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From: Telford Work, Religious Studies  
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September 2005 Program Review Progress Report

The Religious Department has reflected on the Program Review Committee’s response to our proposal for program review. Here is our progress so far in departmental assessment as we face both this progress report and the program review plan due December 2005:

Scope. While the department’s self-study report paid attention to all six of the school-wide learning standards, for program review and assessment purposes we are concentrating on aspects of three. Of the six, the Christian Orientation standard is most directly relevant to the particular roles of our courses in both General Education and the major. Of the other five, the most widely shared goals across our course offerings and within the structure of the major are the Critical Thinking standard as a whole and the Engagement standard in its respect for Christian vocation and lifelong learning. Other standards are also priorities in particular courses and among particular faculty; they are also concerns for our own deliberation and planning as individual faculty and as a department. However, these are the most promising areas for making assessment a regular part of our whole department’s strategic thinking about our pedagogy.

Goals. The school’s goal for Christian orientation is for “students to be informed about the Christian faith” and for “their lives [to] be characterized by practices, affections, and virtues that grow out of a life of Christian faith.” Relevant student learning outcomes are familiarity with scripture, biblical scholarship, Christian doctrine, church history, and world religions, as well as with resources for strengthening Christian faith in the context of these disciplines of inquiry. Also relevant are habits of integrity, self-reflection, church involvement, justice, peacemaking, service, and stewardship; sensitivity to God, others, and other objects of their attention; and virtues of courage, self-control, prudence, faith, hope, and love.

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.

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.

Inputs. We structure not only our courses but all our roles in the college toward these ends. Our departmental self-assessment lists both general and specific “inputs” through which our program addresses each of these goals. (For instance, it prioritizes familiarity with and knowledge of scripture across our course offerings, knowledge of biblical scholarship primarily in GE and upper-division biblical studies classes, knowledge of Christian doctrine in Doctrine and upper-division theology courses, church history in the history of Christianity and Doctrine classes, and
world religions in religion courses. Our courses and scholarship treats these as objects of interdisciplinary, critical, and faithful inquiry."

**Already.** The following specific efforts for following through on our hopes are already underway:

1. The department has met to agree on these specific goals, outcomes, and assessment strategies both by itself and in conversation with assessment liaisons elsewhere in the college. Our assessment loop is increasingly well defined and we have sufficient common ground for further refinement in the future.

2. Professors are already undertaking course-level disclosures, self-assessments, and surveys at their own initiative and discretion. Among these are the following:
   - Some professors distribute entry surveys gauging their students’ familiarity with specific course content, the discipline as a whole, its relevance to other disciplines and to their lives, and their own personal goals for the course.
   - Some syllabi and introductory lectures disclose to students the goals, vision, and content of the course. This has gone on for at least several years.
   - For several years, “entrance exams” in all sections of Christian Doctrine spur students’ engagement with the course material. These are either collected and become reportable indicators of students’ initial adequacy in the departmental standards and learning outcomes, or kept for students to reflect upon in a written exercise at the conclusion of the course so as to become reportable indicators of students’ self-assessments regarding how well the course is meeting departmental goals, in time to incorporate their lessons into the following semester’s courses. (Beginning fall 2005, the language of that exercise prompt now appeals explicitly to those standards and outcomes.)
   - We administer course evaluations as appropriate (occasionally for tenured faculty, always for non-tenured faculty), and read and report on them as part of the tenure process and the post-tenure faculty self-review process.
   - Beginning last year one professor has distributed a survey to all graduating seniors who took his GE course, obtaining longer term followup on the quality of the course, what students still remember, how the course influenced them, how well it fit into their broader college education, and what perspective and advice they have for the instructor. This survey is being folded into a similar departmental survey that is more closely tied into the department’s assessment process.
   - A professor requires every enrolled student to keep at least one twenty-minute office-hour appointment during the semester. Ten to fifteen of these appointments happen every week, offering an invaluable opportunity not only to get to know students individually but to gain a running impression and even a kind of “overnight rating” of how the course is going. He learns this way about the course as a whole as well as its internal trajectory. Having these faculty assessments and student impressions throughout the semester allows for quick response to events and opportunities that would be lost otherwise.
   - A professor includes brief self-assessment essays on final exams that ask students for one-paragraph responses to questions such as: *Which one lecture, exercise, or activity in this course was the best use of your time in learning Christian doctrine, and why? Which was the worst, and why?* Getting these back immediately rather than having to wait until student evaluations are returned makes it possible to learn lessons in time to incorporate them into the next semester’s courses.
One of us thought systematically about the significance of pedagogical assessment, failure, and improvement in a paper delivered at the 2003 Pruitt Memorial Symposium on moral formation in American higher education at Baylor University.

Faculty members already carefully craft lectures, readings, assignments, and examinations to accord with departmental goals and desired outcomes (and vice versa – departmental goals and desired outcomes have long grown out of the sensibilities expressed in our classes), and we carefully consider how the grades for each assignment, test, and semester are or are not indicators of success. The assessment loop here may be unfashionable in assessment circles, but it has special applicability to Westmont’s Christian orientation standard, since knowledge, practices, affections, and virtues pertaining to the content of Christian faith are both explicit school-wide goals and explicit foci of our GE and upper-division courses.

3. A capstone course is currently on the fall 2005 departmental meeting agenda for consideration, which would present further opportunities for majors’ assessment. (WASC review pushed back this and other departmental discussion items to later in the semester.)

4. The department has developed alternative questions for items E and F of the school’s standard course evaluations and has forwarded them to the Personnel Committee for consideration in adding them to the school’s list of approved faith/learning questions. Each more explicitly meets the department’s own goals: Question E lies at the intersection of the Christian orientation and critical thinking standards, and question F at the intersection of the Christian orientation and engagement standards. Thus ongoing student self-assessment efforts that are already used in course, personnel, and departmental review will be brought into the departmental assessment loop.

E. What specific aspects of this course have improved your familiarity with the Christian faith as both a body of knowledge and a way of understanding?

F. How have the content and activities of this course affected your formation as a lifelong practitioner and learner in the Christian faith?

5. The department has instituted an end-of-semester questionnaire for RS faculty to complete beginning fall 2005 on:

- changes made that semester in response to earlier self- or departmental assessment (to capture the “closing of the loop”).
- instructor’s assessment of grades and other otherwise non-reportable outputs (to capture some data that would otherwise be lost or marginalized by the reported data).
- disclosure of goals in classes.
- how many tasks students have for performing interdisciplinary critical thinking.
- what formative assessment is already going on (such as entrance exams and my prior peer. review guidelines, which allow students to assess their papers’ readiness before submitting them).
- what student self-assessment we offer students (such as entrance exams and their reflection exercises in Curt’s and my classes, or standards for interpreting letter grades).
- overall assessment of that semester’s course’s effectiveness regarding these two standards.

Faculty will review these as a department at the beginning of the following semester to assess progress and to identify ways to refine departmental reflection and assessment. This feeds the department’s ongoing conversation regarding the adequacy of our assessment efforts, both within and beyond the scope of the school-wide standards. A report on these proceedings will be included in the WASC file.
Not yet. The Department will continue to incorporate assessment and develop a “culture of evidence” with the following planned future tasks:

1. To help pull our courses into the department’s and school’s goals and procedures and for disclosure to students, faculty will bring the language of their syllabi into line with the language of the learning standards, outcomes, and departmental self-assessment where each faculty member deems it appropriate. This will begin happening in preparation for spring 2006’s classes.

2. The department will pull questions from the senior exit interviews pertaining to the standards and learning outcomes on which we will be concentrating as a self-assessment tool given to students entering the RS major. Since majors will have varying exposure to upper-division and GE religious studies courses, they will list the RS courses they have taken. This will happen October 2005 for use by students declaring the RS major from fall 2005 onward.

3. The department is considering giving this major entrance survey to alumni at homecomings or through the mail so the department can get a better idea of outcomes beyond students’ time at the college.

4. Each faculty member will contribute seven ‘content’ questions (in the case of the GE Canons courses LLOT, LLNT, and Doctrine) or five questions (in the case of GE Common Contexts courses) for an entrance/exit survey to assess students’ knowledge of the content concerning the Christian orientation learning standard. These will be due November 2005.

5. The relevant section of this survey will be given to students on the first day of the pertinent GE class, starting January 2006, and the end of class (preferably after the final or with course evaluations) starting April 2006.

6. We will hold spring semester departmental meeting following up on “already” item 5 above, expected January 2006.

7. Collection and review of the past two years’ senior exit interviews for RS majors and reflection on the two standards on which we are concentrating, prior to performing the next year’s interviews (expected February-March 2006).

8. The whole content survey will be given to graduating seniors (whether or not they have taken the entrance surveys) starting April 2006. They will fill out only the sections for which they have taken RS GE courses at Westmont and note the semester, year, and instructor.

As the largest department on campus, we incorporate a considerable diversity of disciplinary focus and methodology. These measures aim to gauge and improve our effectiveness as a whole department in the life of our whole school while preserving that diversity and respecting the professorial autonomy and initiative that are critical to our integrity and effectiveness as faculty.