



To: Su Swarat, Assistant Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness

From: Sheryl Fontaine, Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Date: April 15, 2019

Subject: Dean's Summary and Evaluation, Department of Religious Studies Program  
Performance Review for the B.A.

The Department of Religious Studies is a small department that offers one major, four minors (Religious Studies, Christian Studies, Islamic Studies, and Jewish Studies), and general education courses in the Humanities and Social Sciences categories. They have 17 Religious Studies majors and 13 minors (eight Religious Studies minors, three Christian Studies minors, and two in Islamic Studies). There are no current Jewish Studies minors. Religious Studies has three tenure/tenure-track faculty members and two faculty members who are FERPing.

#### Areas of Achievement

The Religious Studies Department has developed a robust curriculum and is responsive to the changes in the field and the needs of the CSUF student body. I commend the department for responding to the post-colonial turn in the discipline; this move positions them to work across the College and University to build and foster a curriculum that is global and diverse. They have done this by integrating into their single-religion courses an examination of the plethora of ways that religion is practiced worldwide. They have also developed new courses that explicitly address religion in a global context and that look at specific themes in religion such as ecology, film, psychology, sexuality, and gender. Notably, they offer a curriculum that will help first-generation and under-represented minority students at CSUF make sense of their particular religious backgrounds, such as RLST 485T: Religion and Immigration and RLST 367: Religion in Latino/a Life (cross-listed with Chicano Studies). The department's commitment to a global and diverse perspective has been supported by their hiring practices as well. Not only do they continue their tradition of hiring highly respected scholars in the field of Religious Studies, they also hire faculty whose academic and pedagogical training contributes to the global curriculum.

The Department has embraced online education, and I share the External Review Team's admiration of the quality of their online instruction. I respect the Department's concern that offering a fully online minor (or major) could negatively impact recruitment of students who are drawn to the face-to-face faculty and student connections. If the Department does want to pursue



the “feeder-course analysis” described below, I suggest we add a dimension to that study that looks at online versus in-person courses.

The Department has cultivated important relationships with religious institutions in Southern California. The faculty presents lectures to religious communities in Orange County and Los Angeles, and they have been able to bring a number of influential figures to campus. In 2018, the Department secured a \$150,000 contribution from the Jain Temple in Los Angeles to support the Bhagwan Shantinath Program in Jain Studies for five years. This amount will support the hire of an instructor who will teach one course in Jain Studies and organize a symposium each year. If successful, the Jain Temple may fund a permanent position.

#### Challenges and Areas of Opportunity

I am pleased to learn that the Department is already planning a retreat to on the mission, vision, objectives, and goals of the Department. I echo the External Review team’s suggestion that bringing in an external facilitator may allow all faculty to engage equally. A facilitator, perhaps a respected colleague from the area, would free the members of the Department to fully participate in the retreat. Other small departments in our College have used this model and may have individuals to recommend. Indeed, seeing the value of bringing in a facilitator for the day, I would be happy to provide College funds to hire the facilitator. Establishing the future vision of the department will pave the road for them to hire strategically when Dr. Brad Starr and Dr. James Santucci complete their FERP. Given that department’s tenure density is currently 96.2 percent, when Dr. Starr and Dr. Santucci fully retire we can revisit the possibility of a search. By then, the Department would have had time to complete its visioning process and evaluate, for example, the External Review Team’s suggestion of hiring a scholar of Global Christianities, Civic Engagement, and Interreligious Cooperation.

I, too, join the Department in noting the **inconsistent graduation rates**, and wondering if their curricular structure might not be a contributing factor. I encourage the Department to continue to consider reducing the number of categories a student must complete from eight. As the Department decides how to prune and shape their curriculum, I urge them to work with the College’s Associate Dean, Jessica Stern, and the data analysis team to identify places where students may get stuck, and to determine historically which courses students are finding the most appealing and impactful. The College has created dashboards that track enrollment patterns which will be useful in this endeavor. Making better use of the assessment data gathered yearly will also aid the Department in strategically crafting their new curriculum. **I hesitate in encouraging the department to add another minor in Asian religions, given the paucity of students in their existing majors.** Perhaps joining forces with the broader Asian Studies minor, which is in the process of being revamped by coordinator Lisa Tran, is a better route forward.



I hear the Religious Studies Department's concern about EO1100r, and about how double-counting may hurt our smaller departments. Jessica Stern, the Interim Associate Dean, is working with the College's data analysts to get a clear picture of how students in the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 cohorts, the first ones who could double count, navigated their general education courses differently than their predecessors. I have made it priority to engage departments in H&SS in discussions about the impact of EO1100r not only on specific departments, but also on the ability of our students to leave CSUF with a liberal arts education. The will of the Council of Chairs has been to reject a blanket College breadth requirement, and instead allow departments to determine the strategy that best suits their majors, whether it be encouraging minors and double majors, changing their majors to formally require that students take a series of collateral courses that complement their discipline, or informally advising students into other courses. In this environment, it is key for Religious Studies to provide other departments with lists of RLST courses that are regularly offered and may appeal to majors of other departments, as they discuss doing in their March 22 response to the External Review Team.

While I will continue to advocate for admission processes that allow us to grow strategically, in the interim I encourage the Department to invest in developing ways to convince the Religious Studies students who have been admitted to Cal State Fullerton to accept their admission. The College will continue to make the lists of admitted students available to Departments as soon as possible, and I applaud the Chair for actively seeking this list. We look forward to hearing the Department's plan for outreach efforts.

Convincing students with no major to declare a Religious Studies major, or convincing students with majors to add a Religious Studies minor, is another way to grow the program. I am pleased that Dr. Mugdha Yeolekar has chosen to teach in our HUM 100 program. Her presence in the classroom will expose first-semester freshmen to Religious Studies and to the possibility of the major and the minor in Religious Studies. The Department can continue to identify ways to set itself apart and, as such, draw new students. For example, while I respect that the Department feels too strained to offer Study Away courses, I suggest they speak to Interim Associate Dean Jessica Stern to explore adding Study Away trips to existing courses that could take place during Spring or Fall break, and expose students in key courses to the variety of religious institutions in Southern California. Another option to consider is working with the College to conduct a feeder-courses study, as it has done for other departments. A feeder-course study examines the courses students take prior to adding a minor or major. Pin-pointing these feeder courses would help the Department identify what is already setting it apart for our students, build productive and inviting course schedules, and help determine where to vigorously market the minor.

Finally, I suggest that the Department meet with Associate Dean Paul Levesque to discuss renegotiating the cross-listing arrangements it has with the many departments it shares courses with. He can help you advocate for more seat allocations in those courses.