Critique of Assessment Activities in the Religious Studies Department

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Overview:

This critique is based on an examination of the current 2012-13 Religious Studies Department Assessment Plan and only to a minor extent on the results of the assessment activities that were executed and reported in the 2011-12 Religious Studies Annual Assessment Report.

The focus of the critique is on identifying perceived strengths of the assessment efforts that are currently underway and/or are being planned, and my suggestions for potential improvements to strengthen the assessment efforts. It is also my intention to identify any areas where the departments’ assessment efforts may fall short of SACS institutional effectiveness expectations.

2012-13 Religious Studies Department Assessment Plan

The 2012-13 Religious Studies Department Assessment Plan (see Attached “Detailed Assessment Report (DAR) produced from the WEAVEonline Accreditation Management System) is divided into four main sections:

Section I: Department Mission Statement (on Pg 1 of DAR)
Section II: Undergraduate Degree Student Learning Outcomes (on Pg 1-4 of DAR)
Section III: Undergraduate Degree Program Outcomes (on Pg4-6 of DAR)
Section IV: Departmental Expected Outcomes (on Pg 6-8 of DAR)

Strengths

1. While current University of Alabama (UA) policy requires a minimum of four student learning outcomes (SLOs) for each undergraduate degree program, the Religious Studies (RS) Department exceeds that expectation by including five SLOs within their BA degree program. Similarly, while the current UA policy requires a minimum of two assessment measures for each SLO within an undergraduate degree program, the RS department includes a third assessment measure for 2 of their 5 SLOs. These additional assessment measures strengthen their ability to draw even more sound interpretations of the achievement of the two expected outcomes.
2. The three measures to be employed during the 2012-13 academic year to assess content knowledge (Outcome #1) are excellent. It is a very good practice to employ a pre-test/post-test (value-added) approach to measuring content knowledge. The locally developed Survey of Religious Knowledge (SORSK) administered when the student declares the major and then afterwards each fall semester will enable the faculty to monitor each student’s progress as well as student content mastery as a departmental whole.

Embedding a subset of items within the SORSK (Measure 2) that reflect common issues and topics emphasized by the entire faculty is a unique diagnostic twist to the typical value-added assessment approach and should result in heightened levels of performance on this subset of items.

It is an excellent 3rd measure of the content knowledge outcome to correlate performance on the survey to the nature and number of Religious Studies courses completed. It is likely to be the case that performance will increase as the number of religious studies courses completed increases, but it may be quite informative if the correlation is even higher between survey performance and a particular subset of completed courses. This is an excellent cross-check on the validity of the survey instrument, and should allow the faculty to draw sound inferences concerning the levels of learning among their majors.

3. I think it is an excellent ingredient in a program assessment plan to follow-up a content mastery SLO with a higher order cognitive outcome (In a Bloom’s taxonomy sense) such as applying the knowledge acquired, or critically analyzing theories within the discipline drawing on the content knowledge base. The second SLO addresses higher order thinking skills with its focus on methods and theories within the discipline. The two rubrics (the group presentation rubric and the discussion rubric) that are under construction or still being finalized should be excellent tools to systematically monitor achievement of the higher order cognitive skills (i.e., application, analysis).

As an aside, I think it is excellent that the faculty-as-a whole are working on these rubrics. It is a significant plus for broad-based involvement by the faculty in the assessment of student learning and this department exemplifies this very important trait.

4. The third SLO is also a very sound educational objective calling for students to demonstrate the ability to craft an “evidence-based argument.” It is my understanding
that the two rubrics to be used in evaluating this outcome are either yet-to-be-developed or ones still under consideration by the faculty.

I think it is noteworthy that the department has adjusted the expression of the execution of measures in their 2012-13 assessment cycle. Instead of differentiating what is to be assessed in lower-division courses vs. upper division courses as they did in 2011-12, the emphasis is now on simply indicating assessments “in selected courses.” Making this shift in emphasis has the potential of yielding greater continuity in the monitoring of the achievement of SLOs.

5. There may be only one or two other undergraduate programs on campus that have specifically included an SLO that pertains to the development of an original insight by the student (Outcome #4). I am anxious to see how the in-class presentation rubric will include attention to “originality” as part of the student’s performance.

6. I think calling on students to participate in blog and other media discussions is an excellent complementary assessment measure to the frequent use of rubrics as evaluative tools within the program.

7. The last student learning outcome that focuses on the “value of the religious studies major” is commendable. Very few departments have included attention to the “affective” domain of learning in their preparation of SLOs. The essay that students write in their capstone experience (Rel 490) seems to be quite appropriate as is calling on the student to assess his/her realization of goals identified when the major was first declared.

Suggestions for Improvement

1. There are some very significant advantages associated with faculty in a department developing their own content mastery evaluation instrument. You may be very happy with the diagnostic utility of the instrument developed and see no need for considering alternatives. But in case there might be some interest in exploring options, there is one instrument I would recommend you examine. It is called the “U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey” that was developed by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life. For more information, see http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1745/religious-knowledge-in-america-survey-atheists-agnostics-score-highest

It might be interesting in comparing and contrasting performance on this instrument with your locally developed instrument. Of, you have interest as a department in further developing your local instrument, there might be some ideas that surface from examining this instrument.

2. Your frequent use of course-embedded rubrics is an excellent assessment philosophy, particularly for your academic discipline. There is no question that such an assessment
Consultant Report - Religious Studies

ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW

Consultant Information

Dr. Greg Johnson, University of Colorado
Associate Professor and Chair in Religious Studies

1. Overall Assessment

| Overall Assessment of the Department and its Degree Programs—Current Regional/National Standing and Promise for the Future |

The Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama is healthy in all regards and exemplary in several, including the strength of its faculty, the morale of its students, and its unique niche in the discipline. I have been a member of two very strong but considerably different religious studies departments, one at a liberal arts college and one at a large public research university. Based on my recent evaluation, the University of Alabama Department of Religious Studies combines the best of the features from both kinds of departments. It is research strong yet intimate, nationally regarded yet student-focused, diverse in its areas of coverage yet coherent in its intellectual vision. This is a department that studies religion in culture, as their motto and lecture series declare. This agenda is pursued through first rate publications, implemented with stunning critical verve in the classroom, and imbibed by students and faculty alike around the proverbial water cooler— it is what they drink.

To the person, the faculty are involved in the discipline at national and international levels. They are particularly prominent in the various roles they play for a range of disciplinary organs--e.g., Steven Ramey is president of the Southern Region of the American Academy of Religion, Merinda Simmons sits on the the Executive Committee of the North American Association for the Study of Religion, Ted Trost chairs the Music and Religion consultation of the American Academy of Religion, and Russell McCutcheon is an editor of Method & Theory in the Study of Religion and on the editorial board of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion, among his many institutional roles in service to the discipline. Such a profile is what one expects from a much larger unit. Indeed, if one consults this year’s program for the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, the names of the faculty are found across its pages. Beyond a national and
international presence through research and service, a hallmark of the Department and something for which it is widely know is its Religion in Culture lecture series. The frequency of lectures in the series and the caliber of the presenters is well-known within the field. Again, this is something one expects from a much larger unit.

It is somewhat surprising, given the visibility of the Department, that it does not have a graduate program. They could certainly develop an MA degree curriculum with credibility, especially given how expert several of the faculty are in matters of method and theory. That said, the size of the current faculty is a serious limitation. Moreover, they deliver their undergraduate program so well--astonishingly well--that any risk of cutting against this success should be assessed carefully. My sense is that the Department is not currently planning to add a graduate component for this reason and on the basis of their sound assessment that the field is already glutted with terminal MA programs. Their niche, and one they have established with a glowing reputation, is delivery of a first class undergraduate liberal arts experience that productively straddles the humanities and the social sciences.

This is a true gem of a department and one the University can expect to be great for years to come. As detailed below, focused support for several initiatives will secure this bright future. The first is for the University to follow through on its commitment to hire and retain a scholar of Islam, even in a very competitive job market. The second is to immediately hire a scholar of Christianity or Chinese religions to fill curricular gaps and meet growing student demand across the University for timely, relevant classes of broad impact. The third is to support the Department with dedicated GTAs so that it can deliver larger courses with credibility.

It was a distinct pleasure to serve as the external reviewer for this vibrant department. I'm pleased to offer my evaluation and recommendations below, and am especially pleased to have seen what great shape the Department is in. Indeed, I left with a good number of ideas that I intend to implement in my own department!

2. Departmental Assessment Activities

Please read the assessment attachments to the General Information form (Form 2) and the analysis and recommendations by the Assistant to the Provost for Assessment. Offer any additional thoughts on the department’s assessment activities from your perspective as someone highly experienced in the same discipline as that of the department.
I am impressed by the assessment practices of the Department, College, and University. They strike me as deliberate, careful, and generally well-executed. I largely concur with the analysis and recommendations of the Assistant to the Provost for Assessment. However, given the relatively small size of the unit and its curricular coherence, the level and amount of assessment may be too much, coming at the cost of energy that might be better used for advancing the program through direct initiatives. One clear benefit of the assessment process has been a more equitable distribution of courses by size and area. This has also led to creative thinking about course offerings and delivery.

Assessments have also focused on the number of majors, a perennial problem for small humanities units. This attention is warranted, but I caution against assessing the Department primarily on the basis of its major numbers. Religious studies is a discipline that is at the very core of the liberal arts. Its historical, cultural, and conceptual reach is unrivaled by any other discipline. Robustly supported, a religious studies department such as yours can deliver an incredible, unique, and diverse undergraduate experience for a wide range of students, some of whom will sign on as majors, but the majority of whom will not. The Department puts considerable energy into recruitment of students, which is admirable. However, it would be unfortunate and a waste of their energy and talents if the faculty felt compelled to focus single-mindedly on growing the major. Students in the program—whether one-timers or majors—report having a fantastic, intimate educational experience. I am sure the University of Alabama values having a world-class liberal arts entity in its midst for students to encounter, regardless of their chosen major.

A final note on assessment. I am not persuaded that the Survey of Religious Studies Knowledge is particularly credible. It may have its place, but I hesitate to support such an inflexible mechanism for assessing critical thinking skills and the kind of historicist analysis promoted at such a high level by the Department. My point is only cautionary: if should students score well, great. However, should the SORSK not yield happy results, I would assume that the problem is with the test, not the program.

3. Promotion and Tenure

Brief evaluation of the department’s tenure and promotion guidelines.

The Department’s “Guidelines for Appointment, Retention, Promotion, and Tenure” (2003) are robust, reasonably clear, and in line with Division I expectations and processes. Were the Department to develop a graduate program at some point in the future, it would not need to substantially revise its tenure and promotion standards. The provision for annual dossier preparation and review is particularly admirable, though I