Religious Studies Department  
Assessment Report  
January 20, 2006  

After submitting our last Assessment Report on September 21, 2005, the department chair received feedback from the Program Review Committee and met with our Assessment Coordinator, Marianne Robins. We were encouraged to narrow our goals and to be more specific in our assessment of them.

**GOAL 1**: Content in the Common Context Courses (RS 1 Life and Literature of the Old Testament; RS 10 Life and Literature of the New Testament; RS 20 Introduction to Christian Doctrine).

1. **Program Goal.** The first of our learning standards is “Christian Orientation.” This standard lists four student learning outcomes: A. Knowledge, B. Practices, C. Affections, and D. Virtues. We decided to focus on A. Knowledge. Under “A. Knowledge,” we decided to focus on the first of the two points:

   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 challenge and inform each other.

We then narrowed it down further to “scripture, biblical scholarship” and “Christian doctrine,” leaving out church history and world religions.

This goal is clearly program specific as well as discipline specific, because it is one of our institution’s six learning standards. The criterion for success is that they have learned the content of the course.

2. **Data.** The tool we decided to use is a pre-test/post-test. Each professor of OT, NT, or doctrine, would develop a test to be given at the beginning and end of each semester. Giving it at the beginning will give some indication of where the students are before taking the course; giving it again at the end should show what they will have learned. The criterion for success will be that they improve in their scores. The tests will also be analyzed more carefully to see if there are certain areas where they are not learning the content as well. This will help the professor know what to emphasize more the next time the course is taught. Since it was too late to implement this in the fall semester of 2005, we determined to prepare the test in the fall and begin using it in the spring of 2006. Furthermore, since our NT professor, Bruce Fisk, was on Sabbatical in the fall, we determined that he would develop his test in the spring of 2006 and begin implementing it in the fall of 2007. The tests for OT and doctrine have been written and given at the beginning of this semester. We will analyze that data at the end of this semester.

However, in order to collect some data for this report, Bill Nelson in OT and Markus McDowell, our adjunct professor in NT, developed and gave assessment surveys to students in their fall classes at the end of the semester asking students to report on what they learned. Nelson’s
questions were designed to try to assess the other aspects of the Christian Orientation standard as well as content: practices, affections, and virtues.

At the end of this report are copies of the self-reporting survey questions for Nelson and McDowell. No external voices have been consulted at this point. This report will focus on Nelson’s OT data.

Here is a summary of Bill Nelson’s data from his OT class, fall 2006 (not all of the responses are exact quotes):

1. Important things learned:

The big picture: getting a grip on the basic time line of OT history and the major characters
Details: I had a basic knowledge of the OT but I learned much more detail
Biblical criticism: textual criticism, literary criticism (esp. sources in the Pentateuch, JEDP).
People: judges, kings, prophets—who they where and what their roles were
How the OT leads to Christ and the NT
The ancient Near Eastern background to the OT
How Israel’s faith developed from henotheism to monotheism
Progressive revelation
God makes covenants and promises
God is with us in our suffering
God is sovereign
God is gracious, merciful, and patient
God punishes sin
Faith is essential
God saves his people

2. How the student intends to use the material from the course:

The material is extremely useful in many daily occurrences
Helpful in personal devotions
Conversations starters
Helpful in understanding sermons
It helps in faith development
I will return to the Bible to find guidance and comfort
The characters we studied are role models
I feel more confident talking about the history of Israel and locating the characters in history
How to study the Bible
A tool for talks with non-Christians about the Bible
I have grown as a Christian and I will use what I have learned to live as a Christian
I will not be overcome by emotions or events but will turn my complaints and suffering to God
In all aspects of my life I will continue to remember God’s words
To better understand and defend my faith
To know my savior better
To tell others about God—not just of his love but of his wrath, too
To enlighten my friends about the realities of the Bible
To apply it to my life
To be ready to lead a Bible study
The Israelites inspire me with hope when I am discouraged

3. How study of the Bible has contributed to growth in virtue, spirituality, or Christian practice.

Extremely helpful
I realize now who important the coming of Jesus and the kingdom of God are
I see how the NT is the fulfillment of a long process
Seeing how OT believers dealt with hardship and experienced God’s grace has been a great encouragement, especially in times of trouble
I am better able to connect my knowledge with my own personal faith
It has challenged me to thing differently about things
Now I scrutinize scripture instead of just reading it
It has helped me formulate more applicable questions
I have a better understanding of how the OT still applies to Christians today
It has made me read the Bible every night and understand God better
I used to feel uncomfortable with the OT; I now understand God has a reason for everything
It has helped me to understand the meaning of God’s words, his ways, and his plans
It has helped me to understand and appreciate God on a deeper level
It was refreshing to get the OT perspective on God, since I was mainly familiar with the NT
I have more respect for Christian rituals
It has shown me always to trust in God because he always prevails
It has helped me relate to the characters of the Bible and to connect my experiences to theirs
I have a better sense of God’s faithfulness

4. For Improvement

I wouldn’t change anything
Require less work
Either no cumulative final or a unit 4 exam in last week plus a cumulative final
No cumulative final
Go slower
More lenient attendance policy
More extra credit opportunities
Daily assignments to enforce the reading
Friday quizzes
Weekly quizzes
Cover more books, e.g. Esther
Review before each exam
Supply the lecture outlines
3. Interpretation of the Results.

- Question 1 shows that the students are learning just the sorts of things I want them to learn: background knowledge about Israel’s place in the ancient Near East, history of Israel, literary concerns, a basic familiarity with the main events and people of the OT, and some key theological themes.

- Questions 2 and 3 reveal that they are learning much more than content. The course is clearly helping them to grow spiritually, to apply the Bible to their lives, to know God as well as to know about God, to share their faith, and to trust in God more.

- Question 4 yielded mixed results.
  -- Several students said they would change nothing or they left the question blank.
  -- Some students wanted the course to be easier: “require less work”; “either no cumulative final or a unit 4 exam in last week plus a cumulative final”; “no cumulative final.”

  Course evaluations and anecdotal evidence show that this course is challenging but not inordinately so. About 50% of the class make As or Bs. Therefore the class is not too difficult. A cumulative final exam forces them to review the whole semester and learn more. Some students do not want to be responsible for a whole semester’s worth of material. They need to come up to a more rigorous standard.

  -- Some students are slower than others, hence the comment “go slower.” During the semester I adjust to the needs of the class and slow down when necessary. But the professor cannot pitch the class to the slowest student or the brighter students will fail to be challenged.

  -- “More lenient attendance policy.” The amount of unexcused absences is set by the school. I try to enforce this but I only lower grades if there are excessive unexcused absences. Therefore, I am not very strict. Once again, some students want to lower standards rather than meet them.

  -- “More extra credit opportunities.” This goes against my philosophy of education. If students do the work they will succeed in the course. Grades should measure how well they succeed. Extra credit work inflates grades so that they do not accurately represent the student’s work in the course.

  -- Some students want graded homework or quizzes: “daily assignments to enforce the reading,” “Friday quizzes,” “weekly quizzes.” Student’s need to learn self-discipline. They need to do the reading every night whether there is a quiz or a daily assignment due. This is college; such exercises are more appropriate for high school. I have often polled classes and found that 99% are opposed to having quizzes.

  -- Some want to “cover more books,” or other books, such as “Esther,” but the OT is a large collection of books and it is not feasible to cover all of them. Or, if all books are included, some would not be covered with any depth. No matter what books are left out, someone will object. So, it is best for me to make the decision about what is most important to include in the readings.

  -- “Review before each exam.” Last semester I did reviews before each exam but because I had to miss some classes, I was not always able to have a whole review period. This semester I set aside full periods for review, as usual.

  -- “Supply the lecture outlines” by having them printed and distributed. This would be cost prohibitive, but also, some students want to be spoon fed. The outline is on overhead
transparencies and projected on the screen. Most students benefit by copying the outline and then filling in the outline while I lecture; it keeps them engaged. However, I will consider doing this.

In conclusion, most of the suggestions for improvement were not very helpful. Perhaps that is because the course is mostly on track.

4. Using the Results. I am considering copying my lecture outlines and selling them to the students in the bookstore. That would allow the students to have the outlines without the huge cost to the department for photocopying.

The student responses are stored in my office.

5. Next Steps. We will continue to carry out our pre-test/post-test plan to see if it helps us assess what is being learned in terms of the content standard.

GOAL 2: Critical Interdisciplinary Thinking in the writing intensive section of RS 20W Introduction to Christian Doctrine

1. Program Goal. The school’s goal for critical and interdisciplinary thinking is for students to be “versatile thinkers” who can use our disciplines’ different tools in appropriate ways to solve problems. Outcomes include exercising general critical thinking skills virtuously, disciplinary range, ability to solve complex problems that cross disciplinary boundaries, and collaboration across fields.

Criteria for success:
- Applicable student work evidences successful critical and interdisciplinary thinking.
- An upward slope in the average longitudinal grades for writing assignments in which critical thinking is central would indicate increasing skill in critical thinking.
- Scores on student surveys indicate relative strengths and weaknesses in promoting critical thinking.

2. Data.
- “Theology in the liberal arts” written exercises.
- Longitudinal grades on eight written assignments, the dominant component of which is critical thinking.
- Responses to the rs20w end-of-semester questionnaire for fall 2005.
- Responses to student questionnaire self-assessing the course’s helpfulness to critical thinking.

3. Interpretation of the Results.

Spring 2005 “theology in the liberal arts” written exercises (n=18) embodied constructive engagement between theology and:
   - art history 1
   - biology 1


chemistry 2
English/literature 3
history 3 (world civ 3)
leadership 1
philosophy 5 (ethics 1)
physics 1
political science 1

Fall 2005 (n=20):
biology 1
communication 1
English/literature 3
English composition 1
history 5 (world civ 4)
kinesiology 1
leadership 1
mathematics 1
philosophy 2
political science 2
psychology 1
theater 1

Comments relevant to critical/interdisciplinary thinking volunteered by students in response to a question on the final exam (these are stored in my office):

What will you do with what you have learned in this class?
I definitely have been changed by this class. Last night I had an epiphany of the importance of this course. … This class has opened my eyes to an entirely new way of looking at Christianity in an educated way.
I will think through everything in a different way. … I will begin to think deeper (sic) on a doctrinal level.
I learned how to be more analytical in my reading as to get an actual understanding of the material and how it changes/affirms my beliefs.
I am now more readily prepared to understand different viewpoints than before. Tests helped me remember what I forgot, see new things I had not considered before, and make connections between course material and life in general.
I have learned to evaluate and look deeper (sic) into what I believe and be able to defend it.
Asking questions and finding answers is an essential step in growth.
Everything I do now is viewed from the Christian paradigm.
I have come to realize that Christian doctrine can be used everywhere. … I have become a better writer and editor.
I will put my experience from this class into my spiritual life mainly through the way I view and analyze issues of the Christian faith [through] foundational knowledge that will affect my thought process in my Christian faith.
This course will … affect the way I look at the world. [Lesslie] Newbigin really challenged me to take off ‘cultural lenses.’ I want to see the world through the eyes of a Christian, not of an
American. I feel more secure and grounded in my beliefs and now feel prepared for any intellectual discussion. I have gained a great deal of confidence in my ability as a student/scholar. This will be put to use in all other classes. The reflections … helped me to learn to write solid papers with strong arguments. This class has helped me to see Christianity in a new light. It has given me the tools I needed to understand and comprehend scripture and has shed light on some very important questions that I had (and still have). I had to invent a whole new way of studying that created a big picture of theology and a comprehensive picture of Christian doctrine. Already it has helped much as I have been taking philosophy at the same time as this course. Also, it has truly changed my whole perspective, particularly through Newbigin and his exposure of how churches are so influenced by modernity without realizing it. In my studies of political science I can see things through the proper lens. The structure of the tests forced me to review much more material and know things in a broader sense rather than memorizing facts. I feel like now I’ll remember the concepts rather than just forget the fact. I view my fellow believers, Scripture, and God in a very different manner. This class sparked a fire! I’m nowhere near grasping even half of what we covered, but I learned how to read theology. I’m passionate about finding truth. I am going to take the fundamentals and ‘conditioning’ I learned from this class into the rest of my classes. I will continue to think critically as a result of what I have learned from this class. I will seek the truth and when I have found it I will publish it, not as ‘my beliefs’ but as the truth. When people make objections to this truth I will listen and if necessary change my way of thinking.

The slope of the regression line across the eight critical thinking essay grades is essentially flat (+.04 in one section of rs20w, -.03 in the other; see figures below).

According to the fall 2005 end-of-semester questionnaire for rs20w:

Assess the overall effectiveness of the course in meeting the outcomes of the critical/interdisciplinary standard:
Effective in introducing theology as a critical, intellectually controlled discipline among the liberal arts and with a concrete historical and biblical shape.
On what basis (your assessment of grades, student performance, student self-assessment, etc.) do you arrive at that conclusion?
Improved knowledge of historical and systematic theology. Demonstration of the grasp of systematic arguments in Donald McKim’s *Theological Turning Points* (WJK), Lesslie Newbigin’s *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Eerdmans), lectures, other texts (Barth, Wilken, Boyd and Eddy, Camp, Barron) on the basis of student test scores, effective written projects in Christian thinking, and self-reporting on the entrance exam final written exercise.

What formative assessment is happening in this class?

What student self-assessment is happening in this class?
Entrance exam exercise, extra credit exit questions on the final exam, and interviews (in which one common question from me is “What has this course got you thinking about?”).

List the tasks students have for performing interdisciplinary critical thinking:

A post-course survey of students in January 2006 regarding critical and interdisciplinary thinking produced these results:

1. How effective would you say rs20w was in helping you become 'versatile thinkers' who can solve problems in the field of Christian theology?
   0 1-Not effective
   0 2-Only somewhat effective
   6 3-Basically effective
   11 4-Very effective
   mean 3.65

2. How effective would you say rs20w was in helping you skillfully use knowledge across disciplines?
   0 1-Not effective
   0 2-Only somewhat effective
   4 3-Basically effective
   13 4-Very effective
How helpful were the following devices in sharpening your critical thinking?

3. The questions I asked you to answer in your written assignments:
   0 1-Not helpful
   0 2-Only somewhat helpful
   5 3-Basically helpful
   12 4-Very helpful
   mean 3.71

4. The readings you needed to use in the assignments:
   0 1-Not helpful
   0 2-Only somewhat helpful
   4.5 3-Basically helpful
   12.5 4-Very helpful
   mean 3.74

5. My lectures:
   0 1-Not helpful
   0 2-Only somewhat helpful
   3 3-Basically helpful
   15 4-Very helpful
   mean 3.83

6. Peer review guidelines and FAQs on my website:
   0 1-Not helpful
   0 2-Only somewhat helpful
   6 3-Basically helpful
   11 4-Very helpful
   mean 3.65

7. Other students' assessments of your exercises:
   0 1-Not helpful
   7 2-Only somewhat helpful
   7 3-Basically helpful
   3 4-Very helpful
   mean 2.76

8. Your work reviewing other students' exercises:
   0 1-Not helpful
   4 2-Only somewhat helpful
   7 3-Basically helpful
   5 4-Very helpful
   mean 2.94
9. My assessments (grades, comments) of written exercises:
1 1-Not helpful
2 2-Only somewhat helpful
6 3-Basically helpful
7 4-Very helpful
mean 3.19

Do you have any specific comments about the course's usefulness (or lack of it) in sharpening your critical thinking that could help us improve?
If I could make any suggestions for the course I would say that a weak point was the review of historical references by McKim. Also, McKim was a hard read, especially with the depth that the other authors got into. If you want to keep McKim as a strong reference and primary reading, you might consider going through it more slowly and/or in greater detail. Overall the other readings and class lectures were a very productive use of time.
It was very useful, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Thank you for the experience.
This class helped shape my faith and greatly changed my perspectives on many biblical issues. My eyes were opened to the complexities and beauty in scripture as never before. rs20w was incredible.
One of the most valuable parts of the course for me was looking at the biblical texts themselves and learning to see the familiar as new. This course forced us to read the Bible critically, to let the texts reach us in their full power, when few if any of us had ever learned to do that.
I really enjoyed this class. It was extremely helpful in my personal journey of faith. The books were great and the lectures were always good learning experiences. Thank you.
I feel this class basically was the class I needed to feel prepared for college. Everything we used for this class is useful now for all of my classes. This class gave me some direction in my faith.

4. Using the Results.
The fall 2005 end-of-semester questionnaire for rs20w includes this documentation of changes made to the fall 2005 course based on the teacher’s own earlier assessment, which was not necessarily captured above:

*What changes did you make in response to earlier self- or departmental assessment?*
The only changes are: 1. use of Eureka [Moodle] for on-line submissions, to enforce deadlines and prevent fraud, and 2. substitution of Robert Barron, *And Now I See* (Crossroad) for Joseph Donders, *Jesus the Stranger* (Orbis), which was hard to test or write about and which students found repetitious.

The professor dropped the use of Eureka mid-semester because it was not well suited to that use. Barron proved to be a very successful and much appreciated replacement for Donders.

Students are between satisfied and quite satisfied with the course’s effectiveness in training them to think critically. However, as the course progressed the professor was not convinced that the structure of eight written and peer-reviewed exercises was an optimal use of class time or resources. The flat regression curve indicates some additional basis for that dissatisfaction. In
response, the spring 2006 rs20w course is shifting the structure to ten exercises: four of the usual written and peer reviewed exercises, clustered toward the beginning and at the end of the semester, combined with six written exercises of other kinds: several chat logs in which groups of three students hold a conversation in pursuit of an answer to a theological question involving critical thinking, reading notes annotated with critical and interpretive comments drawing on other sources to answer a question, and theological analyses of a group’s attendance at a worship service. The traditional exercises will be graded as before, but the others will be reviewed during office hours in person with one of the members of the group. It is hoped that this both improves students’ use of office hours, draws the groups together, and forces each member of the group into active learning and representation of and to the rest of the group. Assessment of written work in the spring 2006 semester will help evaluate whether this is a superior strategy than the fall 2005 strategy. The spring 2006 course also added a writing guide to the book list, Michael Harvey’s *The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing*.

The book list also substituted several books in the required reading list in the hopes that they would prove more effective: Kraybill’s *The Upside-Down Kingdom* for Camp’s *Mere Discipleship*, Wilson’s *Primer on Christian Doctrine* for McLaren’s *Generous Orthodoxy*, and Van Dyk’s *A More Profound Alleluia* for Boyd and Eddy’s *Across the Spectrum*.

5. Next Steps. At this stage the department chose to focus on RS 20W. In the future we will discuss how to involve more faculty, or possibly the whole department, in assessing this outcome. Our Assessment Coordinator suggested either having various professors save papers which illustrate this outcome and sharing them with one another or possibly having select students save papers in a portfolio that department members would read to assess whether students grow in their ability to do critical-interdisciplinary thinking while progressing through the major.

**GOAL 3**: Active Societal and Intellectual Engagement in our alumni/ae.

1. **Program Goal.** The school’s engagement standard seeks to equip students “to benefit from a Westmont education over the course of a lifetime” with “the skills, attitudes, and commitments” for effective “personal and vocational lives.” Outcomes most directly relevant to RS program review include Christian vocation in careers, family, and ethics and formation in lifelong learning.

2. **Data.** We will survey our alumni/ae this semester.

   -External voices: we were told our Assessment Coordinator that the Music Department had developed some good surveys. Their department chair shared copies with me.

Here are our preliminary questions:

1. What is your vocation?

2. How did your Westmont education in general and your R.S. Major in particular prepare you for this vocation?
3. How did your R.S. courses contribute to your growth in spirituality, devotional life, ethics, faith commitment, Christian virtues (e.g. faith, hope, love, patience, joy, self-control), and attitudes?

4. How has your R.S. Major equipped you with the tools to continue learning throughout your life? If you can, give examples of how you have continued to learn and grow.

5. Do you have any suggestions for improving the R.S. Major at Westmont?

3. Interpretation of the Results.

4. Using the Results.

5. Next Steps. We need to meet as a department to discuss these questions in order to finalize our survey. Then we need to send the survey to our alumni/ae. Finally, we will need to analyze the results.

******************************************************************************

Appendix: Assessment Questions from Nelson and McDowell

Nelson

Name (Optional) _____________________________________________

1. Briefly list 10 of the most important things you learned in this course.

2. How do you intend to use the material in this course?

3. How has our study of the Bible contributed to your growth in virtue, spirituality, or Christian practice?

4. If you could change one thing in the course to improve it, what would it be?

McDowell

1. What are the three most significant things you have learned in this course?

2. Describe how this course has helped you to integrate…
   a. Biblical studies and faith
   b. Biblical studies and other disciplines (art, literature, sociology, etc.)

3. On a scale of 1-10 (1 = nothing, 10 – a significant amount) rate how much you have learned in this course about
a. The Bible
b. Methodology (methods of studying the Bible)
c. Integrating history, literature, and your cultural setting