

**Report of the Review Committee:
Program in Religious Studies, University of New Mexico**

The review committee

Internal:

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External:

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Procedure

The team members were sent preliminary information on the Program in Religious Studies (RS) and the University of New Mexico well in advance. This material included a copy of the recently concluded RS Program Self-Study Report, which included a great deal of pertinent information on students, faculty, the B.A. major in RS, and faculty CVs. It also provided an internal assessment of the Program's strengths, challenges for the future, and ideas for strategic planning and priorities. Also included was UNM's own document outlining the policies, principles, and procedures for conducting an academic program review.

We convened on the UNM campus on April 28-30, 2014. Over this three day period we met privately with the Provost (Chaouki Abdallah), Associate Provost (Greg Heileman), Dean of the College (Mark Peceny) and Associate Dean (Diane Marshall), the RS Program Director (Prof. John Bussanich), most of the faculty (including, notably, senior lecturer Dan Wolne and assistant professor Katie Holscher), two of the previous RS Program chairs (Richard Wood and Sharon Napsted), the RS Program secretary (Lore Giese), and assorted other administrators, notably the APR Specialist (Bessie Gallegos) and the University Accreditation Director (Nancy Middlebrook).

Our report will summarize the results of our meetings, particularly noting the sentiment of the administration with respect to the program, our observations on the health of the program, the extent and quality of the teaching, the place of Religious Studies in the University of New Mexico, the facilities that house the program, and the relationships between faculty of the Program and the students. We will then proceed to draft a series of recommendations.

The Program in Religious Studies

The Program in Religious Studies at UNM is one of about 10 interdisciplinary programs (against about 20 academic departments) within the College of Arts and Sciences. It operates independently of all academic departments, even as it has had close historical ties with the Departments of Philosophy, Sociology, and, more recently, Classics. Its history dates to 1977, when its directors attempted for the first time to seek departmental status. Attempts have been made periodically since then to obtain departmental status, notably at the time of the last APR, 17 years ago, and as recently as about eight years ago. Various factors have prevented this from taking place, some of which are mentioned in this report. Throughout its 37 years the RS Program has emphasized teaching, including many classes that qualify as undergraduate requirements. Thus, the RS Program may be regarded as a service unit. Indeed, it has been treated as such by successive generations of College administrators, both because of and despite its extremely high enrollments (approximately 3000 students and 9000 credit hours per year) and its steady stream of between 40 and 50 majors (the current number is 50). The consistently excellent teaching has been conducted primarily by lecturers and adjunct faculty, although a few tenured and tenure-track faculty have also offered regular courses. It is important to note that the enrolment number is greater than all of the other programs in the College combined. This stratospheric number is consistent over the years and is supported by positive student evaluations. It is thus inescapable to conclude that the RS Program is an exceptionally successful unit within the College.

Observations

- It has been seventeen years since the last APR, meaning that this exercise is quite overdue. We observed a history of roadblocks during that time, including prejudices against the very idea of religious studies by a previous Dean. This was a major setback. However, the present Dean, Mark Peceny, is positively disposed, and the Provost, Chaouki Abdallah, is not at all opposed to RS. The Program needs to develop a strategic plan to take greater advantage of this.
- Program leadership must continue to go the extra mile and encourage instructors, especially lecturers and associated faculty, to apply for external funding for outreach or public programming. It is in their own best interest and in the best interest of the program. A wonderful example has been set with the recent Medieval Spring Lecture Series at the end of April on “Medieval Mystics and Masters” that brought several internationally recognized scholars to campus. The Director of Religious Studies, Prof. Bussanich, helped identify internationally known speakers and contributed a generous \$7,500 to the program from non-recurring funds generated by online courses. The audiences were between 200 and 400 for the evening lectures, which indicates a strong New Mexico public interest in both the medieval period of history and an intellectual approach to religion. This, as much as anything we witnessed, argues for a grassroots interest in and support of religious studies at UNM. The success of this event highlights its exceptional nature in other ways as well. It is an exception to the general situation in which there has

been a comparative lack of programming supported by external funding. A decade ago, Richard Wood brought NEXUS funding for building a Religious Studies community. That funding was explicitly denominational in origin, and for this reason cannot be considered as a model for future development. But in our experience, many sources of external grants exist for internal programming that work better with the goals of a state university.

- Lore Giese, the program secretary, is underutilized by her own admission. She could be asked, for example, to track RS graduates. We did not see that they are tracked and assessed. In collaboration with the Program director and the administration, she could undertake data collection on students and peer comparison with other universities that could help strengthen the Program and provide further argument for upgrading to department status.

- Because of administrative indecision on the part of the College, particularly during the few years in which a Dean was in place who dramatically misunderstood the role of religious studies in a state university, continuity within the Program was lost. It is not out of place here to remind the reader that Religious Studies in a state university is not what it was fifty or seventy-five years ago. The goal is not to indoctrinate young and potentially wayward minds with comforting religious beliefs. This is not in the best interests of the Program and the University, and is in any case opposed to the separation of church and state, enshrined in the U.S. constitution. This might have been the objective of the teaching of religion in the university a century ago, but it is long since superannuated today. Nearly all Departments of Religion have refashioned themselves as Departments of Religious Studies, which is an entirely different enterprise with entirely different ways of thinking and teaching. The goal now, which is honored in virtually all Departments of RS in state universities, is to offer a multidisciplinary and secular study of religious beliefs, actions, and institutions, from historical, sociological, or comparative perspectives. It is at the same time, however, a field that has developed its own methodological perspectives that sets it apart from fields such as anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, and psychology, while complementing all of them.

- Many members of the Program noted that there is no discernible strategic plan that maps out the future of the RS Program. However, we recognize the reasons why the Program has been adrift, and have attempted to explain this. Nevertheless, the Program must compose a strategic plan consisting, at the very least, of a list of three tenure-track faculty positions that will help bolster essentials in a proposed Department of RS, including (for example) positions in Native American religious traditions, East Asian religions, Middle Eastern religion (especially Islam), and Biblical or New Testament thought. The strategic plan, which should be discussed by the RS executive committee but for which input should be sought from all members and associated faculty of the RS Program, should be guided by programmatic thinking rather than personal preference. (See now, as an appendix to this, John Bussanich's hiring plan, dated May 2, 2014, composed after the external reviewers' on site visit.) To reiterate, the Program already has an excellent and broad supporting cast of course offerings. None of the instructors have research programs that would warrant elevating them to tenure-track, although one in particular, senior lecturer Dan Wolne, deserves special mention. Both outside

reviewers were very impressed with the quality of the lecture we observed, and wished he were in our departments. Many universities, including one of ours (Iowa), have on rare occasion elevated a truly spectacular and charismatic teacher with consistently overflowing classes to the position of tenure with the title “teaching professor” (or a variant). This should be written into the strategic plan.

- Several Program members expressed the desire for a greater degree of shared governance within the program, in particular for more open lines of communication and regular meetings with the Program director. There should be greater inclusion of the non tenure-track faculty (lecturers and instructors) and periodic consultation of the associated faculty, among whom the previous Directors of the RS Program (Sharon Napsted and Richard Wood), in the operations of the RS executive committee, including, for example, liaising with the Dean’s offices. Even if many decisions do not require the inclusion of associated faculty, it will strengthen the morale of everyone in the program to include them—and this, it is hoped, will result in a stronger and more focused Program. It is clear that the former directors are fully occupied with their present duties, and thus may appear to have severed their connections with RS. However, from their statements, it is also clear that they would appreciate it if the current director were to reach out to them occasionally.

- According to everyone with whom we spoke, the energy of the Program (although not the enrollments) dissipated under the former Dean. There is every reason for that energy to re-establish itself now, with a more favorable administration in place. It is not too late to mobilize this in spite of the fact that the RS Program did not receive any direct positions in the “year of plenty,” during which 59 new positions were filled (it did receive one spousal hire in the form of an instructorship, Donna Ray, included in these hirings). In the person of Katie Holscher, the RS Program currently has only one faculty position, which it shares with the Department of American Studies. As the largest Program on campus, with enrollments larger than many departments and larger than all of the other Programs combined, the RS Program deserves more than this.

- Like virtually every state university, UNM is dealing with the issue of online education. The responses to many challenges remain provisional. It is no secret that an online course is much more work than a classroom course, even if certain conveniences may be there for both faculty and students. Several online courses are offered in the RS Program, with apparently mixed results. In this way it is no different from the situation elsewhere. An example of this appears in the realm of finances, in which the College has decided to “harvest” the departmental funds generated from online courses. This, like the “cross-subsidies” mentioned below, could be treated as unencumbered funds. We recommend, however, that this harvest be fed back to RS for its own development.

Recommendations

The primary and indeed obvious, conclusion and consequent recommendation of the evaluators, both internal and external, is that the RS Program must continue to seek departmental status. It is clear that Religious Studies as a department should be an

important component in Dean Peceny's vision of New Mexico's flagship university as the pre-eminent model of education for the emergent American majority, namely Hispanics within a resolutely multicultural environment. In this environment, religion plays a role that is perhaps second to none as an independent variable. I cannot (and has not) been studied adequately (with methodological grounding in Religious Studies) in Departments of History, Sociology, Philosophy, or Anthropology; religion as a topic of study receives its only full and unbiased treatment in departments of Religious Studies.

Reasons to departmentalize:

1. While existing departments at UNM specialize in the studies of the physical, historical, and cultural characteristics that distinguish New Mexico from other parts of the United States—including its mountain and desert landscape, its ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity, and its proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border—UNM does not have an academic department oriented toward the study of religion, nor does such a department exist anywhere within the state of New Mexico. This is a major oversight, given New Mexico's dynamic religious history, its present religious diversity, and the critical importance of that history and diversity within national and transnational conversations about religion. New Mexico's past and present religious landscape, which includes the ceremonial culture of Native Americans, traditions of Hispano Catholicism, the role of Catholicism in territorial and early state government, the work of Protestant missionaries and Mormon settlers, the flourishing of religious seekers and alternative forms of spirituality in the last fifty years, the devotional lives of migrants and border peoples, etc., makes the region an essential corrective to Anglo, Protestant, and East Coast-centric narratives about U.S. and North American religious life.
2. Scholars of religion at other U.S. institutions regard New Mexico as religiously interesting, but they do not undertake the serious work of thinking about how this region informs broader issues in religion or religious studies scholarship. Faculty affiliated with the Religious Studies Program at UNM *are* doing that work. A full department of religious studies at UNM, one that houses scholars with regional expertise, as well as scholars working on religious traditions from across history and around the world, and cultivates dialogue and collaboration between them, is a necessary and critical first step toward realizing UNM's potential as a national and international center for the study of religion.
3. Although the external reviewers support departmentalization, we understand that this must perforce be a medium term goal, to be accomplished over approximately a five-year period. Many outstanding components must be put in place, including at least two additional tenure-track positions, in order for this to become a reality. An internal round of discussions is necessary in order to determine the focus of the Religious Studies Program vis à vis religion itself, especially which religions it wants to study and according to which methods. We strongly believe that a UNM Department of Religious Studies can quickly gain visibility on the national and international map of such departments by supplementing the usual and

necessary course offerings for RS departments with a concentration in the religion of the American Southwest or of the North American continent south of the Colorado border, or even of the non-Anglophone (or Francophone) western hemisphere. (It may be mentioned here that specializations in this area are not found in the RS Departments at the University of Arizona, Arizona State University, or the University of Northern Arizona). These areas are sorely neglected in the field of Religious Studies and should be brought into the mainstream. This has recently been recognized by the American Academy of Religion (AAR), which has instituted Religion in the American West as a new group, with Katie Holscher as a member of its steering committee. Furthermore, these concentrations, which should include strengths in Hispanic Christianity (and Judaism!) and Native American religions, correspond directly with the aforementioned vision articulated by Dean Peceny. Some of the elements are already in place, including expertise in the sociology of religion, bearing strongly on the Southwest (Katie Holscher and Sharon Napsted), and there is an attractive and relevant flanking array of courses taught by the four established instructors (lecturers) and the nine adjuncts. Thus the Program is already interdisciplinary in ways that many large established departments can only dream of. That said, the Program (or department) must find a way to balance the components of a department, including the sociological, the text-historical, the classical, and the contemporary. As the only tenure-track faculty member in the RS Program, Katie Holscher must play a major role in this discussion. It is also advisable to try to bring Katie Holscher entirely into RS (knowing of course how difficult it is for university departments to relinquish what they already have). Methodological pluralism must be a highlight of this discussion. We must state emphatically that Katie is a wonderful hire, and UNM must not risk losing her because of inaction.

4. RS is a profit-making Program for the College and the university. The profits are distributed throughout the University (including within the College itself) to other areas of need. To use the words of Provost Abdallah, "Universities are exercises in cross-subsidies." As convenient as this might be for UNM, this does not require the sacrifice of a transition of RS from a Program to a department. The costs involved in hiring two or three additional tenure-track faculty members, with their expanded course offerings, will, if handled carefully, more than justify the expenditure. Enrollments, already high, will continue to increase, and the integration that a Department of RS will bring to the College in terms of diversity will produce incalculable dividends in terms of undergraduate and graduate programming, not to mention national visibility. In short, a Department of RS can play a major role in improving other departments and programs around it.

Acknowledgement

Finally, the external reviewers thank the University and the Program for inviting us. It was an enlightening and positive experience for both of us. We must reiterate in conclusion that the Program has many reasons to be proud, many gifted teachers

(especially Dan Wolne), an excellent recent hire around whom the Program can build (Katie Holscher), a new hire in an affiliated role (Sarah Davis-Secord), and an exceptionally strong cast of lecturers and adjuncts. We must also compliment John Bussanich for streamlining many of the internal operations of the Program.

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