

Final Assessment Report

Academic Review

Religions & Cultures

A. Summary

- i. The Self Study was presented (electronically) to the PPC on November 22, 2013.
- ii. The Review Committee consisted of two external reviewers: Dr. Donna Seamone, Acadia University and Dr. Scott Kline, St. Jerome's University and two internal reviewers, Dr. Sarah Winters and Dr. Manuel Litalien.
- iii. The site visit occurred on March 24 and 25, 2014.
- iv. The Reviewers' Report was received on August 12, 2014.
- v. The Department's response was provided on, November 18, 2014.
- vi. The Faculty Dean's response was received on, November 16, 2014.

The academic programs offered by the Department which were examined as part of the review included:

BA Honours Specialization
BA Specialization
BA Major
BA Minor

This review was conducted under the terms and conditions of the IQAP approved by the Nipissing University Senate on May 17, 2013, and ratified by the Quality Council on June 28, 2013.

B. Strengths

The Review Team noted the following regarding the strengths of the Department of Religions and Cultures: *"The Department of Religions and Cultures currently has 3.5 full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty members who are, on the whole, excellent teachers who communicate their enthusiasm for the broad field of religions and cultures to their students through "innovative, high impact pedagogy" (see Self Study, pp. 14-15). Religions and Cultures students are, in turn, enthusiastic about their area of study and the pursuit of learning. One discernable strength of the Religions and Cultures program is the quality of its faculty and their commitment to work with students to develop an academically rigorous and yet student-centred curriculum.*

The review team is especially impressed by the development of the department since its inception in 2004. With few faculty resources, especially in the early years of the program, and with virtually no administrative support staff, the Department of Religions and Cultures has established a vibrant interdisciplinary program that offers a broad range of appealing, innovative courses to Nipissing students. For students who wish to focus their studies in the religions and cultures, Religion and Cultures offers minor, major, and honours options."

C. Opportunities for Improvement and Enhancement

The Review Team offered the following specific recommendations:

1. To capture the distinctiveness of the Religions and Cultures program in recruitment literature, the review team recommends that Integrated Marketing and Communications work closely with Religions and Cultures to revise its promotional material. The review team recognizes that NU must adhere to visual standards and produce literature that reflects NU's look; however, the review team contends that the RLCT promotional material does not communicate the uniqueness and vibrancy of the program.

In its response, the Department advised that *“the Chair will arrange meetings of the Department of Religions and Cultures with External Relations - Marketing to increase mutual involvement and understanding of Religions and Cultures. The Department would also like to pursue a RLCT Facebook page to connect to students and market itself within the university community. The process for gaining approval for initiatives such as a RLCT Facebook page is not, however, straightforward and support has not been forthcoming.”*

The Faculty Dean *“supports the actions proposed in the departmental response. Similar issues were raised for other programs. As the Faculty of Arts and Science, we are working with Integrated Marketing and Communications to develop better promotional material for a number of programs, and in general for the programs in Arts and Science.”*

PPC response is as follows: **PPC considers that while the suggestions are useful, they fall outside the scope of a program review. Nevertheless, PPC recommends that the relevant University units (Recruitment, Marketing and Communications) continue to consult with all academic units and the Deans in the development of their marketing/recruitment/communications strategies.**

2. The review team recommends that the department consider a 3-credit introductory course as a means to allow greater student exposure to RLCT courses and the RLCT program. Under 1.3.1 above, the review team presented two options—there are, of course, other ways to address this recommendation.

The Department advised that *“this is an important recommendation that has sparked a broader conversation within the Department about pedagogical principles and the operating assumptions of the discipline of Religions and Cultures. We will assess the introductory course again this year in the context of declining enrolments before making significant curricular changes. At the very least we will develop a 3 credit introductory course as a gateway into the program (it will be developed for 2016-17). In addition, we may split the present introductory course into two first-year 3 credit courses or we may delete it and re-envision the comparative study of religion (presently done in this introductory first year course) as fitting better in the second year.”*

The Faculty Dean *“supports this recommendation and the actions proposed by the department.”*

PPC response is as follows: **PPC agrees that Religion and Cultures split the six-credit into two three-credit introductory courses, and it has been done.**

3. The review team recommends that the department consider a second-year required course (3-credits) for minors, majors, and honours that addresses the various approaches to the study of religion.

The Department responded that *“this course will be developed in time for the 2016-17 academic year and may replace the theory course (RLCT 3206) already on the books at the third year level.”*

The Faculty Dean *“supports this recommendation and the actions proposed by the department.”*

PPC response is as follows: **PPC supports this recommendation and notes that the Department has already begun the changes required.**

4. The review team recommends that resources be made available to enhance experiential, community-based, and international service learning. During our interviews, students cited this lack of opportunity as one of the major deficiencies in the program and in the NU RLCT student experience.

The Department noted that *“some of the groundwork for implementing this recommendation has been laid. For example, in Dr Srigley’s course on “Death, Dying and Spirituality” (RLCT 2066) 4 students volunteered with the Near North Palliative Care Network in 2013. One of those student volunteers was later employed by the Near North Palliative Care Network for a summer position. Dr. Renshaw took 6 students from her Animal Rites class to Hong Kong in June 2014. Students were placed in the Wildlife Animal Rescue centre at the Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Garden and with the SPCA in Hong Kong. Their volunteer placements formed the basis of the course Sanctuary and Salvation. Dr. Renshaw plans to continue this international involvement in future years. We have begun preliminary discussion with Dr. Scott Kline (one of the External Reviewers), VP Academic and Dean of St. Jerome’s and Chair of Project Ploughshares, exploring the option to work within a consortium of smaller Religious Studies faculties in order to pool resources. This would allow us to participate in programmes in which students travel abroad. These initiatives are time-intensive and require additional institutional support for their implementation.”*

The Faculty Dean *“would like to note that we are currently in the process of developing a generic 3-credit course to accommodate experiential learning in programs offered by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.”*

PPC response is as follows: **PPC endorses this recommendation and notes that the Faculty of Arts and Science has already introduced a three-credit course to enable experiential learning courses for all disciplines within the faculty.**

5. The review team recommends that the department consider a limited number of online offerings to deal, particularly, with students wishing to take RLCT courses over the spring and summer.

The Department advised that *“the implementation of this recommendation is already underway as Dr. Colborne is presently offering RLCT 2026 (The Roots of Evil) simultaneously on campus and online. The success of this initiative will be assessed at the end of the term and other offerings may be developed. It is already clear, however, that successfully offering an online course requires significant investment in time and resources.”*

The Faculty Dean advised that *“the Faculty of Arts and Science is currently working on creation of a support position for development and delivery of online courses.”*

PPC response is as follows: **PPC considers that the decision to offer online Spring and Summer courses depends largely on potential student registrations. PPC notes that the Faculty of Arts and**

Science is offering more online courses in Spring/Summer 2016 in a number of disciplines, including Religion and Cultures.

6. The review team recommends that the Executive Director of the Library and the liaison librarian assigned to RLCT meet formally with the Department of Religions and Cultures to create a list of priorities that will guide the acquisition of library and research resources that will better support the RLCT program. In particular, the review team strongly recommends that the University consider purchasing a subscription to the American Theological Library Association Religion Database (ATLA RDB). This is a standard research database that would support not only Religions and Cultures research but also research in Native Studies, Anthropology, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, and Social Welfare and Social Development.

The Department responded that *“the RLCT program will continue to advocate for library resources to support not just our own students but students throughout the Humanities and Social Sciences. Improving our library collection is a common theme in student feedback for all departments in the university.”*

The Faculty Dean *“supports the recommendation. Even if current budgetary constraints do not allow our subscription to the database, we should have a plan in place to subscribe to the database in the near future.”*

PPC response is as follows: **The Executive Director of the Library has reviewed the acquisitions budget related to Religion and Cultures to ascertain whether or not the ATLARDB can be acquired. Database has been acquired.**

7. The review team, in agreement with the department’s proposed recommendation, recommends that, given the pattern of sabbaticals (Prof. McCann 2015-16, Prof. Renshaw [.5 in RLCT] 2016-17, Prof. Colborne [6 month sabbatical] 2016-17, and Prof. Srigley 2017-18), the University approve a three-year limited term appointment, which would reasonably provide the necessary resources to address the loss in capacity created by course releases and sabbaticals.]

The Department advised *“it has applied for a three year LTA in the next budget. The RLCT Department operates with a minimal faculty complement and must offer a minimum number of courses simply to maintain its program, let alone offering some amount of choice in courses to students. Sabbatical replacements for the next three years will be a necessity.”*

The Faculty Dean noted that *“the request for this position is already included in the budget requests for the 2015-2016 year. The request will be brought to the budget committee. From the point of program delivery, having such a position will bring continuity and stability to the department, which will also be important for student recruitment.”*

PPC response is as follows: **PPC notes according to Quality Assurance Framework Reviewers are asked to comment on the “Appropriateness and effectiveness of the academic unit’s use of existing human, physical and financial resources in delivering its program(s)”. In making this assessment, reviewers must recognize the institution’s autonomy to determine priorities for funding, space, and faculty allocation.” Accordingly, PPC refers this matter to the Dean for consideration as part of the normal budgetary process.**

D. Specific Recommendations

Below are the recommendations that require specific action as a result of the Review, along with the identification of the position or unit responsible for the action in question. Notwithstanding the position or unit identified as the being responsible for specific recommendations, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science has the overall responsibility for ensuring that the recommended actions are undertaken..

PPC Recommendations	Responsible	Projected Date
(1) That Religion and Cultures split the six-credit into two three-credit introductory courses.	Department	September 2016
(2) That the department consider a second-year required course (3-credits) for minors, majors, and honours that addresses the various approaches to the study of religion.	Department	September 2016
(3) That the Faculty and the Department should consider offering online courses in Religion and Cultures for Spring/Summer 2017.	Dean	May 2016
(4) That the Executive Director of the Library review the acquisitions budget related to Religion and Cultures to ascertain whether or not the ATLARDB can be acquired.)	Executive Director of the Library	June 2015 (completed)