



TO: Mike Mahon
President and Vice Chancellor

DATE: February 13, 2015

FROM: Robert A. Boudreau
Chair, Academic Quality Assurance Committee

RE: Department of Religious Studies, Academic Quality Assurance Review

In accordance with the U of L *Academic Quality Assurance Policy and Process*, the Academic Quality Assurance Committee approved the review of the Department of Religious Studies at its January 30, 2015 meeting.

The Program Review Committee for this review was comprised of Tom Robinson (Program Review Coordinator), Hillary Rodrigues, Jim Linville, John Harding, and Atif Khalil. The review produced four documents:¹

1. *Department of Religious Studies, The University of Lethbridge: Self Study Report 2014* (received June 12, 2014) – Self Study Report, developed by the Department of Religious Studies Self Study Committee.
2. *University of Lethbridge, Department of Religious Studies: External Review* (received November 11, 2014) – External Review Report by James Benn (McMaster) and Kim Parker (Memorial) based on their site visit of October 22-23, 2014.
3. *Department of Religious Studies, Academic Quality Assurance Review: Departmental Response to External Reviewers' Report* (received December 1, 2014) – response of the Self Study Committee to the external review.
4. *Dean's Response to Quality Assurance Review of the Department of Religious Studies* (received January 22, 2015) – response to the review, written by Craig Cooper, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science.

¹ All documents are available upon request.

Self Study

One surprising finding of the Self Study Report related to the Religious Studies 1000 course (RELS 1000). The department assumed this was an important feeder course into the upper-level courses. However, the self study found that 57% of students who take 2000-level courses have not taken RELS 1000, and so it is less important as a feeder course. The 1000 and 2000 level Religious Studies courses are part of the General Liberal Education Requirement (GLER). The department, therefore, depends on maintaining a strong humanities component in the GLER.

Departmental strengths mentioned in the body of the report include:

- Student interest in religious studies is high.
- Graduates have successfully pursued further education and have also entered the workplace in positions in, for example, museums, art institutes, and non-profit organizations.
- The department has helped connect the U of L with the community in a number of ways: annual interfaith lecture; Public Professor newspaper column; various professorial connections with religious and community groups; faculty member talks for the Southern Alberta Council on Public Affairs; public lectures; and talks to public service groups.
- The examination of religious traditions and of the global context of religious diversity contributes to the U of L's commitment to expand student horizons and develop a global perspective.
- The department's Research in Religious Studies Student Conference has about 50 students participating every year.
- All full-time faculty in the department hold doctorates, and have an average of 16 years of teaching experience.
- Administrative support is both efficient and essential.
- The Library provides access to an extensive database of electronic journals.
- The department is productive in publications: monographs; textbooks; edited volumes; articles; websites / software; conference presentations; and journal editing.

Weaknesses and challenges discussed in the report include:

- With only two professors responsible for them, it is difficult to maintain an adequate range of Eastern religions courses.
- In the near future, the department may not be able to offer courses in Greek and Latin.
- There are limited opportunities for employment in the field.
- Up to two of the department's faculty members will likely retire within the next few years.
- Current resources do not allow the department to teach courses in indigenous studies, ritual studies, women in religion, and feminist approaches to the study of religion.
- The faculty complement lacks gender diversity.
- Funds for travel to conferences are very limited.
- The department has the third highest student:faculty ratio in the University.

Possible future directions, from the body of the report, are:

- Make RELS 1000 part of Faculty of Education requirements, to help inform future teachers about religious diversity in their classrooms.
- Attract M.A. students in a small number of very specific areas.

External Review

In summary, the External Review Report noted that:

- The department is “delivering an outstanding, high-quality undergraduate program” and “is a model of how an undergraduate program in Religious Studies should function.”
- The faculty members in the department are “excellent teachers and researchers.”
- Graduates of the undergraduate program are well prepared for careers and further education.
- The department is committed to student engagement and learning.
- Faculty members are participating in serious scholarship, which exposes students to insights from cutting edge research in religious studies.
- Faculty members are accessible to their students.
- Faculty members provide service to the department, the Faculty of Arts and Science, and the University.
- Faculty members are actively engaged in professional organizations and scholarly societies.
- Governance of the department “appears healthy and robust.”
- The department is committed to engaging with the public. Laudable examples include the Interfaith Lecture, the Public Professor newspaper column, and talks for public service groups and the Southern Alberta Council on Public Affairs.

Challenges noted in the report include:

- The department’s commitments to GLER lead to it servicing large numbers of students.
- The department cannot offer upper-level courses regularly.
- Without a significant investment of resources, growth of a graduate program in Religious Studies would compromise the quality of the undergraduate program.

The report contained eight main recommendations for improving the department:

1. Pursue a more even distribution of success in research grants. Support all department members in obtaining external research funding.
2. Examine and address the main challenges of teaching the first-year Religious Studies course, which are: (a) teaching five major world religions in 13 weeks; (b) team teaching of the course by two professors (one specialized in Western religions, the other in Eastern religions); and (c) inefficient use of department resources, as the course is heavily subscribed but is not a gateway for Religious Studies majors.
3. Examine the department’s first-year courses, and assess if RELS 1000 is the most effective introduction to the study of religion.
4. At the Faculty level, consider how to best support the teaching of languages for the study of religion.
5. Explore the use of social media to publicize course offerings, public lectures, and opportunities for students.

6. Increase University recognition for the value and contributions of the department. Promote it as a model for integrating research, teaching, service, and civic engagement.
7. Appoint an additional faculty member, preferably in the field of Eastern religions, and taking into account gender diversity.
8. Be extremely cautious in growing a graduate program in Religious Studies, as it is not possible to sustain such a program and the undergraduate program with the current faculty complement of five.

Program Response

In their Program Response, the Self Study Committee addressed the External Review Report under six topic headings:

Religious Studies 1000 course - Using large classes and team teaching for RELS 1000 frees the department to offer more upper-level courses while teaching a large number of students at the introductory level. Though a number of students take further Religious Studies courses without taking RELS 1000, this course is still an effective introduction to the discipline for many.

Grants and external funding - Three faculty study ancient religious texts that are easily available, and so do not require significant research funding. The faculty that move on to work outside these areas have successfully pursued external research funding.

Graduate program - Students are only admitted to the M.A. in Religious Studies if their interests align with the current research of a department faculty member. The department has graduated five M.A. students.

Language training - Offering training in the variety of languages required for Religious Studies is challenging. Even so, the department has been able to regularly offer Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, and Japanese, often in partnership with other departments. This language training has been sufficient for students to pursue graduate studies. Discussions about ways to maintain or increase language offerings have been ongoing between Religious Studies and the departments of History and Archaeology.

Social media - The department is studying ways to promote itself and communicate with the larger community.

Retirements and hirings - The next faculty member retirement will probably be in the area of Christianity. Our priority for a new hire is a female scholar in Eastern religions.

Dean's Response

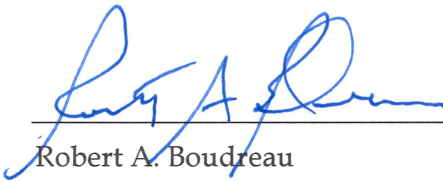
Overall, the Dean acknowledged the high quality of the Department of Religious Studies while noting the challenges the department faces. The Dean's Response went on to comment on the recommendations that emerged from the review:

<i>Pursue a more even distribution of success in research grants</i>	The U of L should not privilege the holding of research grants over the production of research. Lack of research grant support has not handicapped research in Western Religions, where the focus is on ancient texts that are easily available.
<i>Consider various issues related to the first-year RELS 1000 course</i>	The Religious Studies department should consider if the current form of RELS 1000 is the best way to deliver the curriculum. One option is to split the course into two 1000-level courses, Western Religions and Eastern Religions.

<i>Hiring an additional faculty member</i>	Hiring a new faculty member will be challenging given the limited resources. The department should consider a cross-appointment with another department, such as Women and Gender Studies or Native American Studies.
<i>Planning for upcoming retirements</i>	The department should discuss planning for upcoming retirements with the Dean of Arts and Science.
<i>Language instruction, especially Greek and Hebrew</i>	Discussions on how to support language instruction should continue between the Dean of Arts and Science and representatives from Religious Studies, History, and Archaeology. Discussions could also be initiated with other institutions.
<i>Promote the department using social media</i>	Agreed. The department should continue to study ways to promote itself and communicate with the community.
<i>Information technology support and computer</i>	Faculty and staff computers are renewed on a four to five year cycle. Moving to a three-year cycle may not be feasible. The department should approach the Dean of Arts and Science with any concerns related to information technology support.

The Academic Quality Assurance Committee is satisfied that the Department of Religious Studies academic quality assurance review has followed the U of L's academic quality assurance process appropriately, and acknowledges the successful completion of the review.

Sincerely,



Robert A. Boudreau

Chair, Academic Quality Assurance Committee

Cc: Andrew Hakin, Provost and Vice President (Academic)