2014 Assessment Report, Religious Studies

In AY 2013-14 the Religious Studies discipline took significant steps in self-assessment and strategic planning. In the fall we undertook two searches for full-time, tenure track positions. One was successfully filled but the other, in liturgical studies, was not and this was due mainly to a dearth of suitable applicants. This afforded us an opportunity to regroup as a discipline and ask some fundamental questions about what we wanted for that position, which in turn demanded that we take stock of our present strengths, weaknesses, and identity. In the spring semester, as soon as the interview process was over, we met and decided to have an external review. The Wabash Center for the Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, (http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/home/default.aspx) at Valparaiso University, offers a program to selected institutions which sends a trained consultant to work with Religion/Theology departments on a variety of issues, including basic questions of identity and mission. Under the leadership of Mara Brecht, we submitted and were awarded a visit by a consultant. Dr. Joseph Favazza of Stonehill College came to SNC this past May and led a discipline retreat that lasted twelve hours over the span of two days. The fruits of that retreat are detailed here.

I. We decided unanimously that we needed to change the name of the discipline from “Religious Studies” to “Theology and Religious Studies.” We had been talking about such a change for a few years already, and this change does not represent a change in the philosophy and approach of the discipline. It is instead a more accurate designation of our scholarly and pedagogical identities. The designation “Religious Studies” was given to the discipline many years before the arrival of any of the current faculty members, at a time when the term was seen as more ecumenical than, “Theology.” In the intervening thirty or so years, specific academic understandings of the terms, “Theology” and “Religious Studies” have taken hold in the field. The former term denotes the engaging of academic questions from an emic stance, i.e., from the within a particular tradition. The latter, on the other hand, refers to an etic approach, i.e., from a position outside of any religious tradition. We are, and have been, a department whose scholarship and teaching engage in both of these approaches, as is abundantly clear from our course offerings and research, and the change in name more accurately reflects this. Practically speaking, we plan to start using the new name in the upcoming academic year (2014-15) with full integration of its use for the next College Catalog (not the one currently in production).

II. We also rewrote the discipline Mission Statement, which had not been revised for almost a decade:

The Theology and Religious Studies discipline is a community of scholars who teach by word and example. We believe pursuing religious and theological questions—questions about ultimate meaning, God, and how we relate to God, one another, and the created world—is essential to a good and meaningful life. We do this primarily by drawing on the resources of the rich and dynamic Catholic intellectual and theological traditions. As taught by the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic tradition develops over time through study, contemplation, and engagement with the world. We believe sustained conversation with other academic disciplines and a variety of religious traditions is essential to the study of theology and religion. Inspired by the Norbertine value of radical hospitality, we
advocate for the inclusion of many persons, voices, and perspectives, especially those historically marginalized for any reason.

III. A significant part of the retreat involved a curriculum audit based on our current goals for the major. This led to a revisiting of the goals, which resulted in the creation of new set goals more in line with our identity and mission:

Graduates in the Theology and Religious Studies Major at St. Norbert will be able to:

1. Understand the core concepts of the discipline: revelation, reason, faith, ritual, ethics, authority, tradition, mystery, and interpretation.

2. Situate themselves in historical, global and social contexts in order to take responsibility for how they think and act in the world.

3. Identify and apply theoretical principles of theology and religious studies.

4. Develop reading skills of primary and secondary “texts” (e.g., scripture, books, films, artwork, architecture, etc.).

5. Develop writing skills to think carefully and clearly, and articulate ideas and meaning coherently.

6. Become competent in active verbal exchange and public conversation about questions of ultimate meaning and value.

7. Reflect on community engagement as it connects to vocation and coursework.

IV. We also had the time to look at our major curriculum. We had lightly revised it two years ago, but knew at the time that the revision was a temporary fix. To that end, we sketched the outlines of a new major curriculum, including a required service learning component and a portfolio assessment plan for our capstone. I spoke with Dr. Drew Scheler on how to use electronic portfolios. We’ve been talking about portfolio assessment for a couple of years and I take responsibility for our foot-dragging in this area. We have redoubled our commitment and plan to have a system in place the next time our capstone is taught (Spring 2015) as part of a new assessment plan to be submitted in the next AY.

Respectfully submitted,
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Professor of Religious Studies