

Religious Studies Department

Westmont College

Program Goals

Religious Studies graduates should demonstrate facility in critical/interdisciplinary thinking by:

- Exhibiting an awareness of how the various sub-disciplines of religious studies inform the topic at hand.
 - Those sub-disciplines are Old Testament, New Testament, History of Christianity, Theology, and Christian Mission.
- Articulating their positions in writing in a clear, accurate, concrete, and logical fashion.
- Being able to think analytically and comparatively.

Assessment Strategies

- The department focused on the course RS 100, Foundations of Spiritual Formation. This course fulfills the GE requirement "Integrating the Discipline" because it uses most of the sub-disciplines in the department.
- The department was intentional about encouraging interdisciplinary thinking by having various members give guest lectures in the course in the fall of 2006. There were lectures given on Spirituality and the Old Testament, Spirituality and New Testament, Spirituality and the History of Christianity, Spirituality and Theology, and Spirituality and Christian Mission.
- Students were then asked to write an essay on how they see those various areas of the department contributing to their understanding of spirituality.
- The department met to discuss several of the papers.

Results

- Students did a fine job of giving examples of how the various disciplines inform the topic of spirituality. These are areas they mentioned in their essays:
 - The Old and New Testaments were important as we considered Christian practices such as prayer, fasting, and community.
 - History of Christianity was important as we looked at different figures such as Augustine, St. Thomas à Kempis, Bonhoeffer, and Lewis and placed them in a historical context.
 - Theology was important as we discussed determinism versus free will in books by Foster, Augustine, and Lewis; and as we discussed how theology informs practices such as worship.
 - Mission was important as we reflected on
 - Thérèse de Lisieux, whose life of prayer in the convent impacted the world.
 - Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who served the poorest of the poor.
- Students succeeded in recounting how the guest lecturers integrated spirituality with their respective disciplines (Old Testament, New Testament, History of Christianity, Theology and Mission).

- Sometimes the students were vague and general and could have improved their writing with more concrete examples.
- In terms of articulating a position clearly, accurately, and logically, there were varying degrees of success. One paper stood out from the others in this regard.
- Students exhibited analytical skills by comparing and contrasting such things as
 - Learning versus faith.
 - Intellect versus emotion.
 - The theoretical versus the practical.
 - Reading the Bible critically versus contemplatively.
 - Structured versus free exercises of spirituality.
 - Critical and intellectual matters versus practical matters.

Interpretation of Results

- Students appear to have a good grasp of how the various sub-disciplines in our department inform the topic of spirituality.
- Students tend to generalize when they should be more concrete.
- Students manifested a range of writing ability: some are more articulate than others.
- Students exhibit good analytical and comparative skills.

Next Steps

Assignments in Other Courses

- Various faculty shared examples of assignments they give which are integrative and interdisciplinary.
 - One professor asks students to address a topic that bridges the biblical world with ours.
 - One asks students to do critical book reviews which analyze a concern from an earlier period of the church and seeks to apply it to the twenty-first century.
 - All of us are considering developing such assignments.

Portfolios

- We will select 2 students each year from each track of the major to save all of their religious studies papers in a portfolio.
- We will review the portfolios in the senior year of each selected student.
- We will then be able to assess how students have developed in critical-thinking skills and in interdisciplinary thinking over their time in our department.
- As we become aware of strengths and weaknesses in the student work, we can make changes in our teaching and assignments.

A Capstone Course

- Several in the department would like to see us develop a capstone course which would be team taught and would be even more intentionally interdisciplinary.