

DATA-BASED DECISIONS / SUSTAINABILITY

ACADEMIC YEARS 2015-17

(Organized by Learning Objectives)

Students completing the BA or BS degree in Religious Studies should be able to:

1. demonstrate literacy concerning the major religions of the world

Our three-year strategic plan, external peer review, and internal curriculum review determined that our coverage was not consistent across the major world religions. Over the past two years, we have worked steadily to improve coverage:

- We created a new tenure-track position in Buddhism, providing stable teaching in this major world religion. Courses include “Introduction to Buddhism,” “Buddhism in the West,” and “Women in Buddhism.”
 - We have hired a postdoc in Judaism, Bible, and Early Christianity, which is our most significant area of need. New courses now offered on campus include “Introduction to Judaism” and “Women in the Bible.” These are supplemented by online courses in this subject area: “Introduction to Judaism,” and “The Historical Jesus.” Nevertheless, we still require long term curricular stability in Jewish Studies and Biblical Studies.
 - The religious literacy survey in RELS 1010 has been consistently returning evidence of significant growth in students’ knowledge of world religions, over the past 3 years. Survey results are available on the Religious Studies assessment website.
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2. understand the relationship between religion and culture, and think critically about the influence of religious value systems on individuals and societies
- The Religious Studies Program has collaborated with the Anthropology Program to develop the Interfaith Leadership Certificate, housed in the Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology. The Certificate relies on numerous Religious Studies courses, while also offering a new course that specifically addresses the nature of religious difference in cultures and societies: “Bridging Religious Difference: Theory and Practice” (RELS 3165).
 - We have added additional new courses that teach the relationship between religion and culture: “Science and Religion,” “Religion and Politics in South Asia,” and “Gods and Goddesses of India.”
 - We have been producing a varied array of events and speakers who address the implications of religion on societies and individuals. Last year’s events include a lecture on the religious dimensions of the West African Ebola crisis, a lecture by an expert on religion and terrorism, a panel on women’s roles in Mormonism (in partnership with the Center for Women and Gender), and a lecture on the relationship between science and religion.

3. read and analyze the sacred texts of different religious traditions

Our external peer review and survey of majors indicated that we were not offering enough courses on the sacred texts of major religious traditions. We have made development of such courses a priority for the program. Recent offerings include courses such as, “Yoga Theory,” “New Testament Philosophy” (cross-listed with Philosophy), and “Women in the Bible.” We also hosted a well-attended conference on Joseph Smith and Translation, which highlighted scholarship on the Book of Mormon.

4. apply appropriate methods of research and argumentation to questions concerning religion; and

“Theory and Method in Religious Studies” (RELS 3990), which is a course required of all majors, now includes research training that is specifically intended to prepare students for their capstone thesis (RELS 4990). Students read journal articles by recognized scholars in the field, learn to decipher the articles’ lines of reasoning through weekly “argument maps,” and build their own skills of questioning and argumentation through regular writing assignments.

5. communicate their findings in clear, well-reasoned writing

In “Theory and Method” (RELS 3990), majors write an annotated bibliography, an academic book review, a thesis proposal, and weekly response papers—thus gaining experience with a variety of writing styles. Nearly all the assignments are iterative, either through multiple drafts of the same essay, or multiple essays of the same type, allowing the instructor to provide regular feedback and track improvement on their writing and reasoning skills. Furthermore, “Introduction to Religious Studies” (RELS 1010), as taught by both Gupta and Sur, includes iterative writing assignments.

6. possess a rigorous foundation for pursuing advanced study in religion or related fields

- We have instituted an exit survey of graduating majors to assess how prepared they feel for their future careers. The results of this survey are available on the Religious Studies assessment website.
- We have increased the number of majors we send to the Wheatley Conference on Religion in the Public Sphere. Past attendees have affirmed that this conference considerably broadened their understanding of the applicability of Religious Studies to a variety of careers. In Fall 2017, we are slated to send 8 majors to the conference.
- Upon completing their degrees, our undergraduate and graduate students earn places at prestigious universities and employers. Last year, one of our students went on to pursue a PhD in Classics at the University of California Berkeley, a second is studying for his doctoral degree as a Thomas Jefferson Fellow at the University of Virginia, while another is helping found the Smithsonian’s National Women’s History Museum in Washington.