

Undergraduate Program Review Program for the Study of Religion

The review committee read documentation about the program, including the self-assessment, faculty and enrollment data, and student exit surveys; we met in person with the core faculty, some of the affiliated faculty, an undergraduate major (only one showed up), the chair and Academic Business Officer of the Literature Department, and the staff persons associated with the program. The Program for the Study of Religion (PSR), which exists only as an undergraduate major and minor, is a valuable part of our university's offerings, much appreciated by its students.

A. Administrative structure, faculty composition, and enrollments

The PSR consists of a core faculty of three, all with their FTE housed in the Literature Department, although their training is in the study of religions. One of those three is the director of the program. All three meet to work out teaching assignments for the following year and to discuss other issues regarding the program. All three also engage in advising and mentoring students. Now that the other two faculty have received or will soon receive tenure, it will be possible to rotate the directorship if they so desire.

There is an amicable understanding with the Literature Department that the Program will be regularly able to cover its three required upper-division courses and its one lower-division course on an annual basis. Although there is no defined FTE allotted to the Program, the department has been committed to upholding its obligation, and in return the core faculty willingly contribute to the needs of the Literature Department. Because of the nature of the PSR, the core faculty do very little graduate teaching. A one-course lecturer position is used sometimes to teach in PSR and sometimes in Literature; it has not been used, however, to buy out one course every other year for the director, who, apart from his first two years, has been teaching the full Literature faculty load of courses (five and four in alternate years). We see this as a potential problem with regard both to enabling the director's professional development and to persuading someone in the future to take on the position of director. The arrangement with Literature, which so far is working smoothly, has solved the problem raised in the previous review regarding a lack of committed teaching sufficient to cover core courses regularly. The previous concern about a lack of faculty involvement in advising students has also been resolved.

The Literature Department is sensitive to the need to find appropriate reviewers for promotions files for the PSR faculty who are in the department but not in the field of literature.

In addition to the core faculty, 49 affiliated faculty (of which two are emeritus) contribute regularly about twenty elective courses per year; these are courses which they would be teaching anyway but which are designated as satisfying the PSR. The staff person updates the program website every quarter with a list of available courses. The bulk of affiliated faculty come roughly evenly from Literature, History, and Anthropology or Sociology; others are drawn from Philosophy, Visual Arts, Political Science and Communications. The result is a varied array of courses for students to take. PSR is in the midst of conversations with Judaic Studies about coordinating teaching efforts rather than competing for students. Other such conversations with other units on campus might be similarly useful in future.

There is one 50% staff person who is absolutely critical to the functioning of the program: she identifies and lists the course offers every quarter, maintains and updates the information on the program's website, maintains contact with the affiliated faculty, regularly contacts students both within and beyond the program to make them aware of program events and of information about the major and minor, attends transfer and admission events to represent the PSR, and functions as an advisor to students. The Program is lucky to have an excellent and devoted staff person in this position.

The number of majors in recent years has varied from 23 to 40 declaring a major, and 13-21 completing a degree; the number of minors has ranged between 24-31, with 8-11 completing a minor. Many students are double majors, combining PSR with a major in Anthropology (currently the most: five), International Studies, Political Science, Visual Arts, Biology (three), History, and Philosophy. The director's target is to grow to 40-50 majors. Although the Program worries about a recent decline in the number of majors (but simultaneously an increase in minors), we think this may be connected not only with broader student concerns about studies leading to jobs, but also with the fact that the core faculty have been one after another on leave for a year; the dynamism of all three is attractive to students, so the fact that all three are now back to teaching for the next few years should help raise the number of majors to its previous numbers. As many undergraduates are unaware of the Program, the PSR has been making concerted efforts to publicize itself (advertisements on the campus busses, emails to students in related fields, information sessions announced in large or targeted classes, outreach to new and transfer students, film and speaker events). One of the most effective means of attracting majors has been through the core faculty's teaching of lower division courses, especially RELI 1 or MMW 12 (formerly MMW 3) and freshman seminars. The Program is therefore considering adding another lower division course and allowing these courses to count towards the major, as they already do towards the minor. We think this is a good idea worth pursuing. It would, of course, require shifting one more regularly taught course from Literature to PSR. The new redesign of the UCSD website to link students to majors rather than to departments will also make a significant difference in the visibility of this major, currently hidden within the Literature Department, where students are not likely to look for it.

B. Quality of the faculty and curriculum

The quality of the core faculty is extremely high. All are productive scholars publishing with respected journals and presses, and excellent teachers. Affiliated faculty are equally high quality. Our sense of student enthusiasm for the faculty was confirmed by exit surveys, our student interview, teaching evaluations, and the fact that lower-division teaching by the core faculty generates student excitement and interest in the program.

The conception of the program is cutting edge in its interdisciplinarity and aligns with an American Academy of Religion (AAR) report (2008) on the shift of the field away from the study of particular religious traditions towards a broader understanding of religion formulated from a theoretical point of view as a phenomenon linked to nearly every aspect of human experience. The PSR has articulated clearly for itself its understanding of its educational mission and its objectives for student learning: "Our purpose is to help students gather the information, the analytic tools, and the critical acumen whereby they can think clearly and deeply about the place of religion in their own lives and the lives of their fellow human beings." "The program judges its success by whether students gain a contextual understanding of the religious phenomena they investigate, and whether they are able to usefully interrogate their source materials in order to develop analytical skills in the practice of interpretation, oral discussion, and writing....we are always concerned to make sure students know and recognize the difference between confessional and scholarly discourses on religion." The catalog and webpage set forth some of these objectives; perhaps putting more of the language of this articulation from the self-study onto the website would be useful to students, who are not always aware of these objectives. The conceptual coherence of this program compares favorably with departments in this field at UCSB and UCR.

The AAR notes that although there is no single standard for how to construct an undergraduate program, the field aims to develop what have been described as the "essential learning outcomes for all American college students," i.e. "intercultural learning, engagement of big questions, critical thinking and writing, moral reasoning, and the application of all these skills to new global contexts and lived behaviors." We

note that even for non-majors PSR can contribute particularly well to the campus need for developing students' ability to respectfully disagree and to conduct discussions of deeply felt issues within a civil discourse.

Only three courses are specifically required for majors, and all are upper division. One provides a theoretical and methodological introduction to the academic study of religion. A second involves reading and analyzing sacred texts and understanding the history of its interpretations. The third is a research seminar, which aims to involve seniors in some practical experience of how advanced research in this field is done. The content of each of these courses can change with the expertise of the faculty teaching it, enabling the core faculty to take turns. By focusing on methods and skills rather than specific religious traditions, the program serves students with a variety of backgrounds and interests. Its interdisciplinarity similarly connects with students from widely different second majors, and the exit surveys indicate a broad array of options pursued after graduation.

Students are happy with the nature and flexibility of the program, which enables them to combine it often with another major and nonetheless to complete their degree in slightly less time than the campus average. They tend to undertake this major for reasons of intellectual interest and personal development rather than for career objectives. Grades in PSR courses are slightly higher than (but not out of line from) the campus average, as one might expect from upper division classes chosen according to the student's personal interests.

PSR offers an Honors Program, involving two quarters of research and writing. The student we spoke with expressed an interest in it but was very unsure how to go about it. The process could be made clearer in the catalog copy and on the webpage.

While preserving the advantages (for both faculty and students) of a flexible program, the core faculty have taken seriously the request from students for some more structure and are discussing both possible distribution requirements and, to encourage depth, a possible requirement of two courses in one religious tradition. We think these are both good ideas, and are glad to see the faculty responding to student concerns and continuing to think about how to improve the program.

C. Campus policies and campus context

The absence of any specific lower division requirements makes the major readily accessible to transfer students and makes it possible for both transfer students and students who come into the program late in their undergraduate studies to complete a major in a timely manner. On the downside, the lack of any lower division course articulation with other colleges adds to the invisibility of the program to transfer students.

Another visibility problem is caused by the Registrar program's inability to cross-list courses visibly in the schedule of classes. This creates a problem for a program which depends heavily on such cross-listing. Students registering for courses do not see that these courses might count towards a major or minor in PSR. As this is a problem for all interdepartmental programs, it is a systemic problem that we feel strongly needs to be addressed by the campus.

The one lower-division course (RELI 1: Introduction to Religion) that is currently offered regularly also serves to fulfill the distribution requirements of Sixth and Warren Colleges. This is the only course so far to make use of a TA, who is mentored regularly by the professor. This course may be counted towards the minor.

D. Recommendations

On the whole this is a healthy program well set to continue offering its major to enthusiastic students. The faculty and staff are excellent and devoted to the program. While elsewhere a small department of religion may get stuck in its habitual tracks, here the variety of approaches and disciplines creates the constant possibility for new things to happen. The flexibility of the program also allows it to work well for a wide diversity of students and to enable them to finish their degree requirements in good time. PSR is well positioned to serve the campus as a node that can draw together Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences into fruitful interactions. They are already involved in projects that cross those lines, and we encourage the program to continue actively doing that.

1. Administrative structure

With regard to administrative structure, we recommend that the PSR reconstitute a steering committee which includes, along with the core faculty, one or two of the affiliated faculty members from other departments and divisions (at least one from the Social Sciences). This is not at all aimed at changing the direction of the program, but rather is intended to encourage further involvement of the affiliated faculty. Affiliated faculty on the steering committee might also be active in identifying and drawing in other affiliated faculty to contribute to the program and at helping the program's cooperative ventures with other departments.

PSR and the Literature Department might want to consider using the annual one-course lecturer FTE to enable the PSR director to have a one-course release every other year. This would not only enhance his or her opportunities for professional development, but would also make the directorship more attractive in the future when a new director is being sought. This will become more urgent as the number of students increases.

2. Faculty and curriculum

Enough courses are regularly available to make this program work well. However, apart from the teaching by the core faculty, all other courses are offered on an ad hoc basis which PSR tends to find out about the quarter before, in time for student registration. Some proactive inquiry might enable the program to establish farther in advance what courses will be available, which might help the core faculty with their own planning. We encourage the PSR's ongoing conversations with Judaic Studies on cooperative course offerings.

PSR shares the problem of all interdepartmental programs, that their affiliate faculty and course offerings depend on hiring choices which they do not control. We encourage the director to seek out discussion with relevant departments about possible upcoming hires, and to offer whatever leverage PSR can in order to encourage departments to hire in a way that will serve both the department and PSR.

Because PSR has no graduate program, the core faculty do little graduate teaching. We recommend that they and the Literature Department discuss how the core faculty can become more involved in graduate teaching and mentoring.

We support the PSR's current efforts to construct some minimal breadth and depth requirements. These should be kept as simple as possible so as not to interfere with the flexibility of the program, which is important to both students and faculty, and so as to avoid unduly complicating the advising process. We like the PSR proposal to require two courses in one tradition (the traditions will have to be defined). We suggest that a distribution requirement as simple as requiring at least one course in Social Sciences and

one in Arts or Humanities would serve the function of ensuring that students are experiencing a diversity of approaches and methods.

At least some of the affiliated faculty would like to feel more a part of a PSR community but have the usual time constraints; some of them commented that (time permitting) they would be interested in occasionally gathering to discuss topics of common interest, i.e. not the academic program but current issues in the field. Extracurricular events (e.g. a workshop on inter-religion dialog and conflict) could also attract campus attention to the program and offer useful and exciting discussions to the campus.

Although team-teaching is bureaucratically complicated, team course development or workshops are easier to arrange and could be useful both in attracting grant money and in developing new courses.

3. Students and Enrollments

Students are currently advised when they seek advising. We suggest that all majors be required to meet once a year with a faculty academic advisor, as an opportunity to discuss current and future plans and to ensure proper preparation for whatever the student wants to do next.

PSR has made concerted effort of outreach to students, but many students are still unaware of its existence or think that they are not interested because of false preconceptions about the field. Adding one or two new lower division courses, as the program is proposing, we think would be helpful in this regard. One such course likely to attract students to the program is a course in comparative religions. Attention needs to be paid, however, to how such a course is taught. It was brought to our attention that when RELI 1 has been taught by core faculty, it has attracted student interest in the program, but that enrollments in both the course and the major fell when it was taught by several different ad hoc lecturers during the years of core faculty leaves. Regular teaching by a good teacher would make this course a boon to both students and the program. Permitting (but not requiring) a lower division course to count towards the major might encourage students to continue pursuing the interest that such a course has aroused.

The Registrar program's inability to cross-list courses visibly in the schedule of classes creates a problem for a program which depends heavily on such cross-listing because students registering for courses under the affiliated rubric do not see that these courses might count towards a major or minor in PSR. As this is a problem for all interdepartmental programs and is a matter of software, we feel strongly that it needs to be addressed by the campus.

Students need more guidance in the process of pursuing the Honors Program. The catalog tells them to present a proposal to the director, but they do not know how to do this. It needs to be made clear to them that the first step is to find a professor willing to work with them on a proposal.

Students are regularly invited to speakers and other such events; however, they have expressed an interest in some more purely social events enabling them to get to know other PSR majors and minors in an informal manner in order to create a sense of community. A student organization of majors and minors might undertake to organize this sort of student-oriented activity. Such events might also offer good occasions for some of them to bring along a friend with potential interest in the program.

Review committee:

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October 4, 2013

**PROFESSOR RICHARD COHEN, Director
Program for the Study of Religion**

SUBJECT: Undergraduate Program Review for the Program for the Study of Religion

The Undergraduate Council considered the report of the subcommittee charged with reviewing the undergraduate program of the Program for the Study of Religion at its November 9, 2012 meeting. At the time the Council considered this review, the Council also considered and approved changes to the curriculum of the Program which implemented the primary curricular recommendations of the review subcommittee's report. We are pleased to see that the Program accepted these and almost all other recommendations of the review subcommittee. Additionally, the Council supports the Program's plan to constitute an "expanded core faculty" as a way to increase faculty participation.

The review subcommittee was overwhelmingly positive in its review of the undergraduate program in the Program for the Study of Religion, and the Council fully shares this assessment. We congratulate the Director and the affiliated faculty on this successful review and look forward to learning of the outcomes of the curriculum revision, and the new structure for the core faculty group, and your efforts to implement the other recommendations included in the report at the time of the follow up review in Spring 2014.

Sincerely,



Michael D. Todd, Chair
2012-13 Undergraduate Council

cc: G. Boss R. Rodriguez
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