

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

EXTERNAL REVIEWERS

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CAMPUS VISIT:

Dates

April 27-29, 2011

The review team read the self-study written by the faculty in the department; reviewed the curriculum, course syllabi and evaluations; conducted class visits; interviewed faculty, students and staff; and met with the Dean, Associate Deans and other relevant members of the campus community. Prior to their visit, the reviewers were provided with USF's Vision, Mission, Values Statement, the department's self-study and other university materials.

1. How did the external review committee rate the quality of the program – excellent, very good, good, adequate, or poor? How does the program compare with benchmark top-tier programs nationally? Please provide a brief rationale for the external review committee's rating.

Although the reviewers did not rate the program, their comments suggest that the program could be rated as GOOD. Their comments indicate that the program has the potential to become an outstanding program at the level that one would expect to find at a top-tier liberal college or university. The reviewers were impressed with the faculty's "deep commitment to education of their students as well as the high degree of mutual respect and collegial spirit" in the department. The reviewers agreed that the department has much potential for growth, developed by both "individual and corporate" strengths.

2. What are the most important general issues that emerged from the external review process?

- Identity:
 - The reviewers noted the "bifurcated" name of "Theology and Religious Studies" and the differences of opinion within the department about "the shape of the field and the responsibilities of the department towards students and the university as a whole."
 - While the department "has done a good job in diversifying the religious traditions represented in the curriculum," the reviewers found them to be more "inclusivist than pluralist."
 - The reviewers commented on the frequency that faculty members mentioned "authenticity" and discussed potential problems associated with the view that "a practical tradition is best taught by a practitioner of that tradition."
- Curriculum and Instruction:
 - Undergraduate:
 - There appears to be a frustration over the reduced required Theology and Religious Studies courses after the change from 3 units to 4 units courses.

- There is also a frustration over the lack of sequenced courses and courses designed for the majors and minors.
 - Graduate Program: The loss of the graduate program has had an impact on faculty teaching.
- Faculty:
 - Students praised the faculty's excellence in teaching and commitment to their learning.
 - The reviewers commented on the "tremendous amount" of service the department and its members provide the university and the "terrific collaborations going on" inside the department and between department members and other units.
 - The reviewers noted that adjunct faculty members taught over 50% of all CORE courses in some semesters.
 - Reviewers commented that research activities have taken the "backseat" to the teaching and other responsibilities for many junior and mid-career colleagues.

3. What specific recommendations for improving the program's quality has the external review committee made to the Dean?

- Identity:
 - The reviewers suggested that the department abandon references to "religious education" to promote "its 'identity' nationally and internationally as a program that specializes in the 'study of religion and social justice'."
 - Reviewers recommend that the department distinguish itself from other related activities and institutions on campus, specifically mentioning campus ministry, the Lane Center, and SII.
- Curriculum and Instruction:
 - Undergraduate:
 - The reviewers recommend "streamlining of courses that fulfill core requirements and a concrete, multi-year plan developed for making better use of faculty resources in the core." This will eliminate junior faculty's labor over excessive preparations and designing of new courses.
 - The reviewers asked that attention be made to "more sequencing and greater degree of rationalization within the department's offerings." They recommend three potential courses that would anchor the major: "Introduction to the Study of Religion," "Theory and Method in the Study of Religion," and advanced level specialized/thematically organized seminars that would be based on faculty interests and specialization.
 - The reviewers advise more explicit use of the city of San Francisco and the Bay Area as a lab in curriculum as a form of "studying lived religion." Courses could build "on the university's and department's commitment to social justice" and "organized around the strengths of the department's faculty."
 - Graduate:
 - Reviewers recommend revisiting the question of the graduate program (M.A.). They proposed a MA program in *Religion, Social Justice, and the Arts*, which can be envisioned and developed as a 5-year BA/MA degree in Theology and Religious Studies.
- Staffing and Hiring:

- The reviewers suggest hiring a theorist and/or a specialist in the field of social justice; this potential candidate can be a senior hire who would be hired to establish and run the graduate program.
 - The reviewers recommend two other tenured track lines to address the excessive use of adjunct faculty in the following areas: “race and social justice,” “cultural theory,” “religion and the performing arts.”
 - They also suggest allowing faculty to teach a more specialized course in conjunction with CORE courses and to teach “2 unit” courses before and after a study-abroad course for both preparation and critical interrogation/reflection.
- Other:
 - Library: The university library needs more adequate resources, especially African religions, Islam, native religions of the Americas, and scholarly books in Spanish.
 - Course registration/size: Given the issues regarding the size of the major and CORE needs, administration should consider creating a formula that takes into consideration the number of students a faculty member teaches across their courses. If a professor teaches an agreed upon number students in a CORE course, the professor could teach a specialized course with fewer than 12 students.
 - Student survey: Reviewers suggest that the department create a student survey to “get a better sense of who the students are and what their intellectual expectations are of the department.”
 - Course development funding: Reviewers urge the faculty to take advantage of the course development grant for course revision to accommodate curricular changes.
 - Intellectual Community: The review team encouraged the department to focus some of their energy inward to build a stronger intellectual community in the department both in terms of scholarship and curricular visions.
 - Chair: Reviewers recommend that the current chair stay in the role to see through the changes that the reviewers have recommended.

4. In the opinion of the external review committee is the program following the University’s strategic initiative in that it is;

Recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty of outstanding teachers and scholars.

- The reviewers applauded “the healthy working relationship that have been developed in the department.”
- The review team noted that some of the faculty are nationally and internationally recognized scholars in their fields.

Enrolling, supporting and graduating a diverse student body that demonstrates high academic achievement, strong leadership capabilities, a concern for others, and a sense of responsibility for the weak and vulnerable.

- The reviewers commented on the students they met were “impressive, articulate, and passionate about their studies.”

Providing the environment necessary to promote student learning in the program.

- They recognized that “all members of the department are devoted to the art of pedagogy—a commitment resoundingly praised by the student with whom we met.”

5. In what way is the program contributing to the goal of making the University of San Francisco a premier Jesuit, Catholic urban university with a global perspective that educates leaders who will fashion a more humane and just world?

- The review team believed that there is “so much potential in the department to strengthen the academic study of religion, taking full advantage of the wonderful setting of San Francisco and the Bay Area in the process,” especially in “promoting its ‘identity’ nationally and internationally as a program that specializes in the ‘study of religion and social justice.’”

6. What is the timetable for the response to the external review committee’s recommendations for program improvement? What can the Office of the Provost do to appropriately respond to the review?

- Support and help facilitate the department’s effort to re-structure its undergraduate curriculum.
- Engage in a discussion in re-inaugurating the MA program, especially the concept of a 5-year BA/MA program.
- Provide resources to enable the program to hire faculty, especially a theorist and/or a specialist in the field of social justice.
- Assist the department in resolving issues about course enrollments, faculty/student credits for study abroad, and lack of resources in the library.
- Support and cultivate research and scholarly activities.

7. What general comments or issues, if any, are crucial to understanding the reviewers report?

- The reviewers noted that the department “enjoys the support of the university administration with many important interdisciplinary relationships having been forged over time.”
- The review team encouraged the department to move in the “direction of interdisciplinary academic study of religion” which would be more in line with what is happening in the field in colleges and university around the country.