Religious Studies Department
Assessment Report
June 15, 2006

After submitting our last report on January 20, 2006, the department chair met with our AC (Assessment Coordinator), Marianne Robins. She gave us written feedback in a document dated March 28, 2006. The department met twice for discussion and also carried on discussions by email.

**GOAL 1.** Content in Old Testament, New Testament, and Christian Doctrine

1. **Program Goal.** We were asked to give some criteria or learning goals for these courses.

   **Old Testament:**
   - Ability to identify key people such as Ehud, Jonathan, Solomon, Nathan, Nebuchadnezzar.
   - Familiarity with historical events such as the exodus and the exile.
   - Understanding of important aspects of Israelite religion such as sacrifice and the prophet’s role.
   - Awareness of literary aspects such as genre (e.g. the types of psalms).
   - Knowledge of theological and literary themes (e.g. themes in Samuel and Kings compared with those in Chronicles).

   **New Testament:**
   - Ability to identify key people such as Judas, Stephen, Joseph.
   - Knowledge regarding the books of the NT.
   - Familiarity with events in the NT such as Jesus’ baptism, temptation, triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and arrest; the stoning of Stephen; Paul’s imprisonment

   **Christian Doctrine:**
   - Knowledge of the trinity.
   - Understanding of Christology (e.g. the divinity of Jesus).
   - Awareness of the historical context of doctrine (e.g. how the doctrines developed in church history).
   - Insight into some differences between Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox doctrine.
   - Familiarity with the doctrines of sin and salvation.

2. **Data.** We gave pre-tests at the beginning of the semester and then gave the same questions as post-tests at the end of the semester in all sections of RS 1 Life and Literature of the Old Testament (although Tremper Longman and Bill Nelson gave different tests), in Bruce Fisk’s sections of RS 10 Life and Literature of the New Testament, and in Telford Work’s sections of RS 20 Introduction to Christian Doctrine. The questions each professor used are included in the appendixes. Longman (See Appendix 1) supplied data for individual students, showing how each improved. Nelson (See Appendix 2) and Fisk (see Appendix 3) supplied spreadsheets and graphs showing the percentage of students who got each question right. Work (see Appendix 4) supplied a spreadsheet exhibiting results for individual questions.
3. Interpretation of the Results.

*Longman:* I was surprised how all the students had done pretty much equally poorly on the pre-test. While this confirmed my general impression that I have been working from for the past eight years that students are basically biblically illiterate when they enter the class, what surprised me was that there was not more deviation in terms of the level of illiteracy. This was somewhat comforting since it makes me think that they are all at essentially the same place as they enter.

The dramatic improvements on the post-test were also assuring that they were picking up the content of the class. Of course, they tended to do worse on the parts of the class that were taught at the beginning of the semester.

An interesting case can be observed with Student #22, who actually took the class last year and repeated it this year to raise his grade from a D-. Since he took the course last year, in one sense it is not surprising that he scored the highest on the pre-test.

I should note that I did not monitor the turning in of the post-test well this year so a number of people only had their pretest and I did not record these though they were uniformly low like the ones reported here.

*Nelson:* It is clear that learning is taking place. However, there is variance in the amount of improvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improvement Range</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of improvement</td>
<td>2 questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Less than 10 points</td>
<td>4 questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-20 points improvement</td>
<td>8 questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>21-30 points improvement</td>
<td>4 questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>31-40 points improvement</td>
<td>9 questions</td>
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<td>41-50 points improvement</td>
<td>4 questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>51-60 points improvement</td>
<td>1 question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-70 points improvement</td>
<td>2 questions</td>
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Concerning the first question where they went down, it was about Solomon. Most knew it going into the course (82% got it right on the pre-test); apparently the others failed to learn it, although the difference between pre-test and post-test was only -1. The second question where they showed lack of improvement (-8.5) was about Nehemiah. Although we had covered Nehemiah, they had not been tested on the material in that section yet, so they had not really studied it yet. The same could be said for a number of questions where they did not improve very much—they were in the last section of the course containing information to be covered on the final exam (the post-test was given on the last day of class). This shows that students grasp a little bit of the material by just doing the reading and hearing the lecture. But much more learning takes place when they have time to study, review, and memorize the material for the exam. This highlights the importance of exams.
In looking at the percentages of students who got questions right on the post-test, it is worth noting that in some cases they went up a lot, but still did not do very well. For example, on question 6 they improved 28.5 percentage points. But the aggregate score on the post-test was still only 49.5%. Of the questions where they scored less than 60% on the post-test, there are about 5 which indicate areas where teaching and learning could be improved. However, in the other cases, the data are do not indicate failure because the questions, once again, were from the last unit of the course. For example, on question 33 they went up from 15.5% to 22%. They improved, but since only 22% got the question right, it would seem that this is an area of weakness. Yet, once again, the students were exposed to a lot of information in the last 3 weeks of class. They had not had time to assimilate it by the time they took the post-test. They needed time between the last day of class and the final exam to master the material. I am sure that if the post-test had been given on the day of the final exam, they would have done better on those questions which were from the last unit and on which they scored less than 50%.

Work:

1. Students firmly moved from being undecided and slightly wrong (3.31) -- no surprise given how often unschooled teachers use the ice-water-steam analogy -- to pretty firmly right about whether this (modalistic) analogy is traditional Christian teaching (1.43). That it is in fact an illustration of modalism is a point I make briefly, but it comes as enough of a shock that the lesson is well learned. This kind of movement is a model for what I would like to achieve on the points of doctrine that are my top priorities. I want to get important points across and make lasting impressions without belaboring my points. This happens most when the class has been generally wrong about the point and I can use suspense and a conclusion to a long argument to drive home the facts.

2. God's non-creation of sin is clear to many students coming into the class (2.21); readings and lectures both made the point, which became clearer by semester's end (1.73). Nevertheless, given the amount of time on this topic in two readings and five or so minutes of lecture, I would have expected a firmer answer. This is something of a puzzle, calling into question the effectiveness of my combined teaching practices for at least some important and repeatedly made points.

3. The same is true of the claim that the Son has a beginning in time, which is the Arian heresy. The point is made in readings and briefly in lectures, and it closed half the distance between the class's original stance, which was moderately correct (2.21) to where it ended (1.6). But this is a central topic for one chapter of a main textbook, and I would have wanted more students to be clear on it.

4. It is gratifying to see that the course helped students out of the common misperception, stronger than ever after the Da Vinci Code and revisionist scholarship on early Christianity, that the first Christians did not regard Jesus as divine. The New Testament clearly teaches otherwise, and pointing that out helped students move from 2.23 to 1.78. Still, that is only one-third of the distance they could have traveled. Are they still listening to revisionist scholars as representative of the Christian tradition? That is unlikely at Westmont. It is more likely that many did not absorb the
lesson, even though it was mentioned in one reading and a significant point in a lecture on the resurrection.

5. Students entered supposing the Christian tradition to be less individualistic than we often suppose them to be (answering 1.88 on whether the only important relationship is with God rather than other human beings), and moved even closer to understanding the traditional Christian answer (1.39). The stress on community in the doctrines of creation, sin, salvation, kingdom, and Church probably combine to produce this result.

6. The Pelagian heresy is strong among American evangelicals, but many students still entered not thinking of it as official Christian teaching (2.63). Most of the distance between that and the right answer was closed over the semester (62%), probably because here my pedagogy fits the approach I could use on the first question regarding ice-water-steam theology: I poll the class, then build an argument that describes traditional theology as rejecting the class's stance. It makes a lasting impression.

7. Students are slightly Augustinian on original sin at semester's beginning (3.56 where a comfortable answer would be a 4, given differences between eastern and western Christianity on the issue), and only slightly more Augustinian at semester's end (3.67). Given the diversity in the tradition, I would not insist on firmness as evidence of successful learning, but learning students' responses is interesting.

8. Students were exposed to the implications of Trinitarian rather than modalistic accounts of creation and redemption, but the distinction was more implicit than explicit and was not stressed. Thus, while the average answer on whether Christians teach Jesus as creator or just redeemer was close to the right one (2.10 in May), there was no significant movement (from 2.13 in January). It seems that students are not working through the implications of the theology they are learning; only the points I "hammer" show significant movement in the right direction over the semester.

9. The timing in the development of belief in the resurrection was a minor rather than major theme, and the average student answer at the beginning of the course was already pretty close to the right one (1.73). Students continued to improve, closing 38% of the distance between their original average answer and the right answer.

10. The most troubling result was on the question of whether the world's religions teach the same basic truth. The average answer at the beginning of the semester was already good (1.88, with 1 being the right answer), but by the end of the semester students had moved in the other direction (2.06) -- despite reading a book arguing for the incompatibility of different religious claims and discussing it in class! My hunch (which calls for further investigation) is that many students are exposed to theological ambiguity for the first time in this class, and by the end of the semester some are cynically entertaining a relativist answer to help them cope with the uncertainty. Next semester I will be clearer in discussion, perhaps polling students on the matter at the semester's end and discussing their responses. It might be that they need a professor's clarity on the implications of ambiguity and diversity in orthodox
Christian theology.

11. There was enormous movement on the question of whether baptism "matters", from original indecisiveness (2.96, right in the middle) to near consensus on the right answer (4.47). Rarely has the great theological tradition trivialized baptism, even when it disagreed fundamentally over baptism's significance. However, the success here may be overstated as this is one of the last themes of the semester, and thus still fresh in students' minds.

12. I only addressed the point on Catholic teaching on justification once, incidentally, in class, and that lack of emphasis is reflected in the survey which moves from being slightly correct (3.37) to a little more firmly correct (3.71). More emphasis would easily drive the lesson home in the future.

13. There is more movement on whether Catholicism officially encourages worship of Mary and other saints. Students crossed almost half the distance from being originally unsure or slightly wrong (3.23) to being unsure and moderately right (2.31). This is not a formal topic in class, but it almost always comes up at least once as a point of discussion and makes an impact. I may need to increase its visibility in the future if I make it a teaching priority.

In sum, the survey effectively showed that subtlety doesn't pay in teaching Christian doctrine -- at least as far as this assessment instrument is concerned -- and that shocking students with a correct answer produces a more vivid impression. Unfortunately, we can't shock these folks with every salient point they need to understand. While I will be more careful to emphasize points that deserve more emphasis and prioritize the lessons I really want them to remember, I also need to think through how to instruct them on the more subtle "depth-grammar" of Christian doctrine, since it is likely to last the longest and have the greatest impact on them over time. I also realize that the instrument may overemphasize short-term impacts and fail to spot the longer-term learning. This assessment instrument may itself be distortive.

4. Using the Results. In every case it can be seen that significant learning is taking place with regard to content in OT, NT, and doctrine. There are also areas where teaching and learning can be improved.

5. Next Steps. Instead of having students taking separate post-tests in our individual classes, our AC and the PRC (Program Review Committee) would like us to develop one test that is given to students after they have taken all three courses (RS 1, 10, and 20). It will contain questions covering all three areas of OT, NT, and doctrine. We will work on that in late summer and finish it during the fall semester of 2006. It will be proctored by the administration. Students will come into the computer lab and take the exam in a supervised environment. The AC and PRC have suggested that the exam only be given once at the end. However, some in the department would prefer to give the exam as a pre-test when students enter and then again as a post-test when they have completed the three classes. Also, the AC and PRC would like the department to establish a goal for the exam. For example, we might hope that 80% of our students would...
score 70% or better on the exam. We will need to give the exam once to set a baseline. Then we can meet as a department to set a goal for future exams.

**GOAL 2:** Critical Interdisciplinary Thinking.

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.

   Our AC requested that we specify in more detail what we mean by critical and interdisciplinary thinking. Some of the abilities we are looking for are listed below. Students should demonstrate facility in critical thinking by

   - gathering the most important information pertinent to a topic through careful research
   - developing appropriate ideas, opinions, hypotheses, or theses based on that research
   - analyzing, applying, synthesizing, and evaluating information discovered through research
   - employing disciplinary methodologies and when appropriate to the assignment, integrating other disciplines (for instance, history, literature, anthropology, archaeology, sociology, philosophy, and theology)
   - articulating their positions orally or in writing in a clear, accurate, and logical fashion
   - drawing reasonable conclusions from the evidence
   - being self-critical, recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of their positions, anticipating objections, and preparing responses
   - being open-minded, willing to change their positions in the light of compelling evidence or reason

2. **Data.** Last time we focused on papers from Work’s writing intensive doctrine classes. Our AC encouraged us to broaden our assessment to include the whole department.

   1. We met and discussed this as a department and decided to use portfolios. Each year we will select two students from each track of the major. We will ask those students to save every paper that they write for RS classes. We will then collect their portfolios when they become seniors. Department members will look at the papers and assess how and to what extent they exhibit critical-interdisciplinary thinking.

   Since it will take a while to gather the data from this program, we decided to pass around a couple of papers from this semester to include in this report. They were both papers written for Nelson’s Old Testament Theology course in the spring semester of 2006.

   2. We sent surveys to our alumni/ae. There were many comments praising us for teaching them to think critically.

   Here is a selection of comments:
“I learned . . . to integrate my faith and thought, think critically about theological issues, and read commentaries and background materials to elucidate biblical texts.”
“My education helped me . . . by teaching me how to think through issues and come to biblically informed decisions.”
“My R.S. major equipped me with solid understanding of the mechanics of interpreting God’s Word.”
“taught me skills in critical thinking and of thinking for myself”
“No treatise intimidates me & I feel comfortable to swim in deep theological waters.”
“I have the tools to navigate & synthesize complex arguments.”
“opened my eyes to my prejudices and really changed my way of thinking about the church and God”
“learning how to think and write critically”
“I have learned . . . to be analytical and critical in my thinking about various issues.”
“I grew as a thinker, communicator, reader, and writer.”
“Specifically, the Religious Studies degree helped me acknowledge the complexity of faith, history, interpretation of texts, etc. It was so important to be challenged with alternative viewpoints, both conservative and liberal, so I could wrestle with Truth and Reality, becoming more aware, gaining deeper knowledge and faith and sharpening my thinking, writing, analytical skills by constantly being challenged with things that are not black and white, but often very grey.”
“On a cognitive level, it did wonders for me in my understanding of the challenges, complexities and ultimate depth of Christian theology, history, and worldview.”
“Westmont emphasized and refined my ability to think critically and communicate effectively.”
“The major taught me to be a critical (and a critically appreciative) reader of sacred texts.”
“Learning basic critical techniques enables me to find my own answers by using various research techniques.”
“taught me how to question and embrace hard teachings and problems”

3. Interpretation of the Results.

1. Term Papers. The first paper surveys OT and NT critical scholarship on the term “Son of Man.” It is a good example of college-level appreciation of contemporary biblical scholarship, on a par with the kind of reflection one would expect at an advanced course in a high-quality seminary. It exhibits critical thinking in evaluating the contrasting proposals of a variety of biblical scholars, though perhaps the basis of some of its judgments could have used better articulation. The student displays strong interdisciplinary ability by using philology, cultural anthropology, ancient Near Eastern and ancient Greco-Roman history, religion, textual analysis, history of interpretation, literary criticism, biblical theology, etc.

The second paper, which reviews servant language in Deutero-Isaiah, is likewise a satisfying analysis of an important biblical theme as it is used in a variety of passages. The student again demonstrates critical thinking in evaluating a variety of proposals for how to interpret "servant of the LORD" language. He recounts the various servant passages in Isaiah accurately with an appropriate focus on his topic. He discusses sources from "Old Testament theology" and the shifts in the term's interpretation from its Isaianic context to its New Testament context. Like the
first paper, the second manifests interdisciplinary ability as the student utilizes the various disciplines appropriate to the topic.

In sum, these research papers demonstrate that students are developing critical-thinking skills and interdisciplinary critical-thinking skills. The papers do not show a lot of breadth within the department, such as the integration of church history and biblical studies or world religions and biblical studies. But then the assignment did not lend itself to such approaches. Such interdisciplinary work does go on in other RS classes. Neither do the papers show the use of really divergent disciplines, such as say, political science and biblical studies, sociology and biblical studies, or psychology and biblical studies. But again, this would not be expected given the particular assignment. However, there were other assignments for that same OT Theology course. The students had to read articles and contribute to discussions on “Feminism and the Old Testament,” “The Old Testament as a Political Document,” and “Liberation Theology and the Old Testament.” In the History of Israel course, art history is employed as students examine ancient images from Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia. Such examples could be multiplied with reference to other courses. In conclusion, we in the Religious Studies department are definitely making efforts to integrate our areas of expertise with other disciplines both within and outside of our department. The papers we examined are only a small part of the larger picture, but they are evidence that the critical-interdisciplinary standard is being met.

2. Surveys. It is very gratifying to see how our alums testify to growth in this area. Clearly this is a strength of our department. We are not just dispensing information; we are not merely training students to acquire knowledge; but we are helping them to think, speak, read, and write on a higher level. Our graduates seem to be satisfied that we are teaching them to think critically.

4. Using the Results. We should stay the course as we are having good results. As we gather more evidence we may come to different conclusions. Some in the department may wish to develop assignments which encourage the students to used interdisciplinary approaches.

5. Next Steps. We will have our selected students collect their portfolios so that we will have more data to analyze. There will be more variety in the papers since they will be from more than one course. Also, we will have a chance to see if and to what extent students develop over their time here. It will be interesting to compare early papers with later ones to see if there is improvement.

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. In the spring semester 2006, we sent out a survey to our alumni/ae for the years 1991-2005. We received 40 of them back.
Following are some of the responses:

Question 1. What have you done since Westmont in terms of occupation and further education?

M.Div. degree at Princeton Theological Seminary (several); Duke Divinity School (several); San Francisco Theological Seminary; Fuller Theological Seminary (several); Candler School of Theology; Denver Seminary
M.Div. in Missions at Talbot School of Theology
Th.M. at Dallas Theological Seminary
Master of Pastoral Studies degree at Azusa Pacific University
M.A. degree at Regent College; at Talbot School of Theology
M.A. in religion at Yale University
M.S.W. degree at Rutgers School of Social Work; University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
M.A. in Christian Spirituality
M.S. degree in Educational Leadership at CSU Los Angeles
M.B.A. at Pepperdine University; CSU San Jose
Master of Liberal Arts at Southern Methodist University
Ph.D. cand. in historical studies in theology & religion at Emory University
Managing Director of Legal Services of New Jersey Poverty Research Institute
Social Worker (several)
Editor and Writer for Group Publishing (specializing in Christian education materials)
Contributing Writer for Sojourners
Preschool Teacher for a Presbyterian preschool
Elementary School Teacher
Secondary School Teacher
Regional Director of Development for Westmont College
Pastor (several)
Youth Pastor (several)
Creative Arts Pastor
Missionary
Hospice Chaplain
Group Home Counselor
Mental Health Specialist
Contracts and Grants Administrator for Virginia Tech University
Resident Director at Westmont College; at Miami University; at University of Washington, Seattle
Musician
Sales and Marketing (several)
Arabic Linguist/Intelligence Officer, US Marine Corps
Defense Contractor with Irvine Sensors Corporation
Gardener
Office Manager
Police Officer
Lead Carpenter
Insurance Claims Adjuster
Certified Financial Planner

Question 2. How did your Westmont education in general and your R.S. Major in particular prepare you for the above pursuits?

“Perfectly. I felt well prepared for PTS [Princeton Sem]. And for ministry in general.”
“Perfectly. I felt well prepared for PTS [Princeton Sem]. And for ministry in general.”
“I became proficient at learning, synthesizing knowledge, and communication. The rigorous reading & subsequent writing assignments were excellent preparation for anything.” [There were a number of comments like this. See the quotes above in the critical thinking section.]
“My R.S. major provided a strong foundation for my theological studies and the opportunity to begin exploring the theological and biblical foundations for . . . social action.”
“My Westmont education helped develop my academic and critical thinking skills for graduate work.”
“The RS major trained me well for graduate work in religion, and I have found that I am comfortable in classes, even when I have chosen to take advanced standing . . . . I was given a solid basis of information . . . . over the biblical languages, Old and New Testament, and Church history and Christian theology.”
“Instructors were extremely approachable and knowledgeable, and able to help me discern career directions.”
“helped me to think critically & compassionately which has helped me in all my work”
“laid a spiritual foundation that enabled me to deal constructively in situations of conflict”
“It prepared me well for doctoral work and helped me ask the kinds of questions (about social justice, the poor, about ‘what really matters’) that have led me to pursue non-profit work and religion journalism.”
“Religious Studies has given me a leg up on others in seminary.”
“I learned writing, thinking and speaking skills that serve me very well in my current professional pursuits”
“how to work very hard and prioritize my time”
“focus, discipline, and maturity”
“Integration of theory and practical insights have helped hugely.”
“Concepts such as mercy, grace, justice were made real when I was a police officer in D.C. If I had not studied and thought about these concepts before I was an officer my job would have been extremely difficult.”
“The RS focus . . . taught me the methodology which allows me to incorporate a Christian worldview into everything I do.”

Question 3. How did your R.S. Major contribute (or how did it not contribute) to your growth in spirituality, devotional life, ethics, faith commitment, Christian virtues (e.g. faith, hope, love, patience, joy, self-control), and attitudes?

“My RS Major was critical in forming my adult spirituality. I learned to know myself, integrate my faith and thought, think critically about theological issues, and read commentaries and background materials to elucidate biblical texts. It was a great combination of knowing the faculty (seeing their commitment to my well-being, both personal and academic), spiritual advising, and mind-opening biblical and theological discourse.”
“developed relational skills, deepened & focused love for Jesus”
“My studies in church history have been a good basis for my continuing relationship with our Lord.”

“It grounded me in a more thoughtful and disciplined approach to scriptural study and gave me an appreciation for the rich history of faith communities different than the one I was raised in.”

“My R.S. major—specifically some of the classes but even more so some of the professors definitely contributed to my faith journey.”

“The RS major brought me to a place of understanding that theology and ‘academic’ biblical study are not divorced from the Christian life, so the work I do in the classroom affects my ethical standards in the rest of the world. My classes became a place where my devotional life was expanded and my faith commitment strengthened.”

“learning about our faith’s rich history in peace and justice . . . . Learning of God’s plan as Kingdom-centric, rather than a pure Heaven-Earth duality radically shifted my thinking and impacts the teaching I do, and the way I live each day. It renewed my hope that the Church can be the instrument for God’s Kingdom on earth . . . .”

“Gave me tools and practice for helping my faith become my own.”

“Reading theology is now a devotional practice.”

“Stripped me of evangelical subculture constructs that had no pertinence to Jesus & no true relevance to following Him.”

“I came to appreciate the discipline of academic rigor as part of my faith.”

“I had professors who exemplified faith commitment & Christian virtues that inspired & encouraged me. I was exposed to wonderful examples of faithful Christian life . . . .”

“resulted in a stronger understanding of Scripture and commitment to it”

“a deep care for creation, a preference for the interests of the poor and marginalized, and a distrust of consolidated power”

“increased the grounding of my faith and overall relationship with God’”

“RS professors encouraged me to . . . live those values out in all aspects of my life. They especially encouraged me to think about issues of economic, racial, and social justice.”

“Professors that modeled how their learning and Christian vocation impacted their spiritual lives were particularly valuable. I was inspired and impressed by those professors who were able to both speak intellectually and analytically about issues and describe how God was working in their lives. Being in touch with God on both levels was transformational.”

“My RS major helped me to see that there was a much wider world of Christian expression and practice out there.”

“I have learned how to use the Bible as a tool to answer . . . questions & as a way to know my God better. Through this I learned how to better love other Christians & especially non-Christians.”

“It contributed greatly. [It] formed and transformed me, and led me closer to the heart of God.”

“Primarily it allowed Christianity & my faith to be mine & not my parents’.”

“drew me into finding new excitement about reading scripture”

“prepared me for my marriage where I get to grow daily in my Christian virtues”

“[It] was the first time in my life I grew spiritually, mainly due to increased knowledge.”

“ability to listen to others . . . as well as the discipline to be patient with others”

“The classroom relationships . . . challenged me in my spiritual walk.”
“The leadership provided by the R.S. faculty was the strongest encouragement to me in my growth. This transferred into their disciplines which in turn significantly impacted my desire to learn and grow more in specific areas of spirituality and Christian virtue.”

Question 4. How did your R.S. Major equip you with the tools to continue learning throughout your life? Please give examples of how you have continued to learn and grow.

“I recently led a year-long . . . Bible study for six college . . . women. . . . I taught mostly from my Westmont RS course notebooks. These brainy women were blown away and thrilled to engage the biblical text with their minds as well as their hearts.”

“I have continued to read theology and books on Church history.
“I have the ability to pick up books on challenging subjects, and I am able to find other books by viewing the bibliographies of solid authors. In addition I use the syllabi of my professors to find authors and books worth my time and energy and then use those books to find other resources.”

“I went to graduate school.”
“I have a hunger for knowledge and ideas.”
“I constantly learn & grow through study, worship, and fellowship.”
“further studies in seminary and in pastoral work”
“Learning how to think and write critically is a valuable skill and practice in any line of work.”
[Once again, critical thinking was mentioned a number of times, here as a tool they continue to use. See quotes in the section on critical-interdisciplinary thinking.]
“I now am able to ask harder, deeper questions about matters of society, culture, faith and life in general which serves me every day.”
“the mindset of understanding others even if I do not agree”
“taught me how to think critically about issues, how to ask and answer questions and how to communicate my beliefs and ideas in persuasive and appropriate ways. I continue to use all of those skills in both my church and my secular employment.”
“I picked up the good habits of reading and writing. I am now an avid reader and a published author.”
“I think better understanding God’s great and amazing love was the biggest thing—and how to continue accepting and giving that love.”
“I finish a semester of intense work [in seminary] and all I want to do is read & serve more!”
“I have grown my spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, study, partly because Westmont started me down the path.”
“I have attended a few conferences, learning about the emerging church movements. I . . . often investigate books related to Christianity and politics, Christian spiritual practice, etc.”
“It stuns me to see the way the Lord uses me in non-traditional RS fields even today. The major has really equipped me to cross over into any discipline that I undertake. It is amazing to see God working in other people.”
“involvement in church, Sunday School, Bible studies, and accountability groups”
“I use those skills [of Bible study and Greek, learned at Westmont] in ministry today.”
“I continue to appreciate Westmont’s RS major for providing one of the most academically rigorous experiences I have ever undergone. I don’t think I’d be able to be completing a Ph.D. dissertation today if I had not studied religion at Westmont first.”
Question 5. Do you have any suggestions for improving the R.S. Major at Westmont?

“I was 100% happy . . . . I loved every class & every prof.”
“None—I had a great experience.”
“practical applications to real life issues (as through more ethics courses or inter-departmental courses).”
“I’d like to see the RS program at Westmont be more practical and not just academic/theory/scholarly (unless that’s the focus you want to be known for?). I wish maybe there were more ‘ministry classes,” preparing for ministry ‘in the real world.’”
“making the leap to integrate the academics of Religious Studies with our personal faith journey”
“mandatory internship/mission”
“Provide more opportunities for integrating what students learn in the major to real-life issues and ministry opportunities—especially missions!”
“more practical theology”
“I simply hope that the department will always uphold the very high academic standards it had during my time there. I never worked harder or had more expected of me than in my upper division RS courses. . . . Simply put, I urge the department to maintain a strong academic focus (RS should never be a glorified church youth group) and force students to ask hard questions in an academic setting to stretch them beyond their spiritual comfort zone.”
“Never make the requirements less strict or the classes less thought provoking.”
“I felt a lack of ‘career’ guidance, particularly for women heading into a particularly male dominated field.”
“Continue to work on ways to encourage students to talk about their doubts.”
Devote more time “to an understanding of Catholic theology”
“Invite Westmont grads back for panel discussions at homecoming with current students.”
“I encourage the R.S. department’s policies to promote the connection of the R.S. degree and service or experiences beyond 955 La Paz Road. This could be a semester in Israel or a summer job that is connected to the degree.”
“A comparative religions course should be required of all students!”

3. Interpretation of the Results. There are some key themes that emerge from the surveys.

Q 1. Many of our graduates go on to seminary or graduate school. Frequently they pursue vocations related to RS, e.g. pastoral ministry, missions, counseling, chaplaincy, social work. However, many find themselves engaged in other occupations such as business or law enforcement.

Q 2. Most showed great satisfaction in their education. Because Westmont is a liberal arts college, it prepares people broadly in skills which are useful in any profession. We are clearly successful in training students to read, think, speak, and write on a higher level. Because our major is rigorous and because we expose students to traditional views as well as to recent scholarship, our alumni/ae are well prepared for seminary and graduate school.

Q 3. The emphasis of our program is on intellectual formation. This is as it should be, since we are a college rather than a seminary. Most of the comments spoke to this aspect of our department. However, it was pleasing to see how many testified to growth in spirituality, in their
love for Jesus, in their relationship with God, in peace and justice issues, in ethics, in patience, and in virtue. It was also encouraging to see how many appreciate the contributions of the faculty. A number of students remarked that we impacted their lives in positive ways beyond academics. The data from the surveys support the notion that we are doing spiritual formation and transformation as well as intellectual formation. Some voices specifically linked the two, saying that their intense study of our curriculum enhanced their spiritual growth: “[It] was the first time in my life I grew spiritually, mainly due to increased knowledge.” In other cases they credited relationships or faculty role models.

Q 4. This question relates to the previous ones. Graduates relate that they continue to grow intellectually and spiritually. Some have gone on to seminary and graduate school. Some have entered professions, such as pastoral ministry, where their Westmont RS degree was foundational for continued development. Some are involved in lay leadership, teaching Bible studies and Sunday School. They continue to read, think, speak, and write.

Q 5. Most alums were very pleased with our department. One recurring theme was the need to require a world religions course. We already implemented that last year. Another was the suggestion to do more with missions. We addressed these first two concerns already by hiring a person to teach world religions and missiology. Still another was the need to balance out the academic with the practical. One graduate who expressed this stressed both internships and off-campus programs. This has already been addressed by the school in changing the GE program. The new GE curriculum has a Competent and Compassionate Action component. Under that heading students must complete one of two options: A. Serving Society; Enacting Justice—participating in a service project or internship; or B. Communicating Cross-Culturally—often involving an off-campus program. In contrast to the above, a few students encouraged us to maintain our strong academic focus. While the school and the RS department acknowledge the value of practical theology, it is not our mission to go too far in that direction. We are a liberal arts college, not a professional school. Traditionally we have resisted the push from students to have courses on preaching, pastoral ministry, youth ministry and the like. We do have one course on spiritual formation. Perhaps we could have more or perhaps we have the correct balance already. Students are encouraged, though not required (except for the Urban Track of the major where they do 8 units of practicum) to do practica and internships. Regarding off-campus programs, we have always encouraged them when they relate to the curriculum. For example, the Israel program, which was highlighted one of the surveys, relates to biblical studies and church history. That used to be a popular program. Since the Intifada broke out in 2000, however, the college has discouraged travel programs to Israel. But one of our professors plans to bring a group there in May of 2007. Our missions professor also takes students on missions trips.

4. Using the Results. In short, the surveys are very affirming of our current program. We have already corrected perceived weaknesses. We have even accommodated ourselves to those who want the program to be more practical. However, we will probably never satisfy all of our students in that area; to do so would be to become what we are not: a seminary.

5. Next Steps. We plan to send out the survey every five years to the five classes of RS majors of that period.