

**Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion**  
**One-Page Summary, Grant for Undergraduate Departments of Religion & Theology – 2015-17**  
**“Religious Studies is Relevant: Pedagogies of Engagement within and across Disciplines”**  
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**Presenting Questions.**

The pedagogical issue our department aimed to address through this grant concerned how we teach undergraduates about religion in the environment afforded by our private liberal-arts college setting, as well as how the various stakeholders at our institution understand what Religious Studies is. The pedagogical issue we focused on is three-fold. First, we are concerned with helping our students understand and apply the important skills offered by Religious Studies, both within the undergraduate religion classroom and in the broader context of a liberal arts education. These skills extend beyond content mastery into such areas as critical reading and thinking, clarity of expression and rhetorical awareness orally and through writing, values identification, and civic awareness. In our particular institutional context, our students tend to think that studying religion primarily concerns expressing belief without critical engagement, that one must “be religious” to study religion, and/or that one must desire to work as a clergy person following graduation in order to participate in conversations about religion whilst in college. We consistently face the challenge of helping our students think historically, critically, and empathetically about religion, and to understand that the critical appraisal of religion as an enduring component of human experience is a central part of a liberal arts education. Second, we aimed to locate best pedagogical practices to help our students understand the contemporary relevance of the study of religion across the disciplines, especially in lower-level courses where we teach many non-majors. We attempted to locate strategies to enable students to understand how skills developed in religion courses, including intercultural understanding, historical and empathetic imagination, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary awareness, are transferable to other courses of study and to a life of engaged citizenship regardless of one’s major. While some of our courses already reflected these characteristics, with this grant we aimed to foster sustained conversation and increased consistency throughout our program, particularly in our lower-level courses. Third, and importantly, we sought to foster sustained conversation among our colleagues and other stakeholders across campus about what and how we teach in Religious Studies, as well as how our disciplinary courses are aligned with the broader foci in our liberal arts curriculum.

**Brief Description of What We Did.**

In order to better integrate Religious Studies into the intellectual ecosystem at our small, PC(USA)-affiliated liberal arts college institution, we a) conducted independent research in pedagogy and the study of religion, and revised our lower-level classes so as to more directly address the significance of understanding religion whether or not one is a major or intends to work in the field; 2) hosted community workshops whose purpose is to educate our faculty and administrative colleagues about our Religious Studies classrooms in a hospitable setting; and 3) begun overhauling our publicity materials to provide engaging information about Religious Studies and the transferable skills we teach through our field.

**What We Learned.**

In our estimation, a major indicator that we needed to address our questions directly is the reality that our own narrative about what Religious Studies is, and how it functions at Eckerd College and beyond, does not quite match the narrative about us among students, faculty, and other parties. Similarly, our own understanding of what we study and teach as scholars and liberal arts professors does not match the common view of what religion is on our campus. Aside from persistent presumptions about what we do, the reality that we are a small department in terms of numbers of majors is an issue that is narrated as carrying much weight in our context. We will need to continue to reflect on how to best harness and control our own narrative. How we can relate the specificity of our situation—which includes the reality that students are afraid to take religion courses, not allowed by parents to study religion, or mentored away from religion courses by our faculty colleagues—to the narrative about us is a question we will need to address further. As a department, we are for the most part on the same page about some issues such as the need to help our students understand what the study of religion does, and that we need to deploy pedagogical strategies in our courses to help with that. We also want to reflect further on what we lose, or what fades into the background, when we front the kinds of pedagogical shifts that we did in this project. Through processing what we were doing, it does appear we became more aware of important fault-lines in the field that correspond to current debates in the wider social landscape at this particular historical moment. This project exposed for us the range of difficulties that interdisciplinary teaching and learning poses. From what we learned in conversation with our students over the last year, apparently the study of religion is both too irrelevant, in that it will not help anyone get jobs and no one is religious anyway, and too powerful, in that it will destroy everything religious that our college students hold dear. Certain presuppositions about what religion is and how much of the study of religion is about personal synthesis, institutional religious commitment, and theological exploration—not to mention the belief that religion is not relevant to, or even is antithetical to, other disciplinary courses and/or modes of inquiry—have continued to predominate much discussion of our teaching practices among students and colleagues outside our discipline.