

Program-Level Student Learning Assessment for Religious Studies (Fall, 2011)

1. Mission Statement.

Our mission statement from the catalog reads as follows:

Religious Studies is a secular, interdisciplinary program. It approaches a socially defined phenomenon such as “religion” and brings to bear upon this phenomenon the methodological orientations of the human, social, and natural sciences.

The mission statement of the college reads as follows:

Juniata's mission is to provide an engaging personalized educational experience empowering our students to develop the skills, knowledge and values that lead to a fulfilling life of service and ethical leadership in the global community.

Our primary goal is to foster an informed public with regard to the ubiquitous cultural phenomenon of religious belief and behavior. Prior to coming to Juniata College American students have never been given the opportunity to investigate this cultural domain on neutral grounds. For good or for ill, American disestablishment doctrine has made religion a taboo subject for academic inquiry in our public school system. By contract private school educational institutions, when they made room for the study of religion, usually pursue sectarian agendas. Our mission is to provide students with educational opportunities where they can explore the cultural domain of religion without the bias of a religious agenda.

We pursue this goal in three domains: our designated program of emphasis (hereafter majors), our secondary emphasis (hereafter minors), and our service courses.

2. Student Learning Outcomes.

We expect all majors to acquire a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of religion as a subject area. Religion is biological, sociological, and psychological dimensions. Religion generates, maintains, and leaves behind a wide array of material and textual culture. Religion is universally distributed across all human cultures, and yet also displays features specific to local cultures. Majors need to grasp a basic range of content and method defined by our entry-level classes (RL 110 What is Religion, RL 120 World Religions, and RL 202/203 Old/New Testament. Beyond the baseline, we expect majors to master multiple domains of the modern study of religion including history, advanced textual studies, language, philosophy, and science. We expect concomitant improvement in analytical and argumentative writing aptitudes as evidenced above all else by their senior thesis capstone.

For minors we expect less comprehensiveness of exposure to the domains of the modern study of religion. Minors complete our baseline content and method classes like the majors (see previous paragraph). Beyond this baseline, students are required to select only three additional classes. Selection criteria can be breath of exposure or depth in one field.

The department of religious studies does not have many majors. The majority of our students pass through our courses as part of their general education requirements or for elective credit. These courses are the RL 120 and RL 202/203. They are content survey classes for the major religions of the world and for the chief textual tradition of the Western world.

3. Assessment Tools and Methods.

Our program uses two methods for assessment. First, we administer pre-tests and post-tests in our survey classes – RL 120 and RL 202/203. This data displays the value added in terms of mastery of basic data. Second, we assemble portfolio data for majors and minors and review this data with students as they approach the senior thesis capstone experience. We selected these tools because they seemed best suited to capturing accurate measures of what we might directly seek to cultivate in each audience. Prill and Miller administer and maintain the records for the survey courses. Braxton maintains the portfolios for majors and minors.

4. Implementation.

We began collecting data for our survey classes beginning in the fall of 2007. We began collecting data for portfolios in the fall of 2009. In the spring of 2011, we reviewed and analyzed portfolio data resulting in a shift on our program.

1. **Analysis of Results.** Each person is responsible for analysis and reporting of the data collected in each of their domains.
 - Prill submitted her assessment data displaying the clear value-added in her World Religion Survey classes. (See RL120 Workbook). Her classes display a average 39% improvement in world religion literacy with minimal statistical deviations across courses.
 - Miller collected his data for both RL 202 and RL 203. Unfortunately, Miller's recording method deleted his pre-test data leaving only the post-test metric. In the absence of the pre-test baseline we cannot make any claims regarding this data set.
 - Braxton collected files for 3 majors and 10 minors/individualized POEs in religion dating back to the fall of 2009, containing items to date. Of the three majors files, two are completed and one is still open. Of the finished majors, one shows relatively steady writing performances incremental growth in sophistication of thought and display of skills but a poor performance on the senior thesis. The second finished majors show erratic performance and an inability to complete the senior thesis. The third major displays a steady improvement in class performances over the past three years. Among the minors and individualized POEs is to be found the most impressive performances we have. Reviewers should investigate entries by Booher, Dennehy, Hoover, and Korch to see critical reasoning skills, argumentative and organizational writing skills, and ability to synthesize across disciplinary

lines. The upshot of this data is that majors are performing inconsistently at best whereas minors and individualized POEs typically display the highest skills in our classes.

2. Program for Improvement.

In general, we are relatively content with our survey classes and their service to the larger college. Because we typically only see these students one time, we have no way to measure their longitudinal development, but in terms of mastery of basic information about world religions and texts, students display a marked improvement. (This is also the case with Miller although he can no longer adduce the data as evidence.)

Second, we have serious doubts about the viability of the designated POE given the track record of students to date. The significant differential between the relative improvements we see evidenced in the writing portfolio prior to the senior thesis and the senior thesis itself suggests either that we under-challenge students in our courses or that the senior thesis is organized in such a way that it is too difficult for them to accomplish. Of the two options we are looking at the latter and revising the oversight and guidelines for their senior thesis.

Third, our minors and individualized POEs are the elite performers and we wish to see this aspect of our program expand even as we restrict and restructure the designated POE.

Submitted,
Braxton
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