

# **External Review Team Report: Department of Philosophy and Religion**

## **External Review Process**

Review Team Members:

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The review team's visit took place from February 13 through 15, 2011, during which time team members met with and interviewed Provost Linda Stanford (2/14 and 2/15), Asst. Vice Chancellor for Planning and Effectiveness Melissa Wargo (2/14 and 2/15), all departmental non-tenured faculty (2/14), all tenured and tenure-track PAR faculty members (2/14), PAR Chair Kevin Schilbrack (2/14 and 2/15), Dean of Arts and Sciences Wendy Ford and Associate Deans Butcher and Michelson (2/14 and 2/15), Dean of the Honors College Brian Railsback (2/14), Assessment Coordinator David Onder (2/15), and a group of 5 current students and 2 recent graduates of PAR (2/14).

The following report and recommendations are based on these interviews, as well as on the review team's consideration of the Philosophy and Religion Internal Self Study and other printed and posted materials about the department, Western Carolina University and the North Carolina System.

## **Overview of Departmental Strengths**

Western Carolina University should be very proud of its Department of Philosophy and Religion (PAR). It is a real gem.

The faculty is both exceptionally accomplished and highly committed. The scholarship of the members of the faculty is impressive, in many cases garnering national distinction. In fact, several of the professional achievements noted on

the curricula vitae of faculty members—things such as serving as regional president of the leading professional organization in the discipline; publishing articles in the most selective journals in the fields of philosophy and religion; serving on prestigious editorial boards, and being awarded fellowships from organizations such as NEH and Harvard University—would typically be found only among the faculties of leading research universities.

The review team was struck by several other traits of PAR that we found to be exceptional by national standards. The faculty—both tenure/tenure track and non-tenure track—are collegial in ways not often found among scholars of philosophy, who tend to be ideological in ways that over time create personal rifts. In almost all of our discussions with the PAR faculty, we found good will and striking amounts of unity: in conceiving of the future of the program, in recommending areas of specialization for future hires, in re-tooling the curriculum in support of WCU's QEP, in presenting the field to students and majors. WCU should appreciate how uncommon it is to find such deep collegiality within the discipline, and how beneficial it is to the University and its students. This collegiality speaks very well not only of the hiring decisions of the department but also of the leadership and governance practices of both PAR and the WCU.

As outsiders, we also want to point out how uncommon it is to find a faculty of philosophy that is so genuinely committed to the practical and experiential implications of the discipline. From a re-tooled curriculum that features a host of applied courses, to creative and effective service learning initiatives such as the annual program in Washington D.C., to a deep and abiding commitment to the Honors College, to an exceptional track record in promoting and supporting undergraduate research, this department does not see philosophy as a merely contemplative exercise. With almost half of its courses covering non-Western themes, PAR has taken seriously the goals of the *UNC Tomorrow* document to promote “global readiness” among the state's students. With its central contributions to WCU's Liberal Studies and QEP initiatives, PAR has not merely addressed but embraced its obligations to the larger pedagogical missions of the campus. In short, the PAR faculty has found ways to make what is often seen as an abstract discipline pertinent to students across campus and vital to the modern world. In this regard, we believe WCU's department is a national model as well as emblematic of the University's overall mission (and could well be promoted by WCU as such).

Finally, we want the WCU administration to know that in our collective judgment the students produced by this department also are exceptionally strong. The chair of this review team has conducted program reviews at such institutions as Princeton and Occidental and can report that WCU's PAR students—bright, articulate, well trained, strongly supported by a dedicated faculty, and uniformly inspired by their experiences in the department—compare well to any group of philosophy and religion undergraduates he has seen nationally. Most of the students we met have had significant experiences in the

Honors College and undergraduate research. Of the seven students we talked to, all but one of them were first-generation college students. You would not know from their professional paths: one has already been accepted into a top Ph.D. program, another landed a fulltime job immediately after graduating, and the five current students all seek to attend graduate schools of one sort or another. After spending some time with them, we have no doubt that they will succeed in this endeavor.

We know WCU is very proud of these exceptional students. It is our judgment that PAR's strong and engaged curricular programs and highly dedicated faculty are at the heart of these successes. In fact, we were repeatedly told by students of the large amounts of out-of-class time devoted to them by not only the tenured/tenure-track faculty but the non-tenure track faculty as well. The results speak for themselves.

In most important respects, things are going very well indeed in this department.

## **Overview of Departmental Challenges**

In many ways, the review team's visit was dominated by an issue that had emerged since the writing of the self study that had been sent to us prior to our arrival: the discussion by the upper administration of "folding" PAR into another department at WCU due to budgetary considerations. While we recognize that this issue may have been decided one way or another by the time this report is submitted, the review team believes that offering a few comments and observations from an outside perspective is appropriate.

First, we must report that the same unity we observed among PAR faculty members on other substantive issues is also present here. The PAR faculty is strongly opposed to any merger of the department with another department. While acknowledging that external factors may ultimately hold sway regarding potential organizational changes, the faculty expressed a strong preference for retaining its existing departmental identity.

Second, while we understand that (especially at public institutions) decisions to consolidate academic units are often driven by political considerations, we think it is important to report that we do not see a compelling *budgetary* reason for such a move. We appreciate the frankness with which Provost Stanford and Dean Ford engaged the review team on this issue. In these discussions, we were explicitly told that the primary savings of such consolidations come not from the chairs' stipends (which are modest at WCU) or from the increased teaching load for the former chairs (an issue which could be addressed by less drastic measures such as adding seats to sections), but from chairs coming off 12-month contracts and from eliminating administrative staff positions. If this is the case, then any savings that would come from merging

PAR with another unit would be exceedingly modest: PAR's chair, Kevin Schilbrack, is already on 10-month contract and PAR only has one half-time staff member. With the rapid growth in the number of PAR majors, the fact that the Philosophy B.A. and its two tracks would by all accounts continue to exist even if the department is consolidated, and the continuing need for faculty members and students to have administrative support of their efforts, we do not believe that WCU would be well served by eliminating the one-half staff position even if PAR were to be consolidated. (If anything, given the number of faculty and majors in PAR, the administrative position could well be expanded.) What are the real dollar savings to be gained by a consolidation of PAR? After several days on campus and hours of discussions with the key players, this remained unclear.

Third, we were told about the serious and admirable campus-wide process engaged in by the WCU community to establish a "priority" list of its academic programs. Provost Stanford stated that the purpose of creating such a list was specifically to create funding priorities. By all accounts, PAR fared extremely well in the rankings of every WCU group that engaged in this process. We understand why. PAR not only has engineered a dramatic "in house" turnaround over the past five years—doubling its number of majors, re-tooling its curriculum, and making wise faculty hires—it also has assumed an increasingly central role in the education of WCU students in general. The team believes that this is highly appropriate. The AAC&U's LEAP learning outcomes, for instance, cluster around primary goals such as developing critical thinking skills in undergraduates, promoting integrative and applied learning, and developing understanding of global issues. PAR is appropriately at the heart of promoting all of these learning outcomes at WCU, not just for PAR majors but for all WCU undergraduates. PAR, then, by both *de jure* and *de facto* measures has been determined to be an academic priority at WCU, so why would it be among the first units to be consolidated—especially when the results of such consolidation would be only modest dollar savings? In what sense, then, would WCU's priority list have a substantive role in shaping budgetary decisions? After our many discussions with key campus players, we were unable to answer these questions, as well.

Fourth, and finally, the review team would like to make a comment about the particular significance—from a national perspective—of consolidating the disciplines of philosophy and religion with other fields. We believe that this move would universally be perceived purely as cost saving measure that reveals a lack of institutional commitment to disciplines that—as evidenced in the AAC&U point above—a growing consensus in higher education tells us need to be made more central to undergraduate education of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not less so. Our point is not that consolidation of philosophy and religion with other units is not done; it has been done regularly. Our point is that the type of institutions that consolidate philosophy and religion with other disciplines are typically not first rate—certainly not nearly as large or as strong as WCU. If one were to take a snapshot of some of WCU's competitors in North Carolina on this matter, for instance, one would

see that UNC Greensboro has separate free-standing departments of philosophy and religion (rather than a combined department), UNC Asheville has separate free-standing departments of philosophy and religion, UNC Charlotte not only has separate departments in the two fields but recently has added a Masters program in Religious Studies to parallel its Masters program in Philosophy, and Eastern Carolina currently has a grant from the Wabash Foundation to develop a plan for separating its combined philosophy and religion department into two free-standing departments. What would it signal if, at the same time, WCU was not only *not* moving towards strengthening and distinguishing these two areas but was planning to fold them into the Department of Political Science or some other unit? It would appear that the cost to WCU's reputation—and to its students—would far outweigh the seemingly modest savings that would come from the move.

For these and other reasons, we do not think the consolidation of PAR is warranted. If this path *is* pursued, we urge WCU to explore a model in which the consolidation is only made at the administrative and budget levels, and PAR is allowed to remain a free-standing department in a legislative sense (and hence allowed to maintain its own web page, its own section in the University catalog, its own hiring and promotion decisions, and so forth). In this scenario, a merger of PAR with the Honors College might present some valuable synergies—providing PAR with more staff resources and Honors with greater faculty resources—without posing a threat to the academic identity of PAR.

Another challenge faced by PAR is the imbalance among its faculty with regard to specializations in philosophy and religion. While the number of majors concentrating in religion has recently surpassed the number concentrating in philosophy, all of the tenured and tenure-track faculty hold their doctorates in philosophy and all of the non-tenure-track faculty hold their terminal degrees in religion. While the philosophy faculty members are uncommonly well trained in issues of religious thought, it is important to recognize that, even by their own assessment, this does not mean that they can step in and teach any and all courses in religion. Indeed, there are particular and very public institutional risks in having courses in religions such as Islam and Hinduism taught by scholars who do not have deep training in the areas. With campus-wide talk of limiting the number of non-tenure-track instructors due to budgetary considerations, PAR and its students (especially those concentrating in religion) are in a precarious position.

## **Recommendations and Opportunities**

### **A. Curriculum**

PAR offers a strong and rich curriculum that thoughtfully balances serving the needs of its undergraduate majors and those of the larger student body. It is

not uncommon nationally in departments of philosophy and religion—where the number of majors is often modest and service obligations to the larger campus are typically steep—for the course offerings to pose challenges to the timely graduation of majors. On some campuses, there are not enough upper-level courses offered to allow majors to progress in a timely fashion. We saw no such problem at WCU. Students reported having the courses they needed when they needed them and only raised a modest concern, also common nationally, about the number of non-majors present in even upper-level offerings. The PAR faculty recognizes, as does the review team, that there are holes in the curriculum. The department currently offers no courses in Judaism and no course in Hebrew Bible; its only courses in Islam are taught by an adjunct, though he is very able; Eastern religions are predominantly covered by a single faculty member; there is nothing offered in African or African-American religion.

*Recommendations:* (1) The administration is urged to recognize the importance of PAR's adjunct faculty in supporting PAR majors with a religion concentration. Clearly, any reduction of non-tenure-track faculty should not be allowed to create obstacles to graduation. (2) The review team strongly supports the department's plan to create more major-only course options for students through its newly introduced sophomore and capstone seminars. We think it is an excellent idea to teach certain major-only courses (e.g. PAR 392 and PAR 393) with rotating topics, thus allowing majors to take them more than once (giving them more experiences in major-only courses).

*Opportunities:* PAR has more than doubled its number of majors in recent years. There is much room for additional growth. (1) We recommend that the department follow through on its plans to develop a pre-law track. Almost every national study shows that philosophy majors do better on LSATs than do students from almost any other discipline; law school admission offices increasingly report a desire for applicants conversant in world cultures and practices. PAR is poised to offer students particularly strong preparation for their law school applications and for a career in the law. Such a track would also strengthen PAR's increasingly rich interdisciplinary focus. (2) There is also a significant opportunity for the expansion of PAR's footprint on campus, as well as the continued re-imagining of philosophy as a discipline pertinent to contemporary and practical academic discourses, through Arts & Sciences' Humanities Program. (3) With the recent conversion of a non-tenure-track line to tenure track, the department is also poised to make strong contributions to WCU's focus on environmental issues. With a long-term adjunct having her specialization in Native American religions, there is not only an opportunity to offer courses covering the neighboring Cherokee peoples but also to extend courses in the area of environmental studies from the philosophical to the religious side of the curriculum. (The next tenure-track hire, who the current faculty describe as a scholar of religion conversant in feminist issues, could develop this specialization further through a focus on eco-feminism.) Such moves would serve to make even more distinctive the PAR's curriculum among

schools in North Carolina and nationally. (4) Finally, the review team sees a number of untapped curricular opportunities in the area of religion. Courses in specific religions—especially Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism—are not only increasingly popular among undergraduates nationally, they are increasingly essential to the “global readiness” promised by the *UNC Tomorrow* document. While we will discuss the composition of the faculty in the next section, we would like to introduce the idea here that a range of curricular topics that currently remain uncovered might be addressed, at least in part, by a rotating visiting professorship whereby established scholars come to WCU for a single semester or academic year to teach within their specialties.

## **B. Faculty**

WCU is very fortunate to have the strong faculty assembled in PAR. This includes not only a talented and highly collegial group of tenured and tenure-track faculty but a dedicated if under-supported group of adjuncts. The balance of tenured and tenure-track faculty to adjuncts, gaps in areas typically covered in departments of philosophy and religion, and faculty diversity all remain challenges.

*Recommendations:* The review team was uniformly impressed to learn that, despite the fact that all of them hold their doctorates in philosophy, current tenured and tenure-track faculty members were unanimously in support of making the next tenure-track hire in religion. In fact, they were also united in the position that the area of specialization should be women in religion/feminism/ecology. (1) The review team supports this faculty plan and, while it is fully aware of the budgetary constraints that WCU is facing, hopes that permission to search for this position comes sooner rather than later. We not only believe that such a hire would help to bring diversity to the faculty and would strengthen departmental and campus offerings in the environment, we believe that it is crucial that the students concentrating in religion, now the majority in the department, have a tenured/tenure-track faculty member to support and to advise them. This is all the more important because we learned that, at least in PAR, adjuncts are not assigned office space of any sort in which to hold office hours and advisement sessions. Such a practice is neither common nor sanctioned nationally—as a comparison, at Georgia State, not only all adjuncts but all graduate teaching assistants are assigned office space—but it creates particular problems amid a department where all of the tenured and tenure-track faculty members hold their doctorates in philosophy. We learned that many of the adjuncts have cobbled together space to meet with the religion students who take their courses, but this space is often less than private, posing risks to students’ privacy and to WCU’s FERPA compliance. (2) The review team recommends that at least one or two offices be dedicated to PAR’s adjunct faculty. They are such a collegial group, we are confident that they will be able amicably to work out a schedule to rotate use of the space among themselves.

*Opportunities:* (1) The opportunity discussed above to expand the PAR curriculum to include more courses in Judaism, Islam and non-Western religions is also an opportunity to diversify PAR's tenure and tenure-track faculty. The fact remains that, while the field of philosophy continues to be largely white and male, this is anything but true of scholars of religions. The growth of the number of scholars of religion hired by public universities since 9/11—estimated by the American Academy of Religion to be 40%--has provided a significant conduit for the diversification of university faculties nationally. Because of the lack of tenure-track hires in religion, WCU has yet to benefit from this national trend. In addition, the presence of tenured and tenure-track scholars of Islam, Judaism and Hinduism at WCU would have far-reaching benefits for larger campus discussions of the Middle East, inter-faith dialogue, nuclear issues in the Sub-continent; could provide a low-risk path to introducing courses in languages such as Hebrew, Arabic or Hindi to the curriculum; and could help WCU with the recruitment and retention of students from these cultures and traditions. (2) As mentioned under Curriculum, a model of a visiting professorship in which a scholar resides in the department for an academic year might fit the current needs of PAR particularly well. We believe it is an option worth exploring.

### **C. Assessment**

The review team thinks highly of the basic structure of PAR's new plan to assess the major. The model of having bookend seminars for majors—at the entry and capstone levels—is a national best practice and should prove an excellent structure.

*Recommendations:* (1) The department needs to work to further refine the rubrics it proposes to use in these seminars. If the review team understands the self-study materials correctly, the rubrics at present do not assess the same outcomes as are laid out by the department for the philosophy and religion majors. Our experience tells us that such a disjunction, if left uncorrected, will needlessly complicate the department's assessment of majors. This matter should be corrected. (2) The department currently designates only the instructor of record to complete the rubrics. This will not pass muster with SACS. SACS requires that the assessment of learning outcomes be done by persons other than the course instructor who assigns the official grade. We recommend that the department introduce an additional step whereby an assessment committee constituted by a cross section of departmental faculty annually considers a sample of papers, tests, or other student materials from the entry and capstone seminars and individually scores the work by means of the rubric. The assessment committee will (again by SACS rules) then have to meet to discuss common observations and to develop an annual departmental plan for improving student learning outcomes in the major. (3) The focus of much of the PAR assessment plan is on learning outcomes for the philosophy and religion majors within the Philosophy B.A. Our understanding of SACS requirements is that

learning outcomes also must be assessed annually for all lower-level courses contributing to the university's general education learning outcomes—the outcomes that come prior to and independent of the major. Given PAR's many contributions to lower-level requirements at WCU, the review team recommends that the department begin to develop a plan, if it has not done so already, for assessing the attainment of general education learning outcomes in all of its lower-level offerings satisfying WCU graduation requirements.

*Opportunities:* (1) The national assessment movement is still very young, and the understanding of assessment in the fields of philosophy and religion is not advanced. Given the unique nature of WCU students, there are opportunities for PAR faculty to make important contributions to our understanding of assessment in these fields by presenting collected data and findings at the regional meetings of the APA and the national and regional meetings of the AAR.

#### **D. Advancing the Department through Funding and Promotion**

Individual PAR faculty members have done an admirable job of seeking external support for their research and endeavors, but the department does not have an established record of bringing in external money to support its scholarship, curriculum and programs. The department has not yet leveraged its many new programs and successes with the larger WCU community: current students, alums, and the larger public.

*Opportunities:* (1) Given the strengths of PAR in supporting learning outcomes such as critical thinking, integrative and applied learning, and global competency in ways that position it as a national leader, there are opportunities for the faculty to become engaged with the national efforts and research of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), which has spearheaded the introduction and implementation of the LEAP outcomes for undergraduate education. The funding offered by AAC&U is often minimal, but attentions shined on PAR's programs through participation at AAC&U national conferences and regional workshops could be used to help leverage funding from such groups as the Teagle Foundation (dedicated exclusively to undergraduate education and a partner with the AAC&U in promoting the LEAP guidelines), the Wabash Foundation (a foundation with very deep pockets dedicated initially to theological education but, post 9/11, expanding the mission to include religious literacy and understanding among all undergraduates), and the Templeton Foundation (probably the single wealthiest foundation supporting the study of religion whose strong interest in the intersection of science and religion fits well with the interest of PAR's tenured and tenure-track faculty in the philosophy of religion and whose RFPs might promote collaboration between PAR and other departments at WCU such as Psychology and Biology). In addition, the combination of the large number of low-income and first-generation students at WCU and PAR's innovative curriculum in areas such as service

learning and undergraduate research might provide an opportunity for funding from the Gates or Lumina Foundations. (2) PAR should promote some of its existing and planned programs—its Washington D.C. service-learning program, its contributions to Liberal Arts and Humanities, its proposed pre-law track—on its website, through brochures, via campus forums and hosted panels—so that the message of what is going on in PAR is heard by the larger WCU community. The faculty recognizes that philosophy once had the reputation of being abstract and dated. This department is anything but these things, but it needs to recognize that part of its responsibility in education is educating others about what it does. Not only might such efforts strengthen PAR's reputation and student numbers on campus, they also might create a visibility that could attract external donors and benefactors. Towards this end, the department might consider creating an advisory "board of visitors" from outside of WCU. The faculty may be surprised to discover how many closet philosophers and students of religion populate the worlds of business, politics, and law—and many would love to have some continuing contact with this fine department.

## **Conclusions**

The Department of Philosophy and Religion has done just about everything asked of it since its previous program review. The department has more than doubled its majors (and the upward trends are growing steeper still), filled its seats through significant contributions to Liberal Studies and the general education goals of WCU, reinvigorated its curriculum with a range of courses reflecting contemporary and practical applications of the field, and emerged as a campus leader in its support of Honors and undergraduate research. In fact, in these last two categories, the review team believes that the department can lay claim to being a national model in the field of philosophy. PAR has a faculty consisting of first-rate scholars, dedicated teachers, and wonderful colleagues, and it is led by a talented chair. Its students are served well by the department and impressive in their accomplishments. There is much that is right with this department.

Many of the challenges that the department faces—not the least of which is the possibility of it being folded into another administrative unit—are traceable to a lack of resources. The tenure-track faculty needs to grow to better serve the students and the WCU community overall and to cover significant gaps in the curriculum, the adjuncts need better support (including office space) and stronger and more secure funding, and the half-time office administrator role needs to catch up to the number of students now served by the department (not just counted in terms of majors but also of students taking PAR courses for general education purposes who number in the hundreds every semester).

The review team realizes the nature of our times for college budgets and recognizes that this may not be the best time for WCU's administration to address some of these issues of resource deficiency. We do believe there are

many opportunities for PAR, though, even in these lean economic times. We think the department can continue to expand its curricular presence on campus and its positive impact on the education of WCU undergraduates through the introduction of a pre-law track and the expansion of its participation in A&S Humanities program and WCU's emphasis on environmental issues. We believe it can grow its reputation and profile within the WCU community through being more strategic about publicly promoting its programs, through becoming a campus leader for public debate on substantive contemporary issues, and through developing an advisory "board of visitors" constituted by members outside of WCU. Through these measures—and through seeking funding by external groups such as the AAC&U and the Teagle, Wabash and Templeton Foundations, among others—there is also the potential for the department to supplement its existing resources even amid these challenging times.