more direct path through the program, and conducting meetings and community building experiences to improve the MA student experience.
2. Work with the deans of the College of Arts and Sciences and of the Graduate School to explore possibilities involved with offering a PhD course of study, and weigh the impacts of such a program on the MA program. Approval of a PhD program should be contingent upon solving problems regarding dissatisfaction among MA students.
3. Continue to grow the number of undergraduate students enrolled in the major by increasing the visibility of course offerings—for instance, through online media.
4. Examine how current faculty may be able to develop stronger and more interdisciplinary teaching ties with other departments, possibly by developing courses addressing the intersection of race and religion to build new collaborations with, for example, faculty in Ethnic Studies, the Center for Asian Studies, or the Leeds School of Business.

5. Make a strong case for future faculty hires by hiring faculty who specialize in the intersection of race and religion, as well as gender and religion. Diversify the current faculty by attracting female candidates or those from populations underrepresented in higher education. When the first priority of hiring a scholar of Buddhist religions is met, focus on hiring a scholar of Latino religions.

To the dean of the College
of Arts and Sciences and
to the dean of Graduate
Studies:

6. Consider providing the department additional office space; in particular, consider options for collocating the department chair with the faculty.

7. Consider funding an additional full-time assistant to work on such matters as increasing undergraduate awareness of RLST course offerings.

8. Consider RLST faculty arguments for offering a PhD program, factoring in the trade-offs associated with of building the quality of course offerings at a time of lower budgets and tighter constraints on course numbers. Analyze the impact on the MA program.

9. If a PhD program is to be pursued, work with RLST and the Graduate School to explore how the department might best conceive of a PhD degree program, strategically growing and diversifying course offerings that would attract students beyond RLST. This could be done cooperatively with other departments.

To the Office of
Advancement:

10. Work with RLST to outline a fundraising strategy to provide additional scholarship support for MA students.

Required Follow-Up

The chair of the Department of Religious Studies shall report annually on the first of April for a period of three years following the year of the receipt of this report (i.e., April 1st of 2018, 2019, and 2020) to the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and to the provost on the implementation of these recommendations. Likewise, the dean shall report annually on the first of May to the provost on the implementation of recommendations addressed to the college. The provost, as part of the review reforms, has agreed to respond annually to all outstanding matters under her/his purview arising from this review year. All official responses will be posted online.