Department of Religious Studies
Graduate Degree Program Strategic Assessment
15 September 2009

Mission: Established in 1927, the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Iowa was the first of its kind at a public university. From the beginning, the department has been dedicated to the academic study of religious values and undertakings as expressed by individuals and communities through actions, rituals, ideas, texts, images, myths and institutions both past and present. The graduate program provides opportunities for students to pursue advanced studies in areas that are supported by faculty expertise. The department currently offers a Ph.D. program with three areas of concentration: Modern Religious Thought, Historical Religious Traditions, and Religion and Culture in Asia. The department also offers a highly flexible M.A. that may be taken with or without thesis.

Admission Processes and Criteria:

- Student demand and recruitment: Over the past several years, the department has refined its admissions policies. We are committed to admitting only those Ph.D. students to whom we can offer funding. The faculty believes that we need to marshal our resources and focus our energies. Based on experience, however, we realize that some students will decline our offer of funding. Therefore, we also admit several students without funding who, should any of our first choices decline, will be in line for funding.

For Fall 2009, the department had 25 applicants for the Ph.D. Of them, the faculty admitted 3, all of whom chose to enroll. During this same period, we had 11 applicants for the M.A. We admitted 7, of whom 3 enrolled. The current total is 28 Ph.D. students (in Fall 2008, we had 29) and 7 M.A. students (in Fall 2008, we had 9). Of the applicants for Fall Semester 2009, 3 persons (2 Ph.D. and 1 M.A.) had GRE scores of 1400 or higher. Four other applicants (3 for the Ph.D. and 1 for the M.A.) had GRE scores between 1300 and 1399. In all, nearly 20% of the applicants had GRE scores above 1300. Our ongoing strategy is to have better students by being more selective.

- Criteria for selection: Admission to the graduate program is based on several related factors. In making its decision, the faculty considers GRE scores, undergraduate training (and the success attached thereto), the applicant’s statement of purpose, a writing sample, and letters of recommendation from scholars in the field.

- Success in enrolling the highest quality students admitted: Success in attracting the very best applicants to Iowa depends largely on our ability to offer attractive financial aid packages. We are also aware that applicants’ decisions can be dictated by personal circumstances over which the department has no control. Typically, we have been able to attract 80% of our top choices.

- Success in enrolling a diverse student cohort: The department much as others across campus continually seeks to attract a more diverse group of graduate students. The increasingly diverse interests of our faculty with colleagues in Islamic, African American, and Native American religious traditions, has begun to attract graduate students from ever more diverse backgrounds. For the Fall Semester 2009, 1 African American student, 1 Latina student and 2 Asian students are enrolled. The department currently has 3 foreign students. Finally, the department has 17 female and 18 male graduate students.

- Financial aid commitments: We seek to provide funding for the Ph.D. candidates in the form of a Presidential Fellowship or a Teaching Assistantship. Each year, we offer at least 3 applicants a ¼ TA and, in each case, provide supplemental funds to cover tuition costs. We do not make a commitment beyond the first year. Yet assuming normal progress toward degree and the availability of support from the Graduate College and CLAS, we renew the TA awards (½ after the first year) annually for a maximum of 5 years. Over the past several years, we have been able to offer Presidential Fellowships to 4 applicants. Unfortunately, because they are among the best candidates in the country, they have had more attractive financial aid packages from institutions such as Chicago and Princeton. The department does not offer funding to M.A. applicants.

Program Outcomes:

- Degree completion and time-to-degree: The DEO and DGS have been working diligently to increase degree completion rates and reduce the time-to-degree. M.A. students typically complete the program in about two years, a time frame that is not problematic. Yet like other programs in the Humanities, some Ph.D. students have
taken very long to finish. We have sought to reduce significantly the number of years that graduate students take to
to complete the Ph.D. Faculty have been stricter in imposing deadlines; the department has been less inclined to ask the
Graduate College for extensions; weaker students have been encouraged to withdraw from the program; and better,
more disciplined students are being admitted. On the other hand, several of our students, particularly those in Asian
religious traditions, face a structural hurdle in that they must master the requisite, often difficult languages before
they can begin their research and writing. The requirement can lengthen the time to completion of degree. Progress
has been made and we fully expect further improvement over the next several years.

- Graduate student fellowships, awards, honors, and publications: Graduate students in Religious Studies
have been increasingly successful in competing for fellowships and disciplinary recognition. For the academic year
2009, these honors include the following.

**University of Iowa fellowships:** We currently have two students who hold Ballard-Seashore Dissertation
Fellowships; one of these students also received a Marcus Bach Award and a Graduate College Summer Fellowship,
both of which he declined. Two alumni held Ballard-Seashore Dissertation Fellowships the previous year (2008-09).
Two students garnered T. Anne Cleary International Dissertation Research Fellowships. Two students were awarded
Stanley grants. A student received a grant from UI International Programs. A student received the J. P. Aiken Award
for Research in the Newberry Library.

During the five years beginning in 2004, the department’s Ph.D. applicants were offered 4 Presidential Fellowships
and 2 Dean’s Graduate Fellowships. During the same time frame, enrolled Ph.D. students were offered 4 Graduate
College Summer Fellowships. Four students were offered Ballard Seashore Fellowships for the three-year period
2006-08.

**Extramural fellowships:** This year, one student won a prestigious research fellowship at the Institut für
Europäische Geschichte in Mainz (Germany) (a Spring 2009 Ph.D. graduate held a similar fellowship last year); a
student received a Theological Study Grant from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (for the second year);
another held a U.S. State Department Critical Language Scholarship to study Hindi at the American Institute of
Indian Studies; a student received a Historical Society of the Episcopal Church Research Grant and was admitted
with full financial support to the Mellon Institute in English Paleography at the Folger Shakespeare Library (D.C.); a
student was awarded a travel grant by the American Academy of Religion.

Publications: During the past 2 years, graduate students have published 5 journal articles; 2 book chapters; 3
encyclopedia entries; and 8 book reviews. They also gave 35 papers at scholarly conferences. In short, our students
are active and engaged.

- Graduate student placements: Placement for our Ph.D. students focuses on teaching positions in institutions
of higher education. In spite of the current downturn in the economy, a substantial number of our graduates found
employment in 2009. Two secured full-time tenure-track positions at the University of Arizona and Texas Christian
University respectively. Two others who had temporary positions found tenure-track jobs at James Madison
University and the University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh. Three 2009 degree recipients have adjunct instructorships at
the University of Northern Iowa and Coe College, Rutgers, and Hawkeye Community College. Finally, one 2009
graduate found employment as an archivist with the Brethren Historical Library and Archives in Elgin, Illinois.

For the previous five-year period 2003-08, the department placed 20.5 students in college or university teaching
positions of which 15 were tenure-track; 2 went into academic administration; and 1 took a post-doctoral fellowship.

Placement for M.A. students can often mean acceptance into graduate studies at another university. Thus, this year
two of our M.A. students went on to Ph.D. studies elsewhere, one at Indiana University, another at UC – Riverside.

**Program Characteristics:**

- Appropriate size of the graduate program: The department currently has 10.75 faculty FTEs. The faculty
groupings into three subspecialties – Modern Religious Thought, Historical Religious Traditions, and Religion and
Culture in Asia – are not entirely even and do not always precisely mirror graduate applicant interest. We currently
have 4 FTEs in Modern Religious Thought, 3.25 FTEs in Historical Religious Traditions, and 2.5 FTEs in Religion
and Culture in Asia. One additional colleague, Jay Holstein, has a limited role in the graduate program. He holds the
J.J. Mallon Teaching Chair in Judaic Studies and concentrates his efforts on undergraduate instruction. We have 28 Ph.D. students enrolled for Fall 2009. The average is approximately 3 Ph.D. students for each faculty member. We believe that this is appropriate and would expect to maintain a level of about 30 Ph.D. students.

The 7 M.A. students currently enrolled are slightly fewer than we have had in past years, but the number is, nonetheless, appropriate. Having 10 or so M.A. students – roughly one for every faculty member – meets student interests and does not burden the faculty.

- **Program comparison with other similar programs:** Religious studies departments follow no particular model and vary widely across North America. The departments at Indiana University, UC – Santa Barbara and Florida State University, for example, have more than twice as many faculty members as ours at Iowa and, accordingly, cover a broader range of subspecialties. Still, our faculty members are without exception prominent in the field; they publish with leading presses and in premier journals. They hold and have held important leadership positions in the principal national and international scholarly organizations, and are regularly invited to speak at the foremost national and international conferences in their respective subfields.

Religious studies departments are notoriously difficult to rank. Comparison of theology and divinity schools with programs in public non-sectarian institutions is not an easy task. In addition, few agencies are eager to evaluate “religion” and its study. In the most recent, but obviously dated 1995 ranking of Religious Studies and Theology undertaken by the National Research Council, our department was listed as 25th in the nation. Yet like every department, it could be strengthened with additional faculty and greater resources.

- **Analysis of the current strengths and weaknesses of the graduate degree program:** The areas of strength include 1) religious ethics and human rights, 2) religious minorities in America, and 3) early modern European Christianity. In each case, we have two or three faculty members working together in mentoring graduate students and strengthening the department’s national reputation.

We seek to enhance our standing in each of our three subareas: 1) Asian religious traditions would benefit from the addition of a specialist in modern south Asian religious traditions; 2) modern religious thought lacks a specialist in Catholic religious thought; and 3) historical religious traditions lacks a specialist in early American religion.

- **Opportunities for potential growth:** The opportunities for growth and even reorganization of Religious Studies at Iowa are several. Firstly, an increased interest in Arabic and Muslim culture offers an unparalleled opportunity for the department to develop a more extensive program in Islamic studies. It is not an insignificant item on the national agenda and increasing numbers of graduate students regularly inquire about pursuing Islamic studies at Iowa. Secondly, an expanded program in religious ethics with an emphasis on human rights and bioethics would complement discussions and developments across the campus and the nation, while simultaneously responding to student interests. Finally, we would like to strengthen and develop further those aspects of our program that explore gender issues in religion as well as the place and role of religious minorities.

- **Other factors:** The Department of Religious Studies has had a number of retirements and departures in the past five years. These developments present an opportunity to rethink what we seek to accomplish and how we might best go about it. At the same time, we need sustained support from the Graduate College, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and the Office of the Provost in order to attain our goals.

**Conclusions:** The graduate program in Religious Studies continues to gain momentum and improve. An aggressive recruiting effort has resulted in an increase in the number of high quality applicants. Enhanced faculty visibility in the profession and better placement of doctoral students has also contributed to a better applicant pool. The faculty’s decision to concentrate resources on fewer, yet superior students has boosted the program. We have made and continue to make a determined effort to reduce the average time to completion of degree through more robust mentoring, greater initial concentration of financial support, and encouragement of students to seek funding from the Graduate College as well as outside sources. Our endeavors thus far have been successful as measured by the fellowships and publications of our current graduate students as well as by the placement of those who have recently finished their degree programs. The Ph.D. program has been substantially strengthened over the past five years. Finally, we are wholly prepared, with proper support from the university, to examine and assess the department and its graduate program with an eye toward realizing its full potential.