

To: Angela Della Volpe, Dean  
College of Humanities and Social Sciences, CSU Fullerton

From: Vivian-Lee Nyitray, Associate Professor and Chair  
Dept of Religious Studies, University of California, Riverside

Jon R. Stone, Associate Professor and Undergraduate Advisor  
California State University, Long Beach

Leila Zenderland, Professor of American Studies  
California State University, Fullerton

Via: Claire Palmerino, Associate Dean for Administration  
College of Humanities and Social Sciences, CSU Fullerton

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Re: Program Performance Review, Department of Comparative Religion

## **Introduction**

On Monday, February 7, 2011, our team of reviewers, two external and one internal, conducted a site visit with the Department of Comparative Religion as part of its Program Performance Review. Our daylong campus visit with administrators, faculty members, and students was productive, engaging, and very enjoyable. We especially thank the members of this department for being such gracious hosts, for preparing materials for our visit so thoroughly, and for engaging us in thoughtful and serious conversation about the department's history, current situation, and desired future.

Our overall impressions of this department's activities are extremely positive. Since its last Program Performance Review in 2004, the Department of Comparative Religion has grown in a variety of ways. The numbers of majors, minors, and graduates have all increased significantly. Both the faculty and the curriculum have become more diverse; this is especially evident in the development of a new Islamic Studies minor. This department has experimented with new and innovative ways to deliver effective and closely monitored course offerings online. It has also implemented a variety of new assessment strategies. Based on our meeting with majors, students are very enthusiastic about this program and feel well served by it: they appreciate their professors, their courses, and the careful advisement they receive. This department's activities clearly advance the missions and goals of this university; they also constitute a very important resource for the Orange County community. In sum, we found this to be a very healthy department that continues to grow and thrive. Our suggestions and recommendations are largely designed to help this department achieve its own goals as presented in its self-study, and thus to strengthen it even further.

## The Major (Curriculum)

The CPRL major is designed to provide students with a fundamental grounding in religion as an historical and cultural phenomenon (9 lower-division units) as well as a more focused examination of specific religious traditions (27 upper-division units). For the purposes of breadth, CPRL requires that its majors choose one or two courses from each of eight categories. These include courses in Western and Asian religious traditions and in historical, textual, experiential, and methodological approaches. In addition to courses on major religious traditions (e.g., Judaism, Islam, Hinduism), the CPRL Department offers topics courses that examine religious ideas and influences in the contemporary world (e.g., politics, literature, film). It is clear that students completing the requirements for the major will have a command of the history and thought of the world's major religions and will be more than adequately prepared to undertake graduate level work in the field.

Although the review team initially questioned the complexity of the department's eight-category structure of requirements, our conversations with CPRL majors (approximately 15 students), revealed that most students prefer this structured major and the resultant variety of the courses that CPRL offers. As one student put it, the "layout of the program" helps him "keep track of [his] progress mentally." While students were satisfied with the major, one voiced concern that not all courses were available every year. The review team was not unduly concerned, appreciating that faculty enjoy developing new courses or varying their offerings as their research, world events, or other factors might suggest. And a few students expressed the desire for a greater variety of courses in Asian textual studies (category 8) as well as courses in "off-beat" topics and new religions (category 7). In the future, the department might well wish to make additional full-time hires in these areas but for now, the team feels that students are reasonably well served by existing faculty and adjunct lecturers. The caveat to this observation, however, is that some courses (although not those identified by students) might be offered more regularly were Dr. Bradley Starr to shift his appointment entirely to CPRL—a move that this team endorses.

Course offerings for the CPRL major depend upon specialists in the world's major religions—ideally six to seven FTEF, if China and Japan are included. Loss of faculty through retirements, therefore, can have a deleterious effect on the program's curricular structure. The retirement of Dr. Hubbard is a case in point, creating a significant gap in the key area of Jewish Studies (one of CPRL's minor degree programs). This review team does not hold that every department of religion or religious studies needs to maintain a complete complement of full-time specialists in all areas (the so-called "zoo" approach), but it does wish to make the case for the presence of a Jewish Studies specialist as critical. The department's reputation has long benefited from Dr. Hubbard's personal dedication to fostering interfaith initiatives among members of the community—an initiative that has made Fullerton recognized and respected as the leader among CSU campuses. Such activities, however, are the result of individual initiative rather than being inherent to the position held by Dr. Hubbard. In our view, what is important for the department, the campus, and the community is that a range of academic offerings in Jewish Studies continue to be available. It seems imperative that a search for a new hire in Jewish Studies be conducted as soon as the economy recovers.

Our final curricular observation concerns the department's efforts in providing online instruction. Student opinion concerning the development of more online courses was mixed, with some preferring more personal contact with faculty in the classroom setting and others preferring the convenience and pace of online study. The team was treated to an introduction to current online offerings but believes that further in-depth assessment is needed prior to any move to shifting introductory courses to a virtual environment at the expense of classroom offerings, or to offering online certificates in the study of religion.

### **Assessment**

In the area of curriculum and program assessment, CPRL faculty can be commended for creating a plan that thoughtfully evaluates the goals and outcomes of the Department. In fact, the summaries and analyses presented in the self-study demonstrate the CPRL's faculty's commitment to creative, forward-thinking, and responsive assessment of its major and minors, as well as its online courses. The goals and objectives are divided into areas of skills (research and writing) and areas of knowledge (content and understanding). For each area there are clear and measurable objectives as well as methods for assessing outcomes, both directly (an assessment quiz) and indirectly (student self-evaluation essays). Since 2006, these assessment instruments have been used, with faculty reading and summarizing the findings. It is commendable that in response to the findings, the CPRL faculty has taken it upon themselves to improve pedagogy and enhance the intellectual development of their students.

We had the great pleasure of attending Dr. Jeanette Reedy Solano's class (CPRL 345B *History and Development of Modern Christian Thought*). Reading through Dr. Solano's comprehensive syllabus, we noted the following: students are provided with a list of the learning outcomes that they can "expect to exit the course with"; explanation of assessment and grading is clear and comprehensive; academic honesty and integrity policies as well as classroom etiquette are outlined exhaustively, by way of socializing students to the academic atmosphere; and often-overlooked topics such as special needs, emergency procedures, the instructor's "pet peeves," and how to be considerate when discussing religion are all covered. It is a model syllabus. The class we observed was equally exemplary, blending lecture, review of the readings, enrichment material, an engaging exercise, and a bit of media to vary the pace yet keep students' attention focused on the topic of the day. It was no surprise to us, then, to encounter genuine student enthusiasm for the Department's faculty and the courses they offer.

### **Major and Career Advisement**

Chair Levesque and his colleagues believe that one way to help increase the number of majors in Comparative Religions is to advise students about career options—to provide students with an idea of the kinds of jobs for which their major can prepare them, including: teaching and research; primary and secondary education; publishing, editing, free-lance writing; law and legal issues; international affairs; diplomatic service; government and non-profit organizations; health care services; marriage and family counseling; religious education; and pastoral ministry. The review team agrees with this strategy and would like to offer additional suggestions for advancing the goal of increasing majors/minors. One would be to cultivate an alumni/ae network through a department newsletter, whether paper or electronic; current students would

become aware of the activities of their predecessors and thus discern the possibilities that might exist for them. Another way would be to advertise CPRL as the best *second* major any student could choose. Students in any major would benefit from the cross-cultural exposure to religion as a distinct yet diffuse human practice, as well as enhance their spoken and written communication skills. A third suggestion would be to charter a chapter of Theta Alpha Kappa, the National Honor Society for Religious Studies and Theology at CSUF—already a stated goal of the Department. In addition to bringing national recognition for academic excellence in the major/minor to the campus, election to Theta Alpha Kappa brings tangible rewards to students: those who embark on careers in government service receive an initial bump in their pay scale (a benefit of membership in a recognized society of the American College Honor Society), and all student members have the chance to receive local achievement awards funded by the national office and to compete for national graduate fellowships.

Were the Department of Comparative Religion to successfully increase its number of majors, double majors, and minors, however, other concerns would arise, viz., the ability of the faculty to adequately advise greater numbers of students. Over and over again, in our conversations with students, we were struck by the dedication shown by faculty in advising students. Chair Levesque, in particular, was identified as tireless in this regard. The team suggests that the department might seek to distribute the work of advising more broadly; there also might be some more formal structure of shared responsibilities for various departmental tasks such as creating a newsletter, communicating with alumni/ae, event coordination, and so forth. Administratively, the department would be helped in this regard by the implementation of a reduced teaching load. Ideally, there would be a 3-3 load, but these are far from ideal times. In light of fiscal realities, even a shift to a 4-3 teaching load would not only enable broader faculty participation in the overall work of the department but allow these dedicated faculty members a bit more time for their own research.

In closing, the review team commends the Department of Comparative Religion for its seriousness of attention to its students, to its curriculum, and to the larger campus and community. In light of its findings, the review team respectfully urges the College administration to continue to find ways to assist the collegial faculty of this fine Department as they strengthen their already outstanding work in educating CSUF students.