**October 2010 Assessment Report Feedback: Religious Studies**

**Assessment Committee Contact**: Scott Hendrix, Academic Skills Center

*\*Note*: Assessment report/feedback was reviewed/provided by Vicki Baker and Scott Hendrix

The new assessment details and discussion added in Step 4 and Step 5 of the 2010 report (submitted in fall 2010) provide helpful, valuable information about student learning within the RS program. Especially helpful here is the distinction between indirect and direct student learning combined with the detailed discussion that follows: taken together, these additions present a clear understanding of assessing student learning, as well as concerted departmental efforts toward this goal.

**Specific comments referring to NEW assessment report sections or information/data follow.**

Indirect Assessment (p. 5)

As indirect measures of student learning, senior responses to surveys and exit interviews often provide helpful program and planning information, as you discuss in your report; in addition, incorporating major and minor surveys and interviews also helps develop the “culture of assessment” for both students and faculty in the program. (That is, assessment comes to be seen as normalized and expected part of major or minor, rather than externally imposed activity that happens only once in a while.)

It is indeed unfortunate that few majors or minors participated in these important departmental conversations, but we appreciate your efforts in this area and would encourage you to continue with senior surveys and/or exit interviews; members of the Assessment Committee would be happy to discuss survey or interview plans with your department, including strategies and/or student incentives that might facilitate greater student participation. In addition, faculty leaders in the Center for Teaching and Learning might provide helpful guidance for generating greater student participation in such departmental activities.

Direct Assessment (p. 5-6)

The decision to focus on one specific learning goal for the April 2010 direct assessment effort seems to have been successful: the discussion presented in this section demonstrates both helpful faculty assessment of student learning toward the specific learning outcome and engaged faculty conversations about student learning, assignment design, and other important pedagogical and classroom environment topics. As you know, a major goal of assessing student learning is to generate this kind of focused yet wide-ranging faculty conversation and introspection about teaching and learning.

In terms of *future* plans and reporting, the direct assessment discussion here would be even more helpful—especially for external audiences—if specific student learning data or information were included, to represent in another format the points of analysis and observation presented in narrative form. For example, some basic course and student details would be helpful, including perhaps the following information (merely examples; specific details would vary based on faculty assignments and outcome criteria, etc.):

Which courses did faculty select to assess Learning Goal 1?

(introductory, upper level, or a blend of courses; required major courses or electives, etc.)

How many student essays were reviewed in assessing/discussing Learning Goal 1?

(the # could provide a useful figure in relation to program majors or minors, or # of students who take RS courses, etc.)

Did faculty use a common rubric or set of guidelines to assess how well students in individual courses achieved the learning goal? If yes, that information would be valuable appendix to assessment reports; if not, how were student essays for different courses and assignments compared by faculty during group conversations?

Finally, would it be feasible to *represent graphically* the range of student learning outcomes for Learning Goal 1—across all of the courses and essays discussed by faculty at the April 2010 meeting? On p. 6 of the report (4th paragraph), the discussion suggests that *students’ mastery of the learning goal covered a range of results*, from something approaching full mastery to a very few students who seem to have misunderstood the assignment or made basic errors of understanding.

As before, our thanks to RS faculty, students, and staff for the time, energy, and collaborative labor that went into assessment efforts within the program, including the drafting and revising of RS assessment reports.

Please contact your Assessment Committee liaison if you have follow-up questions, comments, or concerns.

**NOTE**: for your reference, fall 2009 Assessment Committee feedback is copied below.

**August 2009 Assessment Report Feedback – Religious Studies**

**Assessment Committee Contact**: Scott Hendrix, Academic Skills Center

*\*Note*: Assessment report/feedback was reviewed/provided by Vicki Baker, Mark Bollman, and Scott Hendrix

 Overall, your program assessment plan is an effectively detailed document that provides helpful presentation of program goals, key program components that connect back to these goals, and some helpful discussion about methods and instruments you plan to use for assessing the extent to which specific program components are helping students meet RS learning goals/outcomes.

 The feedback below is intended to help you reconsider and/or revise and update your assessment plans, as needed, as you move through the next steps of the assessment process.

 *Step 1: Mission*

 Your mission statement seems appropriate given your departmental goals and beliefs. In addition, your departmental mission seems in line with overall college goals for developing student awareness of diversity (especially in terms of religion, history, and cultures).

 Note the following tentative suggestions regarding your mission statement, however.

 You might emphasize student learning goals/outcomes more directly in your statement, especially for use with assessment plans and reports: doing so could help external audiences (e.g., Assessment Committee, Accreditation Team members) understand the connections between your theoretical justifications and the learning goals for majors in your department.

 You perhaps should (or might wish to) clarify pronoun usage in your statement, since the “we” that is subject of several sentences is unclear (Albion faculty in RS, RS scholars in general, or students and faculty within the RS department, etc.).

 *Step 2: Outcomes*

 Your department’s learning goals/outcomes seem appropriate given your mission. In addition, dividing the major learning goals into three general categories is helpful and effective, both in terms of presenting more general terms for your goals and as a means to provide focus for your own planning for assessment and curricular development (more on this topic below).

 Indeed, in terms of assessment plans, you (and your students) would probably benefit from focusing on *fewer* learning outcomes for the RS major (perhaps starting with those goals listed under “Substantive and Theoretical Knowledge,” since these are most numerous and perhaps most important, as well?). That way, as you move forward with assessment plans, you would provide yourself with opportunities to pilot methods and/or instruments for assessment, and revise these as appropriate before moving on to other learning goals.

Moving forward then, you could simplify and clarify your assessment plan by focusing on those (A.1-5) KEY learning goals/outcomes for students in the RS major. For example, you might begin your assessment efforts by focusing on student learning of “basic knowledge…of the world’s major religious traditions.” Then, your program components (Step 2) to assess this outcome would be those specific RS courses that are designed and taught so that students learn “basic knowledge.” For this particular learning goal, the specific methods or instruments to assess student learning of this “basic knowledge” (Step 3) could be one or more specific element of that course: exam, paper, class exercise or presentation, etc. (see further discussion below).

 *Step 3: Program Components*

 The program components listed here are clearly significant for the RS major. However, the relationship of these components back to specific student learning goals/outcomes is not clearly presented here. It may be *assumed* that 100+ courses are intended to help students acquire “basic knowledge…of the world’s major religious traditions,” but that relationship is not presented in your proposed plan.

 In addition, your statement that the learning goals are fulfilled by “all of our courses…in one way or another” is not very helpful, since undoubtedly courses differ in terms of content, pedagogical emphasis, and learning outcomes, plus courses may vary in terms of student demographics (intro courses vs. 300-level major courses, 35 vs. 10 students, etc.). As noted in the previous section (Step 2), focusing your assessment efforts more narrowly on a few specific student learning goals/outcomes would allow you to present in this section only those RS courses (or components, whether part of a course or not) that are relevant for the specific learning goals/outcomes. (This kind of narrower focus would likely be both internally and externally valuable, as it would reduce your workload and report requirements, and would also help clarify the RS major goals, components, and assessment methods/instruments for outside audiences).

 Creating a departmental assessment matrix may help you better organize your learning outcomes as they relate to your courses. For example, one column heading could be the learning outcome, another column heading could be “Courses (required and elective), and the last heading could be Course Activities/Assignments. Ultimately, you need to link specific courses/specific assignments to the specific learning outcomes to show the connections.

*Step 4: Methods/Data*

 The questionnaire discussed in this section is certainly a valuable indirect measure of student learning (since you are collecting student self-report data/information); however, for more comprehensive and useful understanding of student learning/outcomes, you will want to augment this with other assessment methods and instruments that are direct measures of student learning and outcomes. Examples of direct measures include tests/examinations, assignments, papers/projects, exercises, portfolios and field experience evaluations (to name just a few), most of which you are probably already requiring of students in your courses. As an example, you could develop common grading rubrics that are used within the department to evaluate students’ achievement of learning outcomes on a per assignment/activity basis (This is not necessary for every class or every assignment, but there might be larger capstone assignments that this approach would make the most sense). Then, keep a record of these rubrics which would be considered a direct measure of student learning. [*See following page for definitions and further examples of direct and indirect measures/evidence*.]

For your next round of assessment plan updating, please consider the comments, suggestions, and recommendations above, and incorporate these as feasible and appropriate. Our hope is that departments will be able to use these assessment efforts to inform program and pedagogical improvements and the ultimate goal is that your assessment plans and reports will show how your departmental assessment efforts have informed your program improvements. Overall, a good start toward developing and presenting an effective assessment plan for the RS major.

 Direct & Indirect Measures

In assessing student learning, there are direct and indirect sources of evidence. Direct evidence is clear and convincing information about student learning, such as: tests, examinations, papers, projects, assignments, field experience assessments, and portfolios. These are particularly strong sources of evidence especially when accompanied by articulated standards (such as a rubric). On the other hand, with indirect evidence there is room for other factors to affect the outcomes either positively or negatively. Examples of indirect evidence include: retention, graduation, and placement rates (may be impacted by economic conditions or college policies); surveys of students and alumni (may indicate feelings about college experience); grades (standards and even content may differ across instructors and institutions).

**Next Steps:**

In coordination with your Assessment Committee reviewers and their written and verbal feedback, please observe the following deadlines for your assessment cycle:

* September 15: Revisions to Steps 1-4 due (if necessary)
* October 1: Completion of Steps 5 & 6 using preliminary data
* November 2: Final Fall 2009 plans due

**Fall 2009 Religious Studies Department—November 2009**
The updated RS assessment plan clarifies program student learning outcomes and presents specific future plans for direct assessment of student learning; on the other hand, although the report includes some information for Steps 5 & 6, the information in Step 5 is based only on indirect measures of student learning; and the discussion is Step 6 has little clear connection back to the student learning goals or other details presented earlier in the assessment plan/report.
So, while the report is complete in the sense of all slots being filled, and includes some sense of future assessment plans, these requirements were met only at a basic level.