

Dept. of Theology & Religious Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR 2018 - 2019

REPORT DUE DATE: 11/01/2019

- Who should submit the report? – All majors, minors (including interdisciplinary minors), graduate and non-degree granting certificate programs of the College of Arts and Sciences.
- Programs can combine assessment reports for a major and a minor program into one aggregate report as long as the mission statements, program learning outcome(s) evaluated, methodology applied to each, and the results are clearly delineated in separate sections
- Undergraduate, Graduate and Certificate Programs must submit separate reports
- It is recommended that assessment report not exceed 10 pages. Additional materials (optional) can be added as appendices
- Curriculum Map should be submitted along with Assessment Report

Some useful contacts:

- 1) Prof. Alexandra Amati, FDCD, Arts - adamati@usfca.edu
- 2) Prof. John Lendvay, FDCD, Sciences - lendvay@usfca.edu
- 3) Prof. Mark Meritt, FDCD, Humanities - meritt@usfca.edu
- 4) Prof. Michael Jonas, FDCD, Social Sciences - mrjonas@usfca.edu
- 5) Prof. Suparna Chakraborty, AD Academic Effectiveness - schakraborty2@usfca.edu

Academic Effectiveness Annual Assessment Resource Page: <https://myusf.usfca.edu/arts-sciences/faculty-resources/academic-effectiveness/assessment>.

Email to submit the report: assessment_cas@usfca.edu. **Important:** Please write the name of your program or department in the subject line. For example: FineArts_Major (if you decide to submit a separate report for major and minor); FineArts_Aggregate (when submitting an aggregate report)

I. LOGISTICS

- 1. Please indicate the name and email of the program contact person to whom feedback should be sent (usually Chair, Program Director, or Faculty Assessment Coordinator).**

THRS Chair → Dr. Vijaya Nagarajan

THRS Assessment Report Preparer → Dr. Jorge Aquino

- 2. Please indicate if you are submitting report for (a) a Major, (b) a Minor, (c) an aggregate report for a Major & Minor (in which case, each should be explained in a separate paragraph as in this template), (d) a Graduate or (e) a Certificate Program**

We are submitting an aggregate report for Majors and Minors

- 3. Please note that a Curricular Map should accompany every assessment report. Has there been any revisions to the Curricular Map?**

There has been no revision to the Curriculum Map

II. MISSION STATEMENT & PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES

- 1. Were any changes made to the program mission statement since the last assessment cycle in October 2018? Kindly state "Yes" or "No." Please provide the current mission statement below.**

Mission Statement (Major/Graduate/Certificate): No.

Mission Statement (Minor): No.

If you are submitting an aggregate report, please provide the current mission statements of both the major and the minor program

MISSION: Dept. of Theology & Religious Studies¹

The Department of Theology & Religious Studies (hereafter THRS) embodies the University of San Francisco's (hereafter USF) mission to "promote learning in the Jesuit Catholic tradition"; offers students "the knowledge and skills needed to succeed as persons and professionals, and the values and sensitivity to be [people] for others"; "distinguish[es] itself as a diverse, socially responsible learning community of high quality scholarship and academic rigor sustained by a faith that does justice"; and "draw[s] from the cultural, intellectual, and economic resources of the San Francisco Bay Area and its location on the Pacific Rim to enrich and strengthen its educational programs."

Religion is one of the most powerful social forces in the world. An understanding of religious traditions helps students navigate the twenty-first-century's complexities. THRS programs critically and systematically explore religious experiences and cultural differences, assisting students in becoming familiar with major religious traditions, values, and symbols. Our faculty encourage students to appreciate the role of religion in public and private life, developing knowledge about human dignity and human rights, freedom, responsibility, and social justice. In developing an awareness of the relationship between belief and justice, students also engage in an exploration in the religious dimensions of their own lives.

2. **Were any changes made to the program learning outcomes (PLOs) since the last assessment cycle in October 2017? Kindly state "Yes" or "No." Please provide the current PLOs below. If you are submitting an aggregate report, please provide the current PLOs for both the major and the minor programs.**

No.

Note: Major revisions in the program learning outcomes need to go through the College Curriculum Committee (contact: Professor Joshua Gamson, gamson@usfca.edu). Minor editorial changes are not required to go through the College Curriculum Committee.

PLOs (Major/Graduate/Certificate):

- 1) **Human Dimensions of Religion, Theology and Spirituality:** Students articulate how religion, theology, and spirituality underlie and correlate with a broad range of human experience.
- 2) **Religious Diversity:** Students analyze various religious traditions, as encouraged by Vatican II's stance on the Catholic Church's relationship with other faiths.

¹ Department of Theology & Religious Studies, University of San Francisco, "Academic Program Review: Department Self Study 2018" (January 31, 2018).

- 3) **Social Justice:** Students investigate and articulate how religious and theological traditions can work effectively for social justice and for the good of the entire human family and the environment that sustains it.
- 4) **Theory & Methods of the Study of Religion:** Students demonstrate knowledge of academic methods and practices characteristic of the study of theology and/or religion, including the different contributions of textual, historical, social, and interdisciplinary studies.

PLOs (Minor): *Ibid*

3. State the particular Program Learning Outcome(s) you assessed for the academic year 2018-2019.

PLO(s) being assessed (Major/Graduate/Certificate): In the case of both the Major and the Minor, we assess PLO #4, which covers research, method, and theory in theology and religious studies. It reads as follows:

Theory & Methods of the Study of Religion: Students demonstrate knowledge of academic methods and practices characteristic of the study of theology and/or religion, including the different contributions of textual, historical, social, and interdisciplinary studies.

PLO(s) being assessed (Minor): *ibid*, PLO #4

III. METHODOLOGY

Important Note – WSCUC advises us to use “direct methods” which relate to a direct evaluation of a student work product. “Indirect methods” like exit interviews or student surveys can be used only as additional complements to a direct method.

For any program with fewer than 10 students: If you currently have fewer than 10 students in your program (rendering your statistical analysis biased due to too few data points), it is fine to describe a multi-year data collection strategy here. It would be important to remember that every 3 years, we would expect you to have enough data to conduct a meaningful analysis.

Important: Please attach, at the end of this report, a copy of the rubric used for assessment.

Describe the methodology that you used to assess the PLO(s). For example, “the department used questions that were inputted in the final examination pertaining directly to the <said PLO>. An independent group of faculty (not teaching the course) then evaluated the responses to the questions and gave the students a grade for responses to those questions.”

Methodology used (both Major and Minor): This report summarizes review of work from a single course — the department’s Methods seminar (THRS 101: Methods and Theories in

Theology & Religious Studies) — as taught in the Fall 2018. The seminar is required both for Majors and Minors. That term the course ended with an enrollment of 13 students, including seven (7) majors and six (6) minors. The Methods seminar offers an introduction to a range of perspectives, approaches and methodologies in the fields of religion and theology, as those are practiced by members of our faculty, who give introductory guest lectures throughout the course. The seminar also offers substantial training and workshopping on library research, drafting, and editing. The overarching goal for all in the course was a final research paper, to which students built up research, outlines, and drafts in a structured pedagogy.

Challenges. A number of challenges confront an assessment exercise like this one. For a variety of structural reasons, mostly beyond the control of our faculty, THRS has struggled in the last decade to field a proper critical mass of majors and minors. THRS is in effect a core-service department, with a barely sustainable program for majors and minors. The Methods seminar is one of two occasions — other than departmental events and socials — for our students to do any sort of cohorting during their time at USF. Because of the paucity of our majors and course-enrollment floors mandated by the university, there have been years in which THRS could not run even this required seminar, for want of 12-15 majors to enroll in it. This dynamic has a devastating impact on our ability to build a major (though it is hardly the only challenge). In response, the faculty voted two years ago to require minors also to enroll in the Methods seminar. This is how THRS was able to pass enrollment — with 13 students — in Fall 2018. (This year's Methods seminar, by contrast, is being offered as a directed study, again for want of that critical mass.)

The other side of the assessment challenges has to do with the vast interdisciplinarity and global range of our faculty in their research and teaching commitments. The blessing is that our faculty, collectively, can speak to matters of culture, belief, and practice in pretty much every corner of the world, in the language of many of the world's religions. The downside is that such a range is not matched by any programmatic deployment (other than the Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice). Ergo, the smattering of majors and minors in a Methods course, which is possible only once every other year at best, does not allow our students the sort of deep dive into topics and methodologies that a THRS program untethered from the Core service mission might offer. And in this course, often the first non-core THRS course our majors take, the papers mostly show first-impression research on themes. So a strict and rigorous recourse to method tends to take place only in the few outstanding students THRS mentors. Thus, assessment on the Methods PLO, even based on data from the Methods seminar, is difficult to assess in a coherent way.

Methodology used: Given the challenges enumerated above, this assessment will present data from a review of final research projects presented by Majors and Minors in the Methods seminar, as well as a few examples of methodological recourse in abstracts that students submitted on course readings. I break out results for majors and minors, separately and in aggregate results, in the charts to follow. Both data sets are examined to determine their fulfillment of the outcomes, especially PLO #4.

IV. RESULTS & MAJOR FINDINGS

What are the major takeaways from your assessment exercise? This section is for you to highlight the results of the exercise. Pertinent information here would include:

- a. how well students mastered the outcome at the level they were intended to,**

See discussion below.

- b. any trends noticed over the past few assessment cycles, and**

Comment: This is the first time to my knowledge that we are testing this PLO. But given what we are learning — particularly the conclusions about critical mass of students *vis a vis* the breadth of our faculty’s geographic and disciplinary coverage. It would be advisable for us to discuss these results and consider their implications for the chronic challenge we have faced pulling together a departmental mission beyond the Core Curriculum.

- c. the levels at which students mastered the outcome based on the rubric used.**

See discussion below.

Results (Major/Graduate/Certificate):

Final Papers

The following chart summarizes student fulfillment of PLO #4, based on a reading of methodological engagement in their final papers. Below the chart is the assessment rubric. (Further information can be supplied on request.)

Majors	Excellent: Well grounded in method	Good: Clear citation of method	Passable: Some citation of method	Inadequate: No recourse / no method claims	No Submission
1					X
2			X		
3			X		
4		X			
5	X				
6		X			

Minors					
1		X			
2			X		
3	X				
4				X	
5					X
6				X	

Key to Rubric

Actual methods used — explicit or implied — engaged: (i) approaches to theological reason, (ii) scriptural hermeneutics, (iii) ethnographic study of religious cultures, and (iv) historical studies. (See “**Discussion**” below.)

Excellent: Clear statement of a methodological approach or perspective, with a clear integration of the paper in the ambit of its method claims.

Good: A citation of method of some sort, with some integration of theme and research to stated methods.

Passable: Some citation of method, even if bare or ambiguous, with some apparent integration to theme and research.

Inadequate: No statement of, or recourse to, any sort of methodology. Paper is more in the manner of a reflection paper than an academic research project.

No submission: Two students had overwhelming personal issues, did not submit final papers, and did not complete the course.

Discussion. The data here is somewhat meaningful. The final papers represent a substantial and prolonged commitment for the students in this course — one informed by multiple workshops and cohort discussions, plus the guest lectures of our THRS faculty, whose writings they encounter in the course. Only a few of the final papers contained truly explicit, lucid statements of a methodological perspective. Others had But to reiterate: this course is (a) a gateway to the major and the minor, and (b) one of only two courses THRS offers that will have a critical mass of its students together as a THRS cohort (i.e. without the agenda and distractions of a core course).

Abstracts

I present below data culled from the abstracts students submitted during the course. This was the best alternate direct evidence for PLO #4 (besides the final papers) for this course. It is clear the small critical mass of students challenges assessment, especially given the breadth of the introductory material our faculty offers in the course. In short, it’s a challenge too far to get into the deep details and nuances of method, in *any* of the many fields of religious studies we represent, in a course like this.

The syllabus expectation for this exercise was stated thus:

Weekly Readings — Abstracts. During the semester you will write abstracts, summarizing and responding to six (6) of the readings, mostly those that will accompany presentations by our guest speakers. ... These papers should be 500-1,000 words each (i.e. 2-4 pgs double-spaced) and address three tasks:

1. Header: bibliographic citation. Give us a bibliographical headnote, in proper citational style. My preference is Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition. ...
2. Present and discuss the thesis claims made by the author. Tell us (a) who the author is; (b) what their principal theses are; and (c) what major arguments, authorities, and evidence they present to buttress their claims.
3. Assess the author's argument. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the argument, prescribing correctives as you see them. Give us some positive statement as well about the value this article makes to knowledge in the field, and to your education in particular.

This assessment report presents data from a review of submissions abstracting four (4) of the figures read in the course whose work is more explicitly methodological.²

Harvey J. Sindima, "What Is Religion? The Search for a Definition," and "The Elements of Religion," in *Introduction to Religious Studies* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2012), 24–49.

Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J., "Religion," in *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 101–24.

Vijaya R. Nagarajan, "(In)Corporating Threshold Art: Kolam Competitions, Patronage, and Colgate," in *Religions/Globalizations: Theories and Cases*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 161–86.

John K. Nelson, "Experimental Buddhism: Contexts and Trajectories," in *Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 1–27.

The scores of the few on-point assignments is as follows:

² **Sindima** wrestles with the impossible task of defining "religion" and delimiting the totality of the fields of "religious studies." **Lonergan** presents elements of theological methodology, especially with respect to theologians interested in religions other than Christianity. **Nagarajan** and **Nelson** present elements of ethnographic method and practice.

Majors

Majors	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7
Sindema			3				
Lonergan		1					2
Nagarajan		2					
Nelson							

Minors

Minors	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6
Sindema		3			3	
Lonergan			3			
Nelson		2				

Key: The charts above rate submission for abstracts on the respective authors, for majors and minors, according to the following ratings rubric:

3	Excellent: Strong, clear, and comprehensive statement of the author’s methodological perspective.
2	Good: Decent citation / summation of method of the author’s methodological perspective.
1	Passable: Partial or elliptical citation of the author’s methodological perspective.
0	Inadequate: Poor to no recounting of method.

Discussion. It is not clear that this data is particularly meaningful. We see some evidence for the PLO in student abstracts of the few readings with more clear methodological engagement. But students were required to submit only six (6) papers overall, on themes that seemed more tailored to their particular disciplinary leanings, or more conducive to stimulating inspiration for final-paper research. Ergo, I am not sure I can infer a consistent pattern in the data. I sense this is attributable to (a) the entry-level nature of this course; (b) the small class size; and (c) the limited prior cohorting of our group, given limits on the department’s life outside the core curriculum. Because the overwhelming majority of our

courses are programming for Core D-2 or D-3, it is not clear how much PLO #4 (methods) is advanced for our majors — at least not before they appear for their senior Capstone projects.

V. CLOSING THE LOOP

Based on your results, what changes/modifications are you planning in order to achieve the desired level of mastery in the assessed learning outcome? This section could also address more long-term planning that your department/program is considering and does not require that any changes need to be implemented in the next academic year itself.

Closing the Loop (Major/Minor): Given that THRS is a department programatically wedded to servicing the Core Curriculum in a way that limits the development of its pool of majors and minors, it is not clear how we can advance outcomes on this PLO. Our department suffers a paradoxical situation: We are blessed with brilliant faculty representing a wide range of fields, religious traditions and geographic regions. But because of growing physical (and ideological) limits, we are constrained — in student numbers (majors/minors), and in fealty to the core. We cannot often drill deep enough in our core courses to keep our few majors interested. And with the growing challenge at USF of rising minimum-enrollments and hard limits on total course offerings, we remain perennially stuck at a relatively low roster of majors and minors.

This is not without consequence. As someone who has been deeply involved during the last decade in mentoring and refereeing many THRS Capstone projects, I aver anecdotally that our majors too often show inadequate formation — in the rudiments of research and writing, and in poor thematic or project integration. Some students are truly brilliant; others show more modest skill; and quite a number of others can barely finish their projects by graduation time. This is a whole subject that has already garnered considerable attention in our department — and deserves considerably more. I am not sure our department alone has the resources — or should bear primary responsibility — for remedying this.

But setting aside the challenge of inculcating basic writing / thinking / research / analytical skills, one clear conclusion, for even this cursory survey, is that THRS cannot especially up its theoretical game in service to Majors and Minors — in terms of nuanced issues of method as configured in PLO #4 — without reconfiguring its bondage to the mission of the university core curriculum — preferably servicing the core in a way that compels students to take more than the *one THRS course* that most undergrads can get away with taking.

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

Any rubrics used for assessment, relevant tables, charts and figures should be included here.

All relevant materials, charts, etc. are disclosed above.

Report Prepared and Submitted By

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Fri., Nov. 1, 2019

cc: Vijaya Nagarajan, Chair THRS
