

Summary of Religious Studies AUP UNIT RESPONSE and ACTION PLAN

Preface

The following summary comes at the end of a lengthy process, one made even longer by the challenges presented by Covid19. As Department Head, I note that the Department has evolved beyond its position and circumstance when we first submitted our final draft of our response to the Review Panel's Report and our action plan, both submitted to the Dean of HSS in November 2019. In addition to the significant impact of Covid19 on our 2020/2021 teaching and public engagement plans, the death of Dr. Michael Shute in January 2020 so soon after his retirement in Fall of 2019, meant we could no longer turn to him for advice about the courses he taught for many years and for the past several years, as online courses. This loss has significant impact on the Religion and Ethics area in our curriculum, an area that links our curriculum with students and programs all across campus and which traditionally has drawn significant number of graduate students.

Nevertheless, the Department's undergraduate enrollments are growing and our graduate cohorts are stable. Our ability to attract majors given the smaller number of undergraduate course offerings due to our depleted faculty complement is an on-going concern: smaller academic programs cannot offer to students a range of course and time slot choices that is comparable to the offerings possible in larger programs. Yet, like programs and departments of any size, we continue to serve students from all across campus.

Finally, it is noteworthy that some parts of the action plan might be accorded lower priority due to the ongoing pandemic and, importantly, the rise in global prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement. In a response developed from June to August 2020, the Department has committed to a number of initiatives to do what we can to address and abolish anti-Black racism in our work as scholars, students, and colleagues.

Summary of the 2019 Response and Action Plan

The Department is grateful for the detailed report provided by the AUP panel and for their appreciation of our efforts and successes in the Department. Here, we highlight some key observations of the review Panel:

- The merit of the new structure in our undergraduate program, one that moves beyond the standard and dated distinction between Eastern and Western Religions areas in favour of text/tradition and religion and culture concentrations while still maintaining considerable breadth. "Put bluntly," the panel report states, "Memorial University undoubtedly has the best and most comprehensive undergraduate religious studies program among all the Atlantic Provinces" in spite of a significant reduction (40% over 5 years) in the number of Professors in the department.

- The extent of service our Department offers to other units at Memorial and to the general public and the university community through our public engagement initiatives both individually and as a department.
- Our ability to work well together, as evidenced by the successful consultative process behind the restructuring of our undergraduate program and by the high regard shown to each and every faculty member by our students.
- The importance of stabilizing instruction in Religion and Ethics. With the retirement of Dr. Shute in September 2019 [and his death in January 2020], this area now has no tenure line faculty. For the past 12 years, teaching in Religion and Ethics has been supported by short term (8 month) contracts, a mechanism that we cannot help but continue to rely upon for the foreseeable future. Courses in this area serve more than 250 students in Nursing, Social Work, Science, and Humanities and Social Sciences and to continue to meet this demand is therefore of high importance.

The Panel supported the four strategic objectives listed in our Self Study (2018) in their first recommendation. This summary of key recommendations is organized according to the Department's the four objectives.

1. Maintain academic strength and relevance of programs and course offerings.

At the Undergraduate level, recommendations include: evaluation of the newly-implemented UG program in coming years (#2); exploration of the idea to add one or two courses to the 12 course major (#5), to increase the number of fourth-year courses and correspondingly reduce third year offerings (see p. 8), and to require minors to complete a fourth year course; creation of courses designed specifically to increase UG enrolments (#9) (while balancing enrolment with quality); conversion of the Graduate Room into a Student Study Room for Graduate students, and RELS majors, and minors (#28).

Recommendations for enhancing our Graduate programs include a clear recommendation that the Department identify and avail of all possible means for funding graduate students (#11) and at the same time maximize our available resources by encouraging applicants in areas where faculty expertise is underused (#18), by piggy-backing graduate courses onto 4th year seminars to provide graduate students with more choice in core course selection (#4), and to support student grant applications, whether in our Thesis Writing graduate seminar or some alternate mechanism (#17).

2. Raise the profile of the Department on campus and in the community

Religious Studies as a Department and an academic discipline are not well-known or accurately understood at Memorial itself or in the broader community. Therefore, the Panel and the Department agree that the Department must continue to raise its profile on campus by emphasizing the importance and reach of the Department's service roles in programs outside the Department and Faculty and to do so whenever we report on the Department's output and contributions to the university (#10 and #26). Further, we will work to develop permanent

signage/advertising space for the Religious Studies Department in ARTs and Admin (#13) or elsewhere on campus.

In the larger community we will continue our efforts to liaise with local high schools to promote Religious Studies as a compelling and viable area of post-secondary study (#12) and to develop courses or a certificate program that would appeal to part-time students from the community, especially as Memorial's Registrar establishes a streamlined process for such students to gain admission and register (#23 and #24). The Department will continue to contribute to existing or new interdisciplinary programs and to increase cross-departmental activity, as our resources allow (#21 and #25).

In both contexts, we will continue to bring our work to the attention of others through public lectures, round-table discussions, film screenings, workshops, upcoming courses, recent publications and so on, making use of social media as well as traditional media such as radio, TV, and newspaper interviews. Again, the reduced number of faculty has an impact on community engagements.

3. Faculty renewal and Equity

We agree with the Panel's observations that our current faculty complement and the breadth of our course offerings makes ours "the best and most comprehensive undergraduate religious studies program among all the Atlantic provinces" (p. 8). We further agree that we risk losing this standing if our faculty complement continues to shrink. Including Dr. Shute's retirement in 2019, the Department has seen five retirements and one new hire over the past 7 years. The Panel approves our plans to renew the case to: regularize the 8-month teaching term contract that the Department has had for 12 years, as a 12 month 3 to 5-year renewable position (#6 and priority 1 on p. 26); request a tenure track appointment in Indigenous Religions; and to consider future hires in Jewish and Christian text/history asap in East Asian traditions (#8), especially with further retirements of faculty in those two areas.

The Department appreciates the Panel recommendations regarding workload equity of ASM in the Department especially around applying for external funding (#20); but also with involvement and participation in Department sponsored activities (#15 and #22) and ensuring fair service contributions from all through the development of a rolling schedule of service duties for necessary and important departmental and faculty wide-committees (#16).

4. Develop an Interdisciplinary Working Group for the Study of Lived Religions

The Panel supported this objective (see, for example, recommendation # 25); it is consistent with an emphasis at Memorial on cultivating interdisciplinarity and leveraging Faculty wide expertise; and the study of lived religion falls within the research agendas of a majority of faculty in our Department.

ACTION PLAN:

The Action Plan developed out of the entire AUP process identifies immediate, short- and long-term goals, individuals responsible for specific tasks, and the specific steps for completing each goal. The Department will review its action plan annually and report on progress as required.

Summary prepared by
P. Dold
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