

Narrative report for external review, UTC Philosophy & Religion

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1) Learning outcomes

Philosophy and religious studies are among the core disciplines of a classical education. At UTC, the two disciplines have their aims for students aligned both with classical ones and with those of a preprofessional sort. UTC's mission centrally includes engaging students in order to achieve excellence in the service of positive change. The mission of the College of Arts and Sciences unpacks such excellence in terms of intellectual virtues such as lifelong intellectual curiosity and the capacities for critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving. Such skills apply across all domains, and are especially important where positive change is important and essential, whether for the individual or the community. Such goals also align with the contemporary university's goal for students to achieve excellence in their professional lives.

The learning outcomes articulated by UTC's Department of Philosophy and Religion align with all of these. The department aims for students in both programs to be able to think critically about and communicate complex ideas and arguments, do research to present such ideas, and apply them to both local and broader global contexts. The department expects disciplinary-specific content knowledge from students in order to further these skills and apply them.

The skills and content knowledge in both programs are both measurable and measured effectively by the department. For program assessment, the department uses a mix of different samples of student work, from different courses at both the entry-level and at a level where students have more experience in the field. The department's self-study lays all this out clearly, with targets for students to reach, reporting on how well they reach them (which is very well, from their discussion in §1.2), and with attention to program assessment rotating through each learning outcome at least once every three years. This is all in line with current assessment practices in higher education. If UTC's assessment coordinators agree with this, then the department is fulfilling its expectations for program assessment.

As for possible improvements, the self-study mentions that the department is developing a tool (a rubric) to use across all assessments, to be used in tandem with existing paper assignments of a significant nature. The self-study also mentions canvassing students for information as to their original interest in the department's programs and for their post-graduation plans. Such information can indeed inform changes to help tailor the department's programs to the UTC student population's needs. These are good plans.

Given that students may take a variety of upper-level (and even lower-level) courses in Philosophy and Religion as they move through their degree program, the department could use some longitudinal results to help them improve even more. The self-study implies this, and the data from the new assessment rubric coded to class level (SO, JR, SR), the department then can examine and demonstrate the progress students make. Moving to this kind of longitudinal analysis also allows the department to ‘close the loop’ by bringing the results to bear on specific instructional practices at the micro level within their courses.

2) Curriculum

The department has great strengths here. They review their curricular offerings yearly, they have a set committee to do the reviewing (for both course scheduling and for specific student needs and requests), and perhaps most of all, both the philosophy and religious studies courses run across a wide range of topics. Unlike many programs, the department has for some time now fielded courses in non-‘Western’ areas of philosophy, in addition to all of the standardly seen Western topics. For example, Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy and Modern European Philosophy have been offered, and so have World Philosophy (lower-level), Meso-American Philosophy, and Asian Philosophy. The American Philosophical Association encourages such breadth, and the UTC department is fortunate to have the faculty expertise and desire to field such courses for some time now. On the Religion side, wider breadth of exposure to different religious traditions has long been standard (and is affirmed in the profession by the American Academy of Religion). But even in religious studies, at UTC students have extensive opportunities to learn more widely. They can learn about, and learn from, the religious thought of all of the commonly-taught religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism), but also from courses on Religion in Southern Culture, Contemporary Religious Issues, and even in highly focused courses such as one on the thought of Jonathan Edwards. Most departments offer some diversity of course offerings depending on faculty expertise. But UTC seems to extend more opportunity here: Students can get breadth of knowledge (though the standard topics, philosophers, and religious traditions covered) but also deeper dives into areas that fit their interests and requests.

This all has advantages beyond diversity of courses available: For the student experience, they have varied opportunities to practice the transferrable skills that are so valuable for fields like philosophy and religious studies. They get wide background knowledge of the field. They get to practice articulating and analyze complex ideas at the macro level. But with the deeper courses they get to refine those skills at a higher level than students elsewhere might have the chance to do. This applies to all the other learning outcomes for the department’s programs.

The department also has a unique strength they’ve leveraged somewhat recently. They’ve extended their mainline Philosophy BA and Religion BA (and a combined Philosophy/Religion BA) to include tracks that align with various preprofessional goals. Philosophy has a new track for pre-law and another for health and medicine. Religion has a track in development for religion

and business. These tracks not only diversify the opportunities for students, but they also show how the different fields align with different community needs and students' preprofessional interests. Philosophy and religious studies have always had great relevance to the skills needed in the professions. But not many programs have this kind of explicit emphasis in their curricular commitments.

Finally, the department has offered students opportunities for higher-impact learning in the form of research, community involvement, and service learning. The self-study gives examples of students being able to present their projects at university- and state-level venues, and it is especially laudable of UTC to support such opportunities. Some religious studies classes include community engagement (e.g., with students visiting some of the different places of worship in the Chattanooga area). Some philosophy classes include both community engagement and service learning (e.g., with students working with community gardens in efforts to revitalize areas of the city). Perhaps the department could create more opportunities for such connections, whether by incorporating student research into such projects, finding long-term internship opportunities, or building such higher-impact learning into other curricular options. The department does more than most of their peers in the areas of high-impact learning and community engagement. They could explore creative ways to do even more.

3) Student experience

Students evaluate the courses in philosophy and religious studies per the usual student course evaluations. The evaluations get reviewed by the chair, a college-level RTP committee (at points of scheduled faculty review or for promotion). This is all part of standard professional academic practice. The self-study doesn't mention other sources of student feedback, but at the site visit, several faculty members indicated that they occasionally have used surveys to gauge student interest in possible future courses. Such Q&A also occurs informally, and at least some of the department's course offerings have been as a result of stated student interest. As observed in the previous section, this process of involving students in the curriculum has helped bring about a curriculum with both breadth and depth for the student experience.

Also as observed above, students have a variety of opportunities to engage with, through the department's activities, the university community more broadly and the local community as well. On the goal of helping students with the transition to professional life post-graduation, the department has held discussion sessions with students on professional opportunities relevant to their major programs. These connections can be elusive for students to see, and even for non-students, the direct application to professional life for philosophy and religious studies isn't as easy to see as in, say, engineering or marketing. But as the program student learning outcomes clearly state, studying philosophy and religion cultivates importantly broad skills in critical thinking, communication, and problem solving, and for both fields, cross-cultural awareness. The programs at UTC can be well-placed for the last item. At the site visit, we didn't discuss the sessions with students on their professional/vocational next steps. But the department should

continue those sessions and likely expand them. They've already made moves to different professionally-relevant tracks in their major programs. (Those tracks themselves also count as offering pre-professional experience for students.) Helping students see even more what those professionally-relevant features are should be a next step, together with helping students be able to articulate those features to others.

Finally, students have access to support services commensurate with institutions on a peer level with UTC. A Writing Center is available to assist with written work. The library has ample resources and instruction available for student research. Students do use those resources, but to what extent they do may be at least partly a function of the courses they're in. They might have a course where research and library instruction are required. Other courses might have less research per se and far more on textual analysis and argument pertaining to course texts already assigned. The department might agree to have more activity on the research end. But on the other hand, it might not be necessary at the undergraduate level to do more. Students already present their papers somewhat formally at university sessions (which is excellent, and not commonly seen at institutions of my experience). Perhaps the level of student research and the support services to assist it are already at a high-enough level.

4) Faculty

All 10 of the current full-time faculty (tenured, tenure-track, visiting, and lecturers) hold PhD's in their relevant fields of expertise. This exceeds the SACS minimums for credentials. When the department has needed part-time faculty, those individuals have held a MA or PhD. Both tenure-track faculty and lecturers alike have exemplary scholarly activity for an institution like UTC. All regularly publish articles and give scholarly presentations, and many have at least one book in their field. On teaching, they all contribute to the department's significant presence in fielding the university's general education requirements, and they all have offered upper-level courses in or related to their scholarly specializations. Most department members also have diverse scholarly interests on which they've been productive (e.g., environmental philosophy and Asian philosophy, epistemology and philosophy of religion, Judaism and medieval history of religion). Not every department succeeds in leveraging their scholarly expertise into their undergraduate course offerings. This department has done so, to the benefit of the students in their classes and programs.

The students appear to appreciate the teaching expertise and commitment of the department's faculty. The self-study gives summaries of teaching evaluations from students as compared with those for the College of Arts and Sciences and for the University as a whole. Philosophy and Religion's faculty uniformly receives strong evaluations, and slightly above that of the college and university as a whole. Another indicator is that the department's general education courses always fill, and their upper-level courses in nearly every case either fill or at least make the enrollment necessary to field the course.

On service, the department's faculty serve on committees where needed, and all appear to contribute to department service in activities such as assessment and faculty searches. All (or nearly all) participated actively in the departmental review of which this report is a part. I believe I met at least once with every department member other than one who was out of town. They also all contributed to the self-study document.

While the department's faculty are strong on scholarship, teaching, and service, as a group they have several needs in order to maintain their strong position. The first involves the faculty search that at this writing is ongoing (and hopefully near completion). That was to replace a philosopher who left for another institution, and whose expertise and teaching capacity is essential to replace. Faculty searches can be difficult and sometimes they fail. They fail not necessarily from the department being unable to agree, but from candidates taking positions elsewhere. For any replacement hire this department needs to make, they need the assurances that the search will run again if it fails. The department is somewhat small as it is. They would find it very challenging to continue their variety of learning opportunities for students if they're short.

Another need is improved faculty compensation. This is more difficult for those at the administrative level to provide, admittedly, but as is the case at comparable institutions, the base salary rate (and starting base rate, for both lecturers and assistant professors) appears to lag behind other universities. The university could do an analysis across academic departments and staff units as well to examine this. There is the basic argument of commensurability, of course, but for purposes of this departmental review, the issue relates also to successful faculty searches. One such search is underway. Others will occur in the future with faculty retirements. If searches consistently see their finalists turn down offers in favor of better remuneration elsewhere, that makes UTC's position challenging.

Another salary-related need that faculty voiced is to address salary compression. This too is a challenge for administrators to provide. But again this should be studied, reported on, and with precise recommendations made. A committee of the faculty senate is the natural body to undertake this. If these salary-related issues (for both faculty and staff) are already being addressed, then readers can note that the issues came up in the context of the department review. It is relevant to attracting, retaining, and fairly compensating those who are doing exemplary work in all areas of which they are charged.

There is one more issue of remuneration or resources relevant to faculty needs, and this is more specific to the department. Several faculty members mentioned that in the somewhat near future, one faculty member holding the Chair of Judaic Studies will retire. There were questions and concerns as to whether that Chair would remain in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. The answer likely lies in the statement of the Chair's definition, to be interpreted by administrators in philanthropy, the university's leadership, and in Arts and Sciences. Dr. Resnick has used the Chair for great good, both for scholarship and for teaching, and the department surely would continue to do so if it were to stay in their possession.

Two final items of note involve the department's bylaws, and the general recommendation here is simply to revisit them as a department. The first concerns faculty obligations and expectations. For lecturers, there was a question of perhaps clarifying the expectations (or at least a role) for scholarship. The wording in the department's bylaws (§VIII, pp. 10-12) for the ranks of lecturer, associate lecturer, and senior lecturer appear to define the lecturer position as having only teaching obligations. The Arts and Sciences bylaws (§V.D, p. 17) says the same: "Ordinarily, our non-tenure track colleagues are not expected to engage in research, scholarly productivity, or creative activity." Yet the University's Faculty Handbook says (§4.7.1) for non-tenure track 'Teaching Appointments' that "disciplinary scholarship...may be added to the terms of employment as outlined by the hiring college or department." And the department's bylaws (p. 11) tell us that for attaining the rank of distinguished lecturer, that "the service and publication records of candidates will also be considered."

It is possible that this reviewer overlooked some further nuance here, but I mention it all only to say that lecturers could surely use some more clarification as to their expectations and for what 'counts' as they move through the different lecturer ranks (and are evaluated along the way, whether yearly or not). I do find the passages above to be consistent. I read it (again, possibly incorrectly) as saying that lecturers aren't required to do scholarship, it can't be held against them if they don't, but they're welcome to conduct scholarship as they wish. But if they wish ultimately to be promoted to distinguished lecturer, research should be conducted along their path to that rank. Whatever the right and precise policy is here, lecturers of all ranks in the department could surely benefit from the bylaws spelling that policy out in more detail.

Also on the question of faculty expectations, one question got raised for tenured and tenure-track faculty as to how teaching activities outside of normal courseload ought to 'count'. For such instruction as involves theses and independent studies, it seems such instruction isn't part of the normal load. It may be rewarded as being among the activities demonstrating teaching excellence (e.g., the lists in the department bylaws, p. 9; and the college bylaws, §VI, p. 19). But it is effectively a teaching overload. As a matter of something to explore, most likely at the college level, might there be remuneration to be had of some kind for such extra teaching, teaching that doesn't necessarily fall evenly across all faculty members? Financial compensation is one option, and another is some kind of 'banking' system to either adjust class sizes or award a course release later. This kind of initiative runs far beyond the department's purview, but the issue of equitable teaching load is one to consider.

The last concern raised by faculty involved voting rights for lecturers. At present, lecturers of all ranks are disenfranchised. They are consulted on department matters, but they don't vote. This is the department's choice as outlined by the university handbook and the college's bylaws. The department might revisit the issue and the arguments involved. Two arguments present themselves for at least revisiting the question: (1) It seems that Philosophy and Religious Studies is one of a small number of outliers in Arts and Sciences that disenfranchise lecturers, and (2) if, as seems plain from the site visit, that lecturers are valued members of the department, have the

same academic credentials as their tenure-track colleagues, conduct scholarship on their own, and teach courses to both majors and for general education, and are already consulted anyway on department business, then it is hard to see why they wouldn't formally vote. Voting might not be universal in the sense of being on all the same questions as their tenured colleagues. Lecturers presumably wouldn't vote on a colleague's promotion to full professor. But their vote seems highly relevant and well informed on broad curricular matters, lecturer hires, and lecturer promotions at or below their own rank. There is room for nuanced enfranchisement here.

To sum up this section, for purposes of the external review, the department's faculty have exemplary credentials, teaching records, and scholarly expertise. They have diverse interests that come together to deliver an exemplary student experience. They face some challenges though on which the university's governance higher up could help. Those include challenges all faculty and staff face, on salary and compression. Unique to the department though, they could address some further issues to make their community even stronger. Equity in handling some nuanced types of instruction is one, and broader enfranchisement is another.

5) Learning resources

The department has excellent facilities and equipment to do its teaching and scholarly work well. The department's offices are all together in a newly renovated building. Classrooms all have contemporary technology and faculty have access to technology for flexible instruction (a positive holdover from the pandemic). A system is in place from the university to replace faculty computers within the equipment's effective lifespan.

Library support is excellent. Regional and satellite institutions don't have massive print holdings, but the current world of library support offers in many ways far better access to larger holdings electronically. Faculty have easy access to journals and electronic books to support research and teaching, and the library's representatives are very responsive to finding texts not immediately accessible. The department also benefits from having a library liaison with an MA in Philosophy. The liaison and other library staff offer quality support for student research, and some department faculty make use of this service for student projects in their classes. Finally, the physical space in the library itself is newly constructed, with all of the facilities, study spaces, etc. a modern university needs for maximizing learning.

The university provides two other resources devoted to student learning, one for instruction and one for writing. Many universities have a center for teaching and learning, and the Walker Center is similar to what one finds elsewhere. In addition to offering sessions on pedagogy and instructional technology, the Center awards grants that several Philosophy and Religion faculty have received. This is evidence not just that the department makes use of the Center, but is also doing better work than others at innovative pedagogy.

The last learning resource of note is the Writing and Communication Center. Again, most universities offer such dedicated support. To have it available is both pedagogically sound and

surely helps with more universal challenges like student retention. The department and the department's students make use of the Center's services, as the self-study notes.

6) Support

One of the most significant improvements for the department since the last program review (in 2020) is for the department to regain its independence. Departmental autonomy is an important good, as granting it signals institutional support and confidence, philosophy and religious studies have their own unique challenges and needs, and the content and pedagogy of the department's courses are sufficiently similar. More importantly though, autonomy itself tends to breed more excellence than when one has less self-governance. To borrow from the language of contemporary psychology's self-determination theory, if one wants to maximize motivation to excel at one's duties, and for the sake of the intrinsic goods performing those duties entails, then create the conditions to maximize autonomy, competence, and community. The department demonstrates exceptional competence in both its scholarship and its pedagogy. They have good community in their own group interactions. They support each other. They had these qualities when they were merged with another department. (The 2020 program review affirms this.) The department's faculty appear to do even better at their duties when they do so under their own autonomous control.

As for other assistance, the department has an admirably capable administrative assistant, confirmed by faculty comments and by my own experience with the site visit. Though the admin is shared with another department, by all accounts the department has its administrative needs met. Funding for student assistants also is of great help.

The department's budget appears to be adequate for its normal operations. Salary issues were discussed in §4 above.

The department's programs have enrollments and numbers of graduates commensurate with national historical averages for a university of UTC's size. Philosophy and Religious Studies programs are typically small. In the case of UTC's programs, while the programs are relatively small (compared to others in Arts and Sciences), the total numbers in the major programs are sustainable. Enrollments are full or nearly so in the varied spread of upper-level classes the department's faculty offer. Enrollments in general education courses are very strong as well, with the net result being strong levels of credit hour production relative to faculty.

As for the department's support for the local, regional, and national communities, the department's programs balance the traditional sorts of goals of philosophy and religious studies (critical thinking, communication, cultural awareness and understanding) with community-oriented goals like community engagement. UTC has committed itself to serve the community in which it operates. The Department of Philosophy and Religion helps fulfill this purpose with community connections in its classes (e.g., with some courses having service learning components); internships for students with local, regional, and national organizations; and finally

with its new curriculum tracks. The tracks for philosophy in health care and law address needs common at all community levels, and the track for religious studies and business (once fully approved) will do the same.

Summing up and final remarks

I'll close with a summary paraphrased from my exit interview from the site visit. I reported five great strengths of UTC's Department of Philosophy and Religion, and I offered five challenges, or possibilities for improving further, or at least common concerns raised by department members. The lists are in no particular order of significance.

Strengths:

1. While philosophy and religious studies are distinct fields, the UTC department has intertwined interests across the two fields. For both scholarly interest and courses taught, there's successful overlap, and not all combined departments share this feature.
2. The department's scholarly and pedagogical interests are more diverse than is common. This benefits students in that they get broad coverage of philosophy and religious studies, while they also have opportunities for more precise, deeper investigations in their courses into areas not commonly appearing in curricula elsewhere.
3. The courses the department fields are of high quality and oftentimes with innovative features. The department's faculty are uniformly strong in their pedagogy, and they seek to improve their craft where possible.
4. The university supports the innovation possible at the department level. Administration from the provost's level and the college level both appear to grant genuine freedom to try new things in education. This goes for both course content (witness the variety of different courses the department has offered) and for innovation within classes (e.g., for community engagement and service learning).
5. The department's scholarly profile is strong for a university of UTC's type. Regular research output is present from all department members, for both lecturers and tenured faculty. This not only boosts the department's profile, but that of the university as well, and the department's faculty leverage their scholarly expertise into their courses successfully.

Suggested areas of challenge or improvement (or simply of departmental concern):

1. Faculty compensation seems to be an issue not just in the department, but in the university more widely. To hire new faculty, whether as a replacement hire or not, candidates need to find the starting salary attractive compared to other universities. Typically, top candidates on the academic job market receive multiple offers, and mid-sized public comprehensive universities like UTC can wind up with grave challenges in

hiring their top choices. Salary compression is another issue the department would like to see the university move toward addressing.

2. For replacement hires (of which the department is currently conducting one), the department needs strong assurances that in the event the search fails (or others in the future), the search can be run again. In a small department, ongoing faculty vacancies put programs in a tight spot for serving students.
3. The financial compensation for the department's two endowed chairs could use improving. Without such adjustments, an endowed chair can do less over time. The department also has great interest in holding the chairs they currently hold. Losing one to another department would eliminate needed research support, support the department's faculty have used very effectively.
4. As is true at universities everywhere and of all types, the department has concerns over ramifications from potentially eliminating university commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. At the time of this writing, the state has not made determinations on this issue as yet. But concerns for department faculty and colleagues in other departments are certainly felt.
5. With respect to lecturers, two concerns were commonly voiced (and not necessarily by lecturers themselves). First, the department does not allow lecturers voting rights on departmental business. If lecturers' expertise and teaching experience are valued, as the department affirms, enfranchisement seems warranted at least for a broad set of agenda items. Second, the expectations for lecturers could be made more precise, both with respect to what 'counts' for evaluation and with respect to what the obligations are beyond teaching. The department's bylaws could be revised and expanded to address this fairly easily.

I thank the Department of Philosophy and Religion, as well as representatives from the provost's office and the College of Arts and Sciences, for their hospitality and support for the review. I'm happy to answer further questions if so desired.

Respectfully submitted,

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