

# **Review Team Report:**

## **Department of Philosophy and Religion**

### **I. Introduction**

From January 31 to February 2, 2016, a team comprised of Dr. Rodger Payne, Professor and Chair, Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina Asheville (External Reviewer and Review Team Chair); Dr. William F. Lawhead, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, University of Mississippi (External Reviewer); Dr. Cyndy Hughes, Associate Professor, Criminology and Criminal Justice, College of Arts and Sciences (Internal Reviewer); and Dr. Hollye Moss, Professor, Director of School of Economics, Management, and Project Management, College of Business (Internal Reviewer), met on the campus of Western Carolina University to review the Department of Philosophy and Religion (PAR). During this time, team members met with and interviewed Provost Alison Morrison-Shelton (1/31 and 2/2); Associate Provost for Undergraduate Studies, Dr. Carol Burton and Assessment Director David Onder (2/1 and 2/2); Dean of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Richard Starnes (2/1 and 2/2); and Dr. John Whitmire, Department Head (2/1 and 2/2). The team also met in a joint session with Dr. Brian Railsback (Former Dean, Honors College and Professor of English); Dr. Jill Granger (Dean, Honors College); Dr. Lane Perry (Director, Center for Service Learning); Ms. Jennifer Cooper (Assistant Director, Center for Service Learning); Mr. Kham Ward (Director, Intercultural Affairs); Ms. Niki Paganelli (Assistant Director, Intercultural Affairs) on 2/2. Finally, the team met with six current students and one graduate of the department (2/1), as well as both jointly and individually with all members of the departmental faculty (2/1).

The following report is based on discussions with these groups and individuals, a review of the program's self-evaluation, and other supporting documents and materials provided to the review team.

### **II. Analysis of Program**

The Department of Philosophy and Religion offers an undergraduate Bachelor of Arts program with two concentrations reflecting the two disciplinary emphases of the department. Students may also combine one of the departmental concentrations with another major offered by the university, since the possibility of a double major is facilitated by the relatively low

number of credit hours (30) needed to complete either concentration. The department does not offer a graduate program at this time.

**a. Program Synopsis**

**i. Curriculum.** As it is currently configured, the curriculum in Philosophy and Religion is appropriate to the institution and serves the mission of Western Carolina University as a regionally engaged university. By requiring only 30 credit hours to complete either of the major concentrations, students should be able to complete their degree within 8 semesters and 120 hours; indeed, it would be possible for students to declare a second major (or to declare PAR as their second major) and still complete their degree in a timely manner. As almost all PAR courses are designated as Liberal Studies courses, by university policy there can be no prerequisites for these courses; the upper-division seminars, however, require at least the permission of the instructor and/or up to 6 hours of PAR courses. The department currently requires that students take 9-12 hours of “foundational” courses (this varies depending on the chosen concentration) and 6 hours of upper-division seminars (under a new proposed curriculum, the number of required hours for the upper-division seminars would be increased from 6 to 9 hours). Beyond these courses, students may choose from a variety of elective courses; as noted most of these will simultaneously fulfill many of the required 42 hours in Liberal Studies.

The strong investment that the department has made in the Liberal Studies Program has brought advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages are: (1) PAR majors can fulfill many of their Liberal Studies requirements simply by completing their major elective hours within the department, and (2) these courses are able to enroll a sufficient number of students to meet university expectations regarding class sizes. Liberal Studies can also offer a means whereby students could be introduced to courses in philosophy or religion that they may not have considered taking otherwise, thus generating potential student interest for declaring either a major or a minor in the department. Among the disadvantages is that the department risks becoming primarily a service department that is more focused on maintaining enrollment numbers to the neglect of program development. The key concern expressed by the students who met with the review team was that even in many upper-level courses offered by the department, few students were prepared for the level of work that would be appropriate for a PAR major in a junior or senior course – since no prerequisites are allowed for Liberal Studies

courses – thus requiring some degree of “remedial” instruction on the part of the faculty. The department has addressed this problem by (1) creating a two-tiered system through which students concentrating in either Philosophy or Religion are expected to participate in additional learning opportunities (including additional majors-only meetings), and (2) to offer, in the new proposed curriculum, an additional required seminar for both concentrations and to revise and reduce the “perspective” categories under which most PAR course will be offered in the Liberal Studies program. The review team regarded this new curriculum as a positive step toward evolving the major to serve those students within the department and to develop the disciplinary opportunities and expectations in both Philosophy and Religious Studies, while maintaining a strong presence within the Liberal Studies Program.

**ii. The student body.** With 6 tenured or tenure-track faculty members and approximately 40-50 current majors (both Philosophy and Religion concentrators), the major to faculty ratio is roughly 7.5 to 1, certainly an adequate figure and one that could easily sustain some increase as the department is able to attract more majors. (It is important to note once again, however, that since most of the courses offered by the department are a part of the Liberal Studies Program, PAR faculty primarily serve a substantial number of non-majors in the majority of their courses.) The students who met with the review team seemed very representative of the student body, and all, with one exception, had declared a PAR major only after taking a PAR course (the course mentioned by most was PAR 295). This reflects the comments on many of the department’s exit interviews of its graduating majors and is in keeping with what most departments of Philosophy and/or Religious Studies encounter, since exposure to these subjects as academic disciplines are generally lacking at the high school level. Thus, the decision to concentrate in either Philosophy or Religion is being made by students who have already spent at least one semester at Western Carolina University, and who discover in a PAR course the relevance of these subjects to various careers. The students interviewed by the review team reported that they were planning careers in areas such as business, law enforcement, forensic anthropology, medicine, and public service rather than continued careers in academia, but all thought that their PAR major had provided them with valuable intellectual and life skills that would serve them well in postgraduate programs and were appropriate as well for a wide variety of career opportunities. In the exit interviews, graduating seniors reported that they had already been accepted into diverse graduate programs (law school, public administration,

development practice, seminary, peace and reconciliation studies) or were actively pursuing careers in writing, publishing, and animal advocacy. With the strong encouragement of the faculty, students in the program are also significantly engaged in undergraduate research: since 2012, 17 PAR majors have presented a total of 20 research projects in Philosophy and/or Religion at the National Conference for Undergraduate Research. A number of PAR majors have been involved with *Gadfly*, the satirical publication sponsored by the department and WCU Student Media, as well as other extracurricular activities such as the Philosophy and Religion Club (PARC) and the CARE Conference. In short, at an institution where students are seeking meaningful and “engaged” careers in the region and beyond upon graduation, the goals and objectives of the PAR program seem well-suited to equip students with the life skills that they need.

One of the outstanding characteristics of the department is the way in which the members of the faculty have been able to cultivate a true *community* of learners, both among the students themselves but also between the students and the faculty and staff of the department. This was made quite clear and evident in our interviews with the students, and is in keeping with what former students have expressed in their exit interviews. Each time the review team visited the department office suite there were any number of students in the lounge area, and often one or more members of the faculty. The one alumna present at our meeting with the students not only commented enthusiastically on this sense of community while she was a student, but noted that the departmental faculty has continued to remain in contact with her as she has been considering her options for postgraduate work; thus sustaining this sense of community even after graduation. (It should also be noted that she wanted us to understand that this contact came out of a true sense of interest and concern and not as a way of seeking financial support!)

**iii. Planning and assessment strategies.** The student learning outcomes seem to be very appropriate for the PAR program and for the university in general, since many are focused on skills such as critical thinking and effective communication, in addition to developing “literacy” within the two concentrations. The current assessment instruments, however, appear to be based primarily upon subjective student perceptions of their own learning rather than outcomes that are objectively measured by the faculty. Since some degree of objective assessment is necessary for meeting SACS criteria, the internal reviewers on the review team recommend that

the department work with the Coulter Faculty Commons to review their overall assessment strategies as well as the instruments and rubrics designed to provide more statistical data. We recognize, however, that such forms of assessment should supplement, rather than replace, some of the current methods, given the departmental emphasis on student development of a personal statement on meaning. Such learning exercises can still provide useful information for the department, and the current system of collecting this information through the use of exit interviews conducted by the Department Head seems appropriate. As the number of majors increases, it could become necessary that this task be shared among the members of the department (perhaps including former Department Heads), but barring a sudden exponential growth in numbers, this assessment component should be sustainable for the near future. All faculty can and should be expected to contribute to an expanded assessment protocol.

### **III. Analysis of Faculty**

**a. Qualifications.** The department currently has 6 full-time members of the faculty (five tenured and one tenure-track); all hold the Ph.D. in either Philosophy or Religious Studies. In addition, the department relies on a number of adjunct instructors who also hold advanced degrees (including the Ph.D.) in appropriate disciplines. All full-time members of the faculty are active participants in professional academic organizations, and some have served as officers in these organizations. All faculty, including adjunct faculty, are thus properly credentialed within their areas of teaching and research and active in their service to the academy through various professional organizations.

**b. Resources and support.** Having faced possible consolidation or even elimination as unit or department of the university at various times over the past 10-12 years, the department now appears to be regarded by the administration of the college and the university as an essential component of the academic mission of WCU, and the administrators interviewed by the review team expressed their strong support of the department. While we realize that certain constraints (e.g., student enrollment in courses) will remain and will continue to affect department planning, we are hopeful that the Philosophy and Religion Department has now crossed a barrier in terms of institutional support, so that any lingering insecurity can be eradicated and the department can focus its efforts in areas other than justifying its existence.

The departmental policies for faculty evaluation, reappointment, tenure, promotion, and post-tenure review were included in an appendix of the self-study (pp. 165-180). They are rigorous but appropriate to the expectations of an institution such as WCU. Candidates for reappointment, tenure, and promotion should have a clear idea of what types of teaching evaluations, scholarly activities, and service obligations are incumbent upon them.

Faculty salaries have been stagnant throughout the UNC system for 5-6 years, and although departmental salaries for full-time tenured/tenure-track faculty rose slightly for 2015-16, overall they remain collectively at only 85.28% of the CUPA market index (when the Department Head's salary – which is on target with the market index – is removed from the total, the overall percentage for the other members of the faculty falls to 82.23% of market value). With new faculty hires able to be appointed at close to market rate, this has created some issues with salary compression. This issue has been addressed somewhat with the 2015-16 salary increases, but it needs to continue to be a budgeting priority in order to retain high-quality faculty in the department.

In our interviews with members of the faculty, they expressed their satisfaction with the current state of library holdings and the access that they have through the library to resources such as WNCLN and ILL. The primary technology needs are for faculty and office computers and peripherals such as printers; since the university has a mandatory computer refresh program, these resources remain up to date.

**c. Teaching, research, and service.** The PAR faculty maintains an impressive and enviable record of teaching, research, and service.

All members of the faculty are active classroom instructors, and all teach the 3/3 load expected of them by the university (the Department Head receives two courses releases for a 2/2 load). Teaching is evaluated through the use of the Student Assessment of Instruction (SAI) as approved by the Faculty Senate as well as by rotating peer reviews of teaching (the peer review evaluation form is included in the appendix of the self-study on p. 181). The SAI indicate high student satisfaction with teaching, and the students who met with the review team were similarly enthusiastic about the pedagogical talents of the PAR faculty. As noted earlier, most of the students that we interviewed had decided to declare a major after enrolling in PAR 295, and the impact that this course had made upon them remained evident in the passion with which they recalled their experiences in the course. It was, one of them commented, the single most

important course that she had taken in college, and others agreed with her assessment. It seemed clear also that it was the classroom experience (guided in this case by Dr. Whitmire) rather than just the academic content of the course that proved so meaningful. The fact that many members of the PAR faculty have been awarded – or at least been finalists for – the most prestigious university awards for excellence in teaching confirms what we heard from the students.

In addition to such excellence in teaching, members of the departmental faculty have a distinguished record of scholarship and publication that would be strong even at a research intensive university. Within the discipline of philosophy, most scholarship is produced in the form of articles rather than books, and the PAR faculty have published collectively a large number of articles in top-tier peer-reviewed journals such as the *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and *Levinas Studies*, and have contributed to anthologies published by quality academic presses such as Oxford University Press, Palgrave, Routledge, and Wiley-Blackwell. Two members of the faculty have written books (two have been published by Dr. McLachlan and a manuscript by Dr. Hale is under consideration by Oxford and Cambridge University Presses), and two – Dr. McLachlan and Dr. Sorensen, the most recently appointed faculty member – have served as book co-editors. Faculty members are also active in local, national, and international conferences or other professional venues at which their scholarly work is presented; according to the self-study, each faculty member averages at least one such conference presentation per year. This scholarship has been recognized by faculty peers: Dr. Whitmire received an NEH Award in 2010 for a summer seminar project in Tunisia, and Dr. Henderson received the Douglas Greenlee Prize from the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy in 2013. The members of the review team were quite impressed with the outstanding record of research and scholarship that the PAR faculty has been able to maintain despite their teaching load.

Members of the department have also distinguished themselves in service to the university, the community, and the academy at large. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, the review team was impressed with the substantial record of service by the PAR faculty. Much of this service is in direct correlation with the departmental emphasis on encouraging students to understand and adopt the very practical consequences of living a meaningful life informed by philosophical and/or religious questions. Perhaps the best example of this is the service learning (SL) component has been adopted in certain courses, which helps to blend the

rigors of intellectual pursuit with very practical “field” experiences. Students singled out one such SL course – PAR 354: Religion, Suffering, and the Moral Imagination; popularly labeled by students as the “suffering course” – to be one of their most enriching academic experiences. Since 2011, selected students in this course have traveled to Washington D.C. for a citizen advocacy conference that has included discussions with lawmakers and lobbyists. Another course – PAR 333: Environmental Ethics – has similarly encouraged student education and activism in both the local communities of western North Carolina and again in Washington D.C. Such activities involve a significant commitment by the faculty to plan and to execute properly, and their efforts were fittingly recognized just last year when the department was presented the Leading Light Award by the Center for Service Learning.

PAR faculty participate in more traditional forms of service as well, serving as board members and officers of several academic organizations and conferences (e.g., the Western North Carolina Continental Philosophy Circle and the North Carolina Religious Studies Association), and within the university as members of various committees and the Faculty Senate. The commitment of the department to engaged and community-based learning has teamed PAR faculty with other campus units and community partners such as Intercultural Affairs and the Center for Service Learning. As an ethicist, Dr. Hoyt has served on the Ethics Board of two area hospitals. Many members of the faculty have given presentations in “popular” venues such as the Highland Lecture Series, emphasizing yet again the necessary connections between the intellectual rigor of the academy and the need for an informed citizenry.

It would be redundant and unnecessary to repeat here the teaching accolades, numbers of publications, and forms of service that the PAR faculty has garnered and produced since these are available in the self-study and in the *curricula vitae* of the faculty. Suffice it to say that the review team was most impressed by the dedication of the PAR faculty to strive for excellence in each of these components of academic life.

#### **IV. Analysis of Operational Facilities and Budget**

**a. Facilities.** The department has a suite of offices and workspace in Stillwell Hall that seems adequate to its needs. Part of this space has been set aside as a student lounge area, which has contributed to the strong sense of community that the department has successfully fostered

between its students (minors as well as majors) and its faculty and staff. Each full-time member of the faculty has an office nearby, and another office is shared by adjunct faculty.

**b. Budget.** Budgetary cuts to higher education in the state of North Carolina over the past few years have significantly impacted programs and universities throughout the state, creating a financial condition in which external funding has become a necessity rather than a luxury. This situation has been compounded by budgetary realignment at the university level, through which the department has lost its share of funds generated by summer school courses (made up, in part, by additional funding from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences). Since the bulk of the departmental budget has been used to fund faculty and student travel to conferences and necessary expenses such as office supplies and printing services, these monetary losses directly affect the educational and academic mission of the department. The department has begun to address these losses by encouraging faculty to seek travel and research funding through institutional resources (e.g., the Chancellor's Travel Funds and Professional Development Grants), by joining with other units, such as the Honors College and Intercultural Affairs, to co-sponsor campus events, and through its recent efforts to develop an active alumni base (e.g., through a LinkedIn page, a departmental newsletter, and alumni vocational talks). The department has also begun working with the development office to establish a Cornerstone Scholarship, which would be the first scholarship of any kind in the department, and to increase the money available as unrestricted funds that could be used for student travel. The review team applauds the efforts that the department has made in this regard. A good relationship with the Office of Development and Alumni Affairs and a strong alumni base should help to create sustainable forms of extramural funding. Another possibility would be the creation of an advisory council composed of alumni and community partners that could be utilized not only to seek out general funding but to help with special projects.

## **V. Summary of Program Strengths and Areas for Improvement**

**a. General impression.** The members of the review team were very impressed with the Philosophy and Religion Department, which, since the last program review in 2011, has continued to build upon its strengths and to contribute significantly to the mission of Western Carolina University. Members of the PAR faculty have done a remarkable job in aligning the priorities of the department with the mission of WCU (*The 2020 Plan*) as a regionally engaged

university, and they contribute substantially to the mission of the College of Arts and Sciences through their extensive participation in the Liberal Studies Program.

**b. Areas of strength.** The greatest strength of this department is its faculty. Faced with possible elimination or consolidation as recently as a few years ago, the departmental faculty has created a community of scholars and students dedicated to demonstrating the very useful and practical skills that the study of philosophy and religion can generate. This sense of community was palpable, and could be observed both in the collegiality of the faculty and the enthusiastic devotion of the students. It is not surprising that this is the one aspect of the department that is continually cited as its greatest strength by graduating seniors in their exit interviews. Yet, despite the energy that has been dedicated to creating and sustaining this very student-oriented community, the members of the PAR faculty have remained vigorous and active scholars with both a regional and a national presence. We agree with the previous review report of 2011 that the members of the PAR faculty have created an atmosphere of collegiality and “global readiness” that should certainly be promoted as a model by the university administration.

**c. Areas of improvement.** With the “dark days” now behind it, the department needs to address the future in a more intentional and systematic way. As illustrated by the current Strategic Directions and Goals included in the self-study appendix, the paradigm that still seems to be lurking in the background is the need to justify the existence of the department by focusing upon the many contributions that philosophy and religious studies can make to the university’s mission. Such contributions remain very important, but operating principally as a “service” department for the college and university is not a sustainable model for departmental growth, and could lead to faculty “burn out” if the members of the faculty do not feel able to contribute more directly to the *internal* development of their disciplines and the academic training of their majors in preparation for those interested in postgraduate work in philosophy or religious studies. Addressing this issue through the creation of a more comprehensive strategic plan that maps out where the department would like to be in the next 5-10 years is even more critical if, as anticipated, impending faculty retirements could change the character of the department within the next decade. As currently constituted, the faculty is very strong in Continental philosophy and in the nexus between philosophy and religion. While some of the students contemplating postgraduate work in philosophy complained mildly in their exit

interviews about the lack of attention to analytical philosophy, the review team, through its examination of course syllabi and interviews with the faculty, did not view this as a major problem. Where the department could use some strengthening, however, is in its faculty expertise and course offerings in religious studies, which has in recent decades expanded its theoretical and methodological scope beyond the examination of texts and ideas. The recent appointment of Dr. Sorensen has brought not only a degree of methodological variety to the religion side of the department, but has also improved departmental course offerings in “non-western” religious traditions in which textual analysis is secondary or even tertiary to more performance-based models of inquiry. Obtaining additional faculty lines would be one way of expanding the study of religion within the department, but given the reality of the current and near-future state of funding higher education in the state, most likely this would need to be addressed through the way in which the department chooses to replace its retiring faculty.

## **VI. Summary of recommendations**

The review team has organized its recommendations into two general areas.

**(1) Program growth and development.** The department should revisit its current Strategic Directions and Goals in order to develop a more comprehensive strategic plan for the next five to ten years (most of the current goals have been met or at least implemented anyway). This plan should give emphasis to the larger conceptual goals for the development of the department and its dual disciplines of philosophy and religion. While the philosophy side of the department is strong, the religion side could benefit from expansion by increasing the number of course that address “non-western” religious traditions (not only those that originated in South or East Asia but also indigenous religious traditions) and introduce students to methodological approaches beyond the analysis of texts and ideas. A general lack of diversity within the religious studies courses offered by the department was mentioned in a number of student exit interviews. And, as noted in the previous review report (2011), there are “institutional risks” to have faculty teaching courses in Islam and Hinduism who “do not have deep training” in these areas as academic subjects and who thus might not be alert to potential pitfalls that can generate significant controversy. Since these issues probably cannot be adequately addressed without the appointment of new faculty members, having a plan in place for desired areas of academic expertise when new or replacement faculty lines become available will ensure that the department is able to respond quickly to such opportunities as well

as generate a more diverse pool of candidates (the continued diversification of the faculty being a desideratum expressed both in the current Strategic Directions and Goals and in the departmental self-study).

Although the department has just completed a revision of its curriculum, there were some issues raised by the review team regarding the proposed revision of the religion concentration. It seems to be possible that students concentrating in religion could conceivably take all of their 9 hours of elective courses for the major outside of the department (e.g., as ENG courses), and, with the exception of PAR 146, complete all of their coursework with little exposure to religious traditions other than Christianity. Limiting the number of hours taken for PAR credit outside of the department (e.g., no more than 6 hours in any one department) and introducing some sort of distribution requirements should help to alleviate these potential problems. One resource that might prove helpful in addressing the expansion of the religious studies curriculum is the Teagle/AAR publication, "The Religion Major and Liberal Education – A White Paper," available online at <https://www.aarweb.org/about/teagleaar-white-paper>.

**(2) Increasing the number of majors.** Much of our conversation with the faculty included some consideration of how the department might continue to increase the number of PAR majors. Since the last program review in 2011, the department has done a remarkable job in increasing the number of concentrators in both philosophy and religion. The review team was supplied with brochures, flyers, copies of the departmental newsletter, and other items that have been developed to publicize better the department and to explain its academic focus. As noted previously, our conversations with current majors as well as the information provided in the exit interviews indicate that the majority declare a PAR major after taking a PAR course, and for many it is their second major. Thus, it seems wise to strategize about the ways in which the department can encourage students to take such courses as early as possible in their academic careers so that they can still complete both majors in a timely fashion. One suggestion is that the department consider reviving its PAR 190 freshman seminar as means of encountering potential majors during their first year at WCU. Since the university requires that students declare a major during their first semester, this seems to be a critical time for exposing students – who likely have little idea of what the study of philosophy or religion can offer them – to the department. While the previous course might be revived, the department may wish to consider the wisdom of adopting some of the topics of meaning and value that are now a part of PAR

295, since this seemed for many students the gateway course that led them to declare a major. Since these freshmen-only courses are limited in their enrollment in order to guarantee a true seminar experience, the department will have to work with the dean to be sure that sufficient SCHs are being generated by other courses so that students in PAR 190 receive an appropriate seminar experience. The department may also consider increasing its participation in pre-orientation activities such as the learning communities that form prior to the beginning of the fall semester as another way of contacting students early in their college career (and perhaps even before they have decided upon a major).

The department has taken some very positive steps recently in an effort to expand its outreach to potential majors, such as offering courses through the Honors College and in publicizing specific courses aimed at students contemplating law school. We urge the department to continue these efforts, and to “exploit” the fact that the most useful major for law school is philosophy. Enlist other departmental advisors in this effort (e.g., in criminology and pre-professional advising). Another area in which students currently in other majors might be encouraged to consider a PAR major is in ethics, especially courses in professional ethics. Some of the students in the exit interviews noted that it was by way of an ethics course that they gained their first introduction to what the department had to offer. Given the campus culture at WCU, the earlier this exposure the better!

By way of conclusion, the review team wishes to once again express its strong endorsement of the work that the Department of Philosophy and Religion has done and continues to do in meeting the expectations of the university. The hard work of the departmental faculty over the past few years should be recognized and applauded. It was our pleasure to meet with and to get to know the members of the faculty, the staff, and the students of the department. The university should be proud at what this department has accomplished and what it has the potential to accomplish over the next few years.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Review Team,

*Rodger Payne*

Rodger Payne, Chair