

California State University, Fullerton  
Program Performance Review  
Department of Religious Studies  
External Review Report (Spring 2019)

Review Team Members

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The Review Process

This report is based on the review team's study of the Program Performance Review Self-Study, completed on January 25, 2019 by the CSUF Religious Studies Department, followed up with a site visit that took place on February 26, 2019. During the on-campus visit, the review team met with Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences Sheryl Fontaine and Interim Associate Dean for Student Relations Jessica Stern. The team met also with Dr. Zakyi Ibrahim, Chair of Religious Studies, before visiting the class of Emeritus Professor Ben Hubbard, Hebrew Scriptural Studies. After the class, the team met with the newest member of the department, Assistant Professor Mugdha Yeolekar. After a break, the team attended her class, Religions of the World. Following the class visit, the team met with four students and then had lunch with several students and additional faculty members, including James Santucci, Brad Starr, and Jeanette Solano. After lunch, the team met with the faculty (Ibrahim, Santucci, Solano, Starr, Yeolekar) for more than an hour. After conferral with Chair Zakyi Ibrahim, the team met with the Dean and Associate Dean before convening a review wrap-up team meeting.

This report is organized into three principal sections in which we outline commendations, challenges, and recommendations for the CSUF Department of Religious Studies. Our primary focus is on the minor and major programs offered by the department.

## Commendations

Overall, there is much to commend about the Department of Religious Studies at CSU Fullerton. Historically, this is one of the most respected departments of Religious Studies in the CSU. Senior faculty members Hubbard, Starr, and Santucci have built a quality program with a track record of placing its graduates in top graduate programs, where they have proven successful. The students that we met were among the finest in the CSU and they highlighted in particular excellent advising from energetic and dedicated faculty.

Having recognized that times were changing, the senior faculty hired diverse faculty successfully. Junior or mid-career faculty Solano, Ibrahim, and Yeolekar are accomplished and respected scholars with global scope who are well-suited for first-generation and under-represented minority CSU students.

The curriculum is rich and comprehensive in scope. It contains all of the elements needed for a successful program.

The senior faculty were prominent nationally during the 1990s for their outreach to the local community, including researching ethnic and religious diversity and inter-religious dialogue. Building on this excellence, junior faculty are taking students into the field for site visits. They have invited prominent guest speakers to inform the campus community and are interested in leading study abroad opportunities. These efforts reflect components of the current university mission including global engagement, local service, and diversity.

The faculty have undertaken some assessment efforts. Learning outcomes including Religious Studies knowledge and the ability to write research papers have been emphasized, and there appears to be evidence of student success.

The faculty should be commended for being very active in learning new technologies and teaching methods. During our observations of two classes, we observed the successful use of technology in the classroom and excellent teaching methods. With 70% of courses in the department currently being taught online, the faculty seemed up-to-date and aware of the latest technologies and online teaching best practices.

An area of excellence that may be under-appreciated by campus colleagues is the importance of the local community to the academic study of religion. Orange County is one of the richest religious environments in the United States. Because of the profound importance of religious diversity locally, the department could advocate for a greater presence in the area of GE service teaching.

Current faculty are engaged in local communities including doing volunteer work and fundraising. New efforts in Jain Studies and Islamic Studies are impressive and should help to appeal to an increasingly diverse student population. Faculty also have demonstrated successful collaboration on campus in teaching for the Liberal Studies and Honors programs. One faculty member currently serves as Associate Dean of

Humanities and Social Sciences and another is mentoring students through the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program.

Enrollment has stayed strong despite overall reductions in the Humanities since the 2008-2009 financial crisis. Facilities, including offices, meeting spaces, and classrooms appeared in good condition and faculty participating in the FERP program appear to be participating in department affairs.

### Challenges

As Religious Studies plans for its future, the Program Performance Review offers an opportunity to identify and address several important challenges, including:

- **Department vision.** Religious Studies last updated its mission and goals in 2007. The department needs to reconsider its mission and goals not only in response to changes that have taken place over the past 12 years, but also in the context of anticipated changes and potential areas of growth.
- **Personnel.** Currently, two senior faculty in the department (Dr. Brad Starr and Dr. James Santucci) are FERP participants. Additionally, an emeritus faculty (Dr. Ben Hubbard) teaches in the department as an adjunct professor. Religious Studies will need to develop a job description to request at least one tenure-track line in the near future. The process of updating the mission and goals statement should inform the department's hiring request(s). The review team did not have the opportunity to interact with adjunct faculty other than Dr. Hubbard. Therefore, the extent to which adjunct faculty participate in departmental activities and decisions was unclear, although adjunct faculty teach a considerable number of the department's courses.
- **Course offerings.** Religious Studies lists an abundance of courses as options to fulfill requirements in its minor and major programs. Some courses, however, have not been offered in several academic years. The department needs to establish a schedule to review its curriculum periodically, consider retiring courses that are unlikely to be offered in the future, and develop a course rotation to enhance student progress toward degrees and to mitigate competition for enrollment between courses that fulfill the same requirements. In addition, the department needs to evaluate the structure of its major program and determine if and how to consolidate the eight separate requirement categories. The department also needs to determine if and how to consolidate its four options for the minor.
- **Assessment.** The department uses direct and indirect measures of assessment to report student achievement vis-à-vis eight Student Learning Outcomes. Assessing eight distinct SLOs, as opposed to the five recommended by the Office of Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness, presents a challenge in and of itself. Moreover, the self-study does not indicate what constitutes success with regard to meeting an objective (for example, what percentage of student samples assessed demonstrate mastery of, or proficiency with regard to, specific criteria). If

assessment of student progress is desirable, as the self-study suggests, then more effort is needed to assess the work of a control group of students over time; the assessment of two different groups—one of beginning students and another, of senior students—does not show progress, per se.

- Enrollment. Currently, the department has 16 declared majors and 14 declared minors. In order to stave off cancellation of non-GE and 400-level courses due to low enrollment, the department needs to pursue strategies to recruit more majors and minors. This is a daunting task in light of extenuating factors such as impaction on the CSUF campus, which limits the prospective student pool by imposing additional hurdles to admission. Moreover, Executive Order (EO) 1100, which allows double counting of courses in the major to satisfy GE requirements, may adversely affect Religious Studies in a number of ways, including lower enrollment in the department's GE courses and, consequently, fewer opportunities to gain new minors and majors.

## Recommendations

1. Consider inviting a facilitator to conduct a department retreat to refresh and update the mission, vision, objectives, and goals of the Department of Religious Studies at CSUF. This will enable the Chair to fully participate as a colleague, and allow all voices to be heard. It might result in a simplification of course requirements for majors and minors.
2. As part of the revised mission, it will be important to highlight faculty and student diversity, as well as global and local initiatives. The department should perhaps consider hiring a new faculty member to replace Hubbard and Starr who knows Greek or Hebrew and can successfully advocate for civility across liberal and conservative, evangelical and secular, and white and non-white. A Hubbard-Starr Scholar of Global Christianities, Civic Engagement, and Interreligious Cooperation could help to recruit students and donors across the region. Christian students will see CSU Fullerton as a viable choice and non-Christian students will benefit by learning about the world's largest religion. Another topic to consider would be the discipline-wide shift from tradition-bound textual studies toward inter-religious conversations about areas of shared concern such as religion and ecology, religion and culture, religion and wellness, religious diversity in California, global Christianities (see above), and religion and science. Use this conversation to develop a formal request for a new tenure track line in anticipation of retirement of two current faculty members.
3. Continue to pursue program support funds from local and national foundations, expanding the successful outreach already in place with the Jewish, Islamic, and Jain communities.
4. Pursue opportunities to develop short-term and long-term study abroad opportunities.
5. Pursue opportunities to further develop field trip and study opportunities at the many churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and religious centers in Orange County.

6. Seek on-campus advisement to develop a comprehensive ongoing assessment plan. As part of the assessment plan, some courses will be removed from the bulletin, making advisement more manageable. It is also possible that some courses might be consolidated. The assessment of online offerings is essential.
7. Work with other departments and programs to aggressively cross-list courses. This will help with enrollment and recruitment of minors and majors.
8. Consider creating and promoting an online minor.
9. Generate more all-campus events that bring attention to the Religious Studies faculty and the department.
10. Visit local community college and high school classes in the study of religion to encourage applications to CSUF's Department of Religious Studies. Prepare simple promotional materials that highlight the website. Include more student success videos.

### Summary

In sum, the Department of Religious Studies is doing an excellent job in providing quality education to General Education students at CSUF as well as for students choosing to minor or major in Religious Studies. Because of impending changes in faculty composition and in the overall field of Religious Studies, this is a good time for further assessment and reflection. It is suggested that the department develop of a new mission statement to replace the mission as articulated in 2007. With the department's remarkable success in the area of online teaching, it is important to articulate how new educational technologies have strengthened the teaching of religious studies at CSUF. With the anticipated hiring of replacement faculty, it is important that the department develop a clear vision about how to best serve the needs of its minors and majors while enhancing its standing within the needs of the General Education curriculum. The energy and enthusiasm of the faculty bode well for a successful future innovation.