Religious Studies Department: 2007 Annual Update

I. Christian Orientation: Biblical and Theological Literacy and Maturity

1. Program Goal. With Westmont, we in RS strongly desire our students to be informed about the Christian faith, and to be marked by practices, affections, and virtues that grow out of a life of Christian faith.

   Student Learning Outcomes: Focus on Biblical Knowledge.

   1) Students will be familiar with scripture, Biblical scholarship, Christian doctrine, church history, and world religions as they relate to the subject matter of each course. They will be familiar with the ways in which Christian faith and subject matter challenges and informs each other.
   2) Students will be familiar with a variety of devotional resources growing out of the concerns of a discipline in particular or the concerns of thoughtfully educated Christians, in general.

For this exercise, our focus has been on point 1 above, with particular attention to the words in bold, in part because these categories match nicely the three RS Common Contexts courses: RS 1, 10, 20. Indeed, the department interprets this goal as an articulation of our commitment to help our students master the Biblical and theological content of these three GE courses. Thus, as stated in our January 20, 2006 report, the goal is both discipline/program and institution-specific.

The criterion for success, as currently envisioned, is substantial improvement (a percentage has not yet been determined) in student ability to recognize / recall / define key biblical texts, themes and episodes, and major theological terms and concepts.

2. Data. To assess our students’ achievement of this goal, we developed and implemented three pre/post tests that were meant to measure the difference in Biblical/theological literacy over the span of our GE courses. Each test follows a multiple-choice format and is graded and analyzed using Scantron. To my knowledge, neither departmental outsiders at Westmont nor colleagues from RS departments elsewhere have been asked to assess the test idea or to review the questions. We may get to this stage once we have done more of our own intra-departmental review.

3. Interpretation of the Results. It was deployed last year and the results have been compiled, but we have not yet met as a department to discuss their significance. An added challenge has been that we have needed to use two adjunct instructors (one for RS 10, one for RS20) and both instructors changed over the summer. (Replacing Alex Hwang is Ryan Murphy. Replacing Markus McDowell is Scott Mackie.) Although O. T. professor Tremper Longman is on sabbatical, one or more departmental meetings this fall will be given to that task, during which we shall take minutes and/or make an audio recording of the discussion. I shall not speculate on the conclusions of that discussion.
In addition to assessing student progress toward our goals, we shall also assess whether or not this specific tool is suitable and effective, and how (if at all) we will use the data in some kind of diachronic, multi-year study of our students. Other tools may prove more useful, and of course we now want to include the input and ideas of Caryn Reeder in any future improvements of our assessment tools.

4. **Using the Results.** It remains to be seen whether our departmental analysis of the pre/post-test will call for specific curricular or pedagogical changes, and whether these changes will concern the department as a whole or (more likely) will provide useful feedback to the instructors of specific courses. The tests and printouts are stored in the secretary’s office.

5. **Next steps.**

- We intend to continue with the pre/post-test for the foreseeable future, gathering data and making adjustments (to the test itself and to our courses) as called for. Since there is no required sequence—students may take RS 1, 10 and 20 in any order—it is not feasible to develop a single tool that would track developing literacy across the entire sequence. We do not know whether we would gain “actionable intelligence” by administering a college-wide Bible and Theology test for entering freshmen and graduating Seniors. These are matters for departmental discussion.
- Given existing questions in the department about the utility of our test instrument, we intend to canvas other schools to learn what other biblical and theological literacy-assessment tools have been developed.

II. **Critical-Interdisciplinary Thinking**

1. **Program Goal.** Religious Studies is intrinsically inter-disciplinary; responsible, capable scholars and students of religion must develop skills in a range of ancillary disciplines: history, rhetoric, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, language and linguistics, to name a few. This means that almost every course and assignment unavoidably requires students to draw skills and knowledge from other disciplines. We want our students able to use the tools and methodologies provided by various disciplines and to understand how various disciplines imply different epistemological orientations. We want our graduates skilled in framing appropriate questions, thinking abstractly and examining assumptions. Desired skills, abilities and outcomes remain unchanged from the *R.S. Department Assessment Report* submitted June 15, 2006.

2. **Data.** The instrument we have identified for assessing critical-interdisciplinary thinking is the student portfolio. This was described in our Fall, 2006 Report (I.3.2, II.3.1).

3. **Interpretation of the results.** Because this instrument requires a substantial time lapse it is not yet possible to report substantive findings. Nevertheless, at least one department meeting this year will be devoted to discussing student work, assessing evidence of growth in critical thinking and reviewing our choice of this particular
assessment tool.

4. **Using the results.** See #3. It is not yet possible to recommend or implement changes in the R.S. program based on this instrument.

5. **Next steps.** We have three steps in mind, all for the spring when Charlie and Tremper will be with us.

   - By spring of 2008 we will have in hand several years of student papers with which to assess developments in critical thinking. At least one department meeting will be given to discussion of student work.
   - We shall also use a spring department meeting to clarify our criteria for assessing critical thinking (aided by, e.g., K. King and P. Kitchener, *Developing Reflective Judgment*, Jossey-Bass, 1994), and to sharpen our pedagogical strategies for students at various stages in their intellectual development.
   - In this connection, we shall initiate departmental consultations with professors from both Philosophy and Liberal Studies on the assumption that their disciplinary perspectives on reflective judgment and critical thinking will be helpful to us as we assess our students’ growth in this area.

III. Active Societal and Intellectual Engagement

1. **Program Goal.** In our fall, 2006 report we emphasized that some career outcomes may lend themselves more readily than others to RS program review and assessment. In our June 15, 2006 report we listed a range of typical R.S. alumni career trajectories (seminary or graduate school, pastoral ministry, missions, counseling, chaplaincy, social work, etc.) but also noted that many of our graduates pursue careers not typically associated with R.S. (business, law, etc.). Whether or not our majors pursue overtly “religious” careers, our goal is to see them establish lifelong patterns and disciplines marked by social responsibility and intellectual engagement in the public square. This does not represent a shift in our thinking from previous reports.

2. **Data.** As described in our previous report (fall, 2006), we conducted a survey of RS alumni in May, 2006. We intend to repeat this survey every five years so we can compare the results. This past year the college did not promote exit interviews for graduating seniors as it has in the past so our departmental participation dropped off.

3. **Interpretation of the results.** There is no new data to interpret.

4. **Using the results.** There are no new results to use.

5. **Next steps.**

   - We shall engage in exit interviews in the spring of 2008, tabulate and discuss the results.
   - We shall repeat the alumni survey in 2011.