RELIGIOUS STUDIES DEPARTMENT

CHAIR'S RESPONSE TO THE PROGRAM PERFORMANCE REVIEW EXTERNAL

REVIEW TEAM REPORT

March 22, 2019

I am extremely appreciative for the excellent report produced by the Religious Studies

Department's External Review Team - Dr. James Hussar (Modern Languages & Literatures,

California State University, Fullerton), Dr. Vincent F. Biondo (Religious Studies, California

State University, Humboldt), and Dr. Christopher Key Chapple (Department of Theological

Studies, (Loyola Marymount University). It was our great pleasure and honor to host these

enthusiastic scholars on February 26, 2019; they truly are exceptional colleagues. During this site

visit, the team met with Dean Sheryl Fontaine and Interim Associate Dean Jessica Stern. They

also met separately with me (the chair) before having a fruitful conference with the entire

faculty. Additionally, they observed two different classes and had a separate meeting with four of

our students. It was noticeable that they listened very carefully and took copious notes during

these meetings.

The External Review Team prepared a very detailed report that included commendations,

challenges and recommendations. They generously offered 10 specific recommendations and

suggestions, which I have shared with Religious Studies faculty. I will address these

recommendations individually below.

1. We agree with the Review Team's recommendation that we should "conduct a

    department retreat to refresh and update the mission, vision, objectives, and goals of the

Department." However, although having a "facilitator" to moderate a retreat may be a good idea, we are not sure yet whether we would necessarily need one. In fact, this recommendation corresponds with one of the department's agenda in our last meeting (3/12/19) when, without discussing and digesting the report yet, a date (5/22/2019) was already set to have a departmental retreat to do exactly what was recommended. We had acknowledged in the self-study and in our meeting that our mission and goals are dated (2007) vis-vis those of the university (2018-23), which are not neatly in sync. Yet, we tried our best in the self-study to point to their corresponding aspects that we feel are compelling. Importantly, revising the mission and goals of the department is imperative now because our department is in a different stage where the mission and goals must not only reflect the current situations, but also project our future aspirations. We hope this revision in mission and goals would guide not only our drive towards a possible simplification of the requirements for majors and minors, but also the future vision and justification for hiring tenure-track positions.

2. We wholeheartedly agree that we should consider new tenure-track faculty to replace our retiring faculty. We particularly appreciate the Team's specific suggestion that we should aspire to hire scholars who "can successfully advocate for civility across liberal and conservative, evangelical and secular, and white and non-white…; Scholar of Global Christianities, Civic Engagement, and Interreligious Cooperation." We certainly agree with the recommendation to consider hiring a scholar in thematic and topical areas with wider and shared appeal such as religion and ecology, religion and culture, religion and wellness, religious diversity in California. The department needs at least two tenure-tracks in the next one to three years due to faculty retirements.

3. The External Review Team is right to encourage us to continue our efforts for external funding to support the department. Our successful outreach to Muslim, Jain and Jewish communities for funds can be expanded and certainly be replicated with regards to other groups.

4. Although study abroad opportunities should always be welcome by all departments, it is not currently feasible for a department as small as ours to develop or initiate it. However, our students who are interested in study abroad opportunities may pursue that through the very successful H&SS College initiatives.

5. We agree with the Team that field trips to religious institutions (churches, synagogues, mosques, temples) in Orange County are a great idea. In fact not only our instructors in lower level courses already take such trips as integral part of their classes, the department encourages that as part of our high impact activities.

6. Assessment is already a university-wide activity in which the department must engage every year. We have a two member assessment committee which includes an assessment coordinator. In the past few years, the team of assessment on campus have considered our assessment practices to be excellent. The recommendation to consolidate some courses is also helpful, but a specific suggestion on how we could go about doing that (as expressed in the self-study) would have been more helpful. Nevertheless, we plan to come up with ways to consolidate our course requirements either during our retreat or after that. Even though we adjudge our online offerings to be successful based on SOQs and enrollment statistics, we agree with the Team that we could still embark on specific online assessment. This could help us gain further insight about the benefits and challenges of online offerings that do not surface during regular assessment. What we already sense is

the adverse impact of intensive online classes on our recruitment, since our direct contact with students to recruit is greatly minimized if not eliminated.

7. We agree with the Team regarding the significance of cross-listing courses, especially, in terms of enrollment and recruitments. We already have an exhaustive cross-listing protocol with several relevant departments, such as Philosophy, History and Sociology. However, what we are planning to do is identify our courses that are tailor-made for specific departments and ask them to suggest to their students, so that they could take such courses as part of their electives. This is important in anticipation of the adverse impact of EO1100r regarding double counting.

8. We completely agree with the Team that we should consider creating an online minor, due to the department's success and experience in online offerings. The positive aspect of a complete online minor (or major) would be an enhanced enrollment and graduation. However, as our faculty have noted, it negatively affects our recruitments, as direct contact for possible recruitments is minimized or eliminated.

9. We agree that campus-wide events would bring attention to the department. In fact, as we stated in the self-study, we already are actively staging what we consider high-impact activities by inviting well-known personalities and the general public to campus, in hope of generating publicity for the department and the courses we teach.

10. We completely agree with the Team that regular visits by our Professors to local community colleges and high schools with promotional materials should be made a priority of the department. This could partly address our recruitment challenges. For by making guest lectures in these institutions, we would be introducing those students to our

department and university well before they are ready to apply or transfer to university. And that could enhance the likelihood of them considering our department.

In sum, the recommendations made by the External Review Team are extremely helpful. Not only do we appreciate them, but we also plan to implement them all as much and as quickly as we can. We specifically hope to execute, as soon as possible, their suggestions to consider hiring a tenure-track faculty and conducting a departmental retreat to review our mission and goals that would inform our immediate future trajectory. As we can embark on some of the recommendations on our own with departmental resources, we would need support and cooperation of the H&SS College and the Dean's office to implement others. We hope we can fully count on the Dean's office, as usual, as we strive to steer the department clear in this difficult transitional period and continue to maintain a stronger and vibrant Religious Studies program.