

Narrative report for external review, UTC Philosophy & Religion

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1. Learning outcomes

The program, in all three of its concentrations, aligns well with many elements of the university's mission, its strategic plan, and the goals for the College of Arts and Sciences: The self-study document successfully makes the case: The knowledge and skills the program provides are foundational to promoting critical inquiry, understanding and appreciating diversity, and developing integrity to improve both students' lives and that of society more broadly. The College has a primary goal of providing a strong liberal arts education. A liberal arts education crucially requires independent critical inquiry skills, and the Philosophy and Religion program makes promoting this fundamental to its mission. Philosophy is perhaps the discipline that grounds itself most in high-quality critical inquiry, and since many of its fundamental questions are shared by the world's religious traditions, the academic study of religion naturally includes deep critical inquiry as well. The College and University also place diversity and inclusion as paramount, a mission shared by Philosophy and Religion: For the department's programs, their vision is "to provide truly *global* coverage of the philosophical and religious traditions of the world." Compared to other programs of which this reviewer is aware, the philosophy program includes more opportunities for students to explore non-Western philosophy (e.g., Japanese philosophy, Indian philosophy), as well as less-studied areas not always available to undergraduates (e.g., aesthetics). The religion program includes near-equal opportunities for the academic study of Western and Eastern religions, again showing the department's efforts to build diversity and inclusion into their programmatic structure. Many programs seek such diverse educational offerings, but UTC's program has succeeded in this area more than most.

As for the specifics of the BA program itself, the department designed the learning outcomes for the three concentrations with flexibility in mind. The central outcomes of critical reasoning skills, understanding complex ideas and arguments, and awareness of diverse perspectives are sufficiently general to where most every course plays a role in all of the outcomes. The concentrations do have some requirements (logic and the history of philosophy for the Philosophy concentration, Western and non-Western religion for the Religion concentration.) But students are empowered to choose much of their own path through the major, and faculty need not be tied down to offering a large number of required classes. Such flexibility helps with traditionally small programs like those in philosophy and religious studies.

Flexibility also offers benefits for assessment: Most every class can play a role in providing evidence to evaluate the program. The department uses a mix of effective assessment tools in its classes, and it seems the assessment process runs primarily at the level of individual courses. The assessment reports indicate that students generally learn what's set for them as goals, and many reports indicate progress both during the course and improvements in successive iterations of the course. The picture is that students will meet the program outcomes to some degree no matter what path they select.

However, one point to raise is that while assessing individual courses helps those professors improve those classes, it wasn't perfectly clear how the assessments were used at the program level. It's clear that each assessed course does well at hitting the program outcomes, but it's another set of questions as to whether students in the program as a whole meet the outcomes.

For example, in the Religion concentration, some students might take many courses in Group 2 (the 'Christianity, Judaism, and contemporary religious issues' category) and just two in the 'Eastern Religions' category. Given this possibility, do students in the program gain sufficient knowledge of 'the significant historical figures and multiple perspectives that have influenced religion' (outcome 3)? Similarly, in the Philosophy concentration, some students might take courses requiring significant exercise of 'organizational and research skills' (outcome 2), and thus are very likely to meet that outcome. But what ensures that a random student in the program is likely to meet that outcome? The department should be able to answer such questions more definitively, and more program-level analysis and discussion might be necessary.

2. Curriculum

As mentioned above, the department emphasizes flexibility in its program's curriculum design. This flexibility is a great strength of the program. It serves students in empowering them to choose their own educational paths, and it makes for efficient progress through the concentrations. Many students join philosophy and religious studies programs later in their undergraduate careers, and both subjects are often second majors. With only a few hard requirements, scheduling then can be a matter of blending faculty choice and student desire.

On the question of whether students meet the program goals for such a flexible program, I see at least two ways the department might support a positive answer. Both involve analysis of student work at or near the point of graduation. One move would be to modify the assessment the department already does, to compare work by seniors (and ideally those seniors in their final semester) with students who have not progressed as far in the program. If the seniors tend to meet the goals, and if they perform better at meeting them than juniors or sophomores, then we have some core evidence that the flexible curriculum is no barrier to success.

The other move is to revisit a curricular change made several years ago, and that was to eliminate the thesis requirement. The interviews and self-study document show that the department made a reasonable move. A thesis is labor-intensive and challenging to supervise, especially for students who struggle with the task. The challenge might turn some students away from the major. There are questions of equity regarding load for faculty. A student presumably can meet the program outcomes without a deep dive into an intimidating and narrowly focused research project like a thesis. And finally, a traditional thesis requirement might even run counter to principles of inclusivity. Yet some kind of "culminating experience" for the program would help with the question of what students can do at the end of the program. Such a project is a high-impact learning experience. The students I interviewed were of the view that a thesis was both good and necessary. And given the department's principles of flexibility and diversity, it might offer more of a capstone project, of which a thesis might be only one sort. There are many kinds of culminating experiences one might design for students in philosophy and religious studies. A capstone might be a portfolio. It might be a service-learning project. It might be a project presenting philosophical content in a non-standard format (as one professor already has done in the context of an existing course). But while such ideas might be attractive and flexible options, I want to stop short here of an outright recommendation to reinstate a thesis or capstone

requirement. The department had good reason for streamlining the curriculum to have a program without a thesis but with many other strengths. They should think about this question. But given their success so far and with the rebound in their number of majors, it would be quite reasonable to proceed with the curriculum they presently have.

3. Student experience

Much of the program's content emphasis is built around exposure to globally diverse perspectives. One sees this easily in the Religion concentration's two 'groups' of curricular offerings. For the Philosophy concentration, the faculty's diversity of expertise gets reflected in the diversity of courses. And within courses, the syllabi indicate instructors have made efforts to diversify their course content relative to race, gender, Eurocentric topics and writings, and disciplinary emphases. The department makes extending this emphasis on global diversity central to its five-year-plan and vision statement.

For the syllabi made available and from the interviews, the curriculum offers a diversity of high-impact course activities. The department faculty are creative here. Sample high-impact practices include: group projects to communicate course content to high schoolers, a Twitter analysis assignment, a project to communicate philosophical ideas/issues via video, Junior-level course papers with expectations for original research, book précis assignments, group presentations on theologians or theological movements, book discussion debates, the senior thesis option. The department also encourages students to present their work at conferences, and several students been successful in this. In addition to the value of the extracurricular experience and having their work affirmed as valuable, such experiences engage students in the real work of the fields of philosophy and religious studies. Not many programs can make that claim authentically. If the University is very likely to emphasize high-impact pedagogy in its next five-year plan, Philosophy and Religion is already contributing to that goal, and with the right support where necessary, one would expect them to contribute even more.

Beyond the regular university course evaluations, the self-study gave no further indication of ways students might provide feedback and evaluation of their experiences. The department might consider getting such alternate and additional feedback, especially for elements of the program outside of coursework. Additional feedback might come from alumni surveys, feedback within courses that have high-impact practices, or from making use of survey data from professional academic organizations (e.g., the AAR's 2015 survey data of religious studies programs¹). The students I interviewed mentioned one sort of feedback I think isn't mentioned in the self-study: It seems the course evaluation includes a question as to what course offerings they would like to see in the future. The students were pleased that a requested course spanning Eastern and Western philosophy was now planned for a semester in the near future. They were also pleased to see an upcoming focused course on a single figure (Jonathan Edwards). So the department is responsive to fitting their curriculum to reasonable student desires. As for suggestions, the students recommended more courses with depth over breadth (e.g., focus on just a few philosophers as opposed to a class with a wide survey of a long historical period).

¹ See <https://www.aarweb.org/AARMBR/Publications-and-News-/Data-and-Studies-/Teagle-Study.aspx>, which contains links to both the full survey results and discussion.

4. Faculty

As part of their current and long-term goals, the university and college seek to bolster the research productivity of its faculty. Philosophy and Religion plays a valuable role in meeting those goals already, and there is no reason to think that will change. For a regional comprehensive institution, the department faculty strike this reviewer as far above average in this area. The CV's show an impressive array of scholarly conference presentations, journal articles, (many at well-respected venues), and book projects. Many of the articles and book projects are at well-respected venues and presses.

The department has made progress in diversifying its faculty, a process that challenges departments everywhere. Given some vacancies, the department was able to improve its gender ratio without new lines, and its faculty expertise ranges across diverse areas important to the fields of philosophy and religious studies. Faculty expertise also ranges across areas that resonate with students (given the testimonials at the department webpages and the interviews for the program review).

The department also works to help each other develop professionally. They use student evaluations of teaching. They discuss these among each other, and they consider the larger ramifications of their course-level assessment data. Tenured faculty do peer observations of lecturers and probationary assistant professors. (For reasons of equity and effectiveness, I would recommend peer observations of everyone by everyone.) The department doesn't do larger-scale formal assessment to judge the program as a whole, but they do seem active in informal critical assessment of their program.

On hiring, several faculty members (and the self-study) mentioned a need for a tenure-track position in biblical studies. The program covers this area with a lecturer presently, and while the department views that lecturer as an effective and valued department member, a new TT line would emphasize scholarly expertise in this area far better. Biblical studies is an important area of the academic study of Christianity, and with Tennessee being heavily Christian, more expertise in this area would strengthen both the program and its potential connections with the community. When this hiring question came up in the interviews, all parties understood that new lines are unlikely in the present environment. One option would be to convert the lecturer line to a tenure-track position, which is far easier on costs and doesn't require a new line. This needs delicate attention to the department's commitments to the faculty member presently in the lecturer line. Another option, though again requiring a new line, would be to broaden the area of specialization to include biblical studies or some other area where the Religion concentration's expertise could be improved. With the ongoing good enrollment numbers in classes (with most classes full and waitlisted), good numbers in the major, and a good graduation rate, the department has an enrollment-based argument for a new line as well.

Another faculty-related issue concerns the department's 2015 merge with Classical and Modern Languages and Literatures. The rationale seemed to be partly financial and partly because of the state's focus on departments with fewer than 100 majors. While Philosophy and Religion is presently semi-autonomous, with its own associate chair, committee representation, and budget, administratively it has a chair from outside its ranks. The self-study speaks of the merged department as 'workable' but 'not ideal'. Department faculty and administrators alike seemed to agree. Yet some faculty still find the administrative structure awkward and unclear. Some tasks, questions, and issues are handled by the chair, some addressed by the associate chair, and some

by both, with some department members not always clear on who handles what. Other faculty raised concerns over the lack of disciplinary overlap with the other side of the department. The current chair is in Classics, which helpfully has some overlap with philosophy (at least in terms of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy). But even so, philosophy and religious studies are far wider fields across topics and historical periods, and the chair presumably faces challenges understanding those wider areas of the disciplines. The associate chair can only help so much, and whether for allocating resources, making hiring recommendations, evaluating yearly performance, or judging promotion and tenure applications, an outside chair can't avoid being viewed as an outsider. To the current chair's credit, he strikes me as authentic in deferring to Philosophy and Religion's needs and desires where possible, and his respect for their autonomy is a wise move. The drawback though, as some faculty mentioned, is that too much respect for autonomy can leave the chair as distant, and it can create the impression of not offering guidance where needed. Were the chair occupied by a different personality, or from a discipline with less overlap, the challenges would be even more acute. Still, everyone seemed to understand the present situation, and indeed the situation is workable and the department continues to succeed despite the merge.

Would all parties benefit from revisiting the rationale for the merge though? Faculty and administrators alike seemed willing to do this. On the financial question, if the savings are minimal, then one might weigh that against the extra work for the chair and the awkwardness of having such different disciplines together. One also should weigh the finances against perceived autonomy within the department. The other question though is how best to work with the state's threshold of 100 majors as a cutoff for official scrutiny of program effectiveness. This is a political calculation that indeed can be delicate, and even more so in the current budget environment. A major in philosophy and religion can thrive with far fewer than 100 majors, and with a flexible curriculum like UTC's, even as few as 20 could probably still be a thriving program if the students succeed and the department's overall class enrollment remains strong. But if a smaller program generates risky political attention, one surely would want a small but high-quality program to remain safe in what currently is a highly uncertain environment for higher education everywhere.

5. Learning resources and facilities

The department looks to have excellent access to library resources, and faculty make ample use of electronic resources and interlibrary loan services. The department's strong research productivity bears this out. The Walker Teaching Center also supports the department, and at least one department member made successful use of a high-impact teaching grant. (I would suggest others pursue this opportunity too.) The Center's assistant director has disciplinary connections to philosophy and religious studies, and the Center itself offers many opportunities for professional development of the craft of teaching.

The student interviews revealed a few areas where the department might create or expand some learning resources and opportunities. One concerns internship opportunities. These are excellent experiential learning opportunities that also can show the broad value of the student experience in studying philosophy and religion. The students implied that the employment picture painted for them was that of graduate school and the teaching profession, a picture that, if accurate, surely ought to be expanded. Partly to this end, the department might encourage students to pursue internships more, and the campus office handling the logistics of them might make their

services and internships more visible to students in Philosophy and Religion. Another possible area to explore is student tutoring within the department. It requires financial support along the same lines as having student workers, but high-functioning students can benefit from the experience of tutoring others. General education students often benefit from peer assistance in logic especially. Even if tutoring in the department isn't feasible, students in the program might be encouraged to pursue tutoring positions in the Writing Center or as peer mentors elsewhere.

On facilities, the department appears to have adequate classroom space and technical resources for conducting class meetings. In the faculty discussions, many expressed unease and consternation over the upcoming move of the department to a new building. Having lived through and helped supervise a recent department move myself, I can empathize with the stress. Some of the comments were familiar: Timelines weren't communicated clearly, furniture in the new space has to match the design for the building (so no furniture allowed from the old space), and needs for adequate bookcase space seemed not to be met. (Some disciplines seem quite comfortable with electronic materials. Others, like philosophy, religious studies, history, and English, work with and need physical materials far more. Disciplines differ on their office infrastructure needs.) The department faculty also raised a public health issue regarding the move. It appears they are moving to a space where more faculty and more students would be concentrated in an overall smaller space. Given our present Covid risks, social distancing principles might be far better met by cancelling or postponing the move. True, the move would put the department with its colleagues in Classical and Modern Languages and Literatures, and also in the same building as its shared administrative assistant. Public health concerns though may well override those benefits. And if "demerging" is at all likely in the future, the department might be better served to stay where it is.

6. Support

The department is a small, sustainable, high-quality program. Enrollments are very strong, and this for both lower- and upper-level courses (with waitlists often for classes of both types). As observed above, a flexible curriculum makes a small program much more sustainable, and even so, the class enrollments actually suggest a strong case for another faculty line. Each faculty member standardly teaches two general education courses and one upper-level course, and with even upper-level classes filling to capacity, it seems the students and university profile alike would benefit from expanding the program. Philosophy and Religious Studies likely would never be a giant program like one often sees in Psychology or Communication. Philosophy typically sees fewer than 1% of degrees awarded nationwide, and religion/theology even fewer.² Yet the UTC program has seen a rebound in its number of majors, and students do graduate from the

² For relative proportions of degrees awarded by discipline from 1970-2011, see <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/05/09/310114739/whats-your-major-four-decades-of-college-degrees-in-1-graph>. For more recent proportions for philosophy, and for proportions broken down by institutional type, see <https://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=56> and <https://schwitsplinters.blogspot.com/2017/12/sharp-declines-in-philosophy-history.html>. The second link speaks worryingly about declines, yet one should note that UTC's program has actually grown recently. For religious studies, one also sees small proportions of overall graduates. See <https://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=10996>. These data are obviously imperfect (e.g., they don't reflect second majors), yet they ought to give some indication of the typical and relatively small size of typical programs in philosophy and religious studies.

program at a rate appropriate to its numbers. A small, high-quality program is what one should expect from philosophy and religious studies, and the department at UTC gives every indication of delivering that.

An area of financial need, or perhaps of financial justice, concerns an endowed chair in religious studies. In the interviews, I didn't ask for a full story of why a chair in religious studies is presently held by a faculty member in Psychology. The University presumably had its reasons. But as a perception in the department and as a means of support for the program, an endowed chair in religious studies ought to be in the Department of Philosophy and Religion. If the chair has a fixed term, it should go back to the department when that term expires.

In the more general area of administrative support, I've mentioned lingering faculty perceptions of the department merge already. Some faculty members still feel somewhat distant on this and other things, and the various administrators might do well to make sure that department faculty concerns are being heard. Even for this present five-year review, some faculty expressed some cynicism about the process. True, administrators have duties that entail a 'no' answer to many faculty requests, and faculty members understand this. Yet surely the cynicism might be minimized with some extra (and possibly direct and personal) explanation as to the rationale behind what decisions need to be made. My impression of the UTC administrators I met were of people who understand and value the faculty and contributions of Philosophy and Religion quite highly. The chair, dean, and provost were well aware of the department's strengths. It may be that the department faculty is somewhat unaware of those favorable views.

7. Summary recommendations

I'll close with a summary of some strengths and points of possible improvement. The lists are not in order of importance. I leave it to the department and College to evaluate that question.

Strengths:

1. Faculty have good connections with students and the students perceive this. The students recognize and see the quality of their courses in the department.
2. The department has a very strong research profile for an institution of UTC's designation.
3. The program offers flexibility and student choice, and such student empowerment to drive their own education also seems present within individual courses.
4. The department respects and promotes diversity and inclusion. They demonstrate this in their faculty expertise and in curricular offerings in philosophy and religious studies, and also in their progress in hiring. Whatever larger initiatives develop from the College and University, it should be easy for the department to participate and contribute.
5. The department offers a variety of interesting high-impact activities in classes, including research involvement by students in developing their own work.
6. For what the next University strategic plan is likely to be, the department is already contributing in some of that plan's important areas (e.g., all of #1-#5 on my list of summary recommendations so far). I'd expect more of the same in the future. One might expect even more if the department gets some of the extra support they ask for. Examples might include:

- a. Make a tenure-track hire in biblical studies or in some disjunction of biblical studies and another needed area in religious studies.
- b. Give the endowed chair in religious studies back to the department, instead of having it in PSYC. The time perhaps would be when its term expires.
- c. Support more grants for teaching and learning through the Walker Center.

Points of possible improvement or further analysis:

1. Having merged departments is far from ideal (there are significant disciplinary differences, some faculty don't feel connected, being an outside chair is a challenge—there's a tension between hands-off facilitating and not offering enough direction). A merged department does offer some political safety, and the program is doing very well despite the structural and administrative challenge.
2. A program assessment question: Flexibility in completing the program can make it hard to see from outside whether the program meets its *program* goals, even if in the context of individual *courses*, there's a lot of demonstrated success and student satisfaction.
3. Having no culminating experience for students has the same drawback as raised in #2, and even if a culminating experience isn't a thesis project per se, students ought to benefit from if it's designed well. Perhaps there could be a flexible option for such an experience, and even if a thesis/capstone project isn't formally required, it could be encouraged as an attractive way for students to complete the program in a high-impact way.
4. Help students better navigate the transition from college student to job applicant with a philosophy/religious studies degree. (The culminating experience in #3 might help with this, just as a suggestion.) The Career Services Center might do better in making discipline-specific connections with programs.
5. Internships might be pushed or encouraged or made easier to see as student opportunities.
6. Connections with alumni might be explored, both to the graduates' liking and to the department's advantage in gaining useful information.

I'm happy to answer any further questions or discuss any of the points in the review further. I thank the University for its (virtual!) hospitality in the discussions, and I also thank the department's administrative assistant, Evelyn Murray, for her efficient logistics in setting up the meetings. I wish the department well in the rest of the review process and in its efforts for the future.

Respectfully submitted,

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