

Wabash Departmental Grant Summary

“Toward a Dynamic Model of Religious Studies Senior Capstone”

Hendrix College

November 2017

1) Presenting Question and Focus

The goal of our departmental grant has been to develop a new capstone course that serves as both a culminating experience for the major and also as preparation for life after college. This grant project was motivated by the sense among our department members and our students that our previous model of a mandatory thesis did not effectively meet the needs of faculty and students. In particular, we aimed to address a number of problems that we identified as part of our presenting condition. These included: a lack of clear connection between the learning goals for the senior capstone experience and those of the department; uncertainty among our students about the relationship of the senior thesis to the rest of the major; inadequate preparation among many students both in terms of coursework and skill development required to produce a high-quality thesis; a demanding workload for department faculty under the old model, many of whom effectively supervised multiple independent studies without receiving course credit; and a lack of clarity as to how the senior thesis related to life after college, especially for those students who were not headed to graduate school. We additionally surmised that the prior model may have been a barrier to students who chose to minor rather than double-major in religious studies so as not to write to senior theses in multiple departments. Finally, we hoped that our efforts might contribute to better institutional perspective on how to support interdisciplinary projects involving more than one department. In proposing the grant project, we aimed to develop a capstone flexible enough to allow for a great deal of student input, substantial enough to serve as a culmination of each student's work in the major, and practical enough to prepare our students for success on the job market and in the transition to careers or graduate school.

2) Activities to Date

At this point, much of the work of the grant has been accomplished, and our department feels that it has been as successful as we could have hoped. Specific grant activities included: 1) an alumni survey seeking feedback from graduates about their experiences with prior capstone models, including the thesis; 2) an initial departmental consultation with Gene Gallagher; 3) a campus-wide consultation on senior capstone models for which we invited three presenters; 4) a summer design phase involving a departmental retreat and course development work. On the basis of these activities, we agreed that our new model would integrate three elements represented in the work of our consultants: (1) an intellectual autobiography asking students to reflect on their learning in the major; (2) a project designed on the basis of students' intellectual interests with implications for their life beyond Hendrix; and (3) a process of translating religious studies experiences into language appropriate for a résumé and for interviews with employers. We then successfully re-articulated our department learning goals and developed a new syllabus for our Senior Colloquium course. We implemented a revised version of our theory and methods course taught in the fall of 2016, followed by a first iteration of the new capstone course in the spring of 2017. On the whole, we are very encouraged about the changes that we made and the

results they produced. On the basis of a departmental assessment retreat, we amended our course schedule to make the capstone a fall-semester course, and recommended some further refinements of the course design. The course is currently being offered a second time and we look forward to collectively assessing its outcomes in December and the overall effect of the grant on our department more broadly next spring.

3) Reflections

Within the department, the activities of the grant have been enormously successful. We revised our major three years ago, and since that time we have known that we would need to re-envision our capstone project. As a result, the department was ready for this project and grateful to have grant funding to accomplish it. In the past our department has had vexed conversations about the capstone, with little consensus about either the goals or the proper format for the course. As a result, we were expecting to have difficult conversations about where we are headed. However, we achieved a surprising degree of consensus from the very first consultation with Gene Gallagher and have continued to find ourselves with a common vision as we accomplish the goals of the grant. While project outcomes and student performance varied with the first group last spring, we currently find growing understanding of and enthusiasm for the goals and possibilities provided by the new capstone model among students. On the whole, both students and faculty are optimistic that the changes we have made have significantly improved our initial, presenting condition, and we look forward to making further refinements on the basis of what we learn this year.