

Revising the Core: Religious Studies 101-102 in the Rhodes College Curriculum

Presenting Question

How might we redesign the Religious Studies 101-102 sequence, which centers on the study of the biblical texts and interpretations, so that our first-year students learn to grapple more explicitly with contemporary questions of meaning and value?

Project Activities

Sustained reflection on our work was a central component of this grant. Our grant work started with structured conversations over the fall 2015 semester that were informative and generative; these conversations were embedded into the pre-existing structure of our monthly department meetings. By reviewing and mapping current structures and practices in Religious Studies 101-102, we were then prepared for further conversations with invited colleagues in the spring 2016 semester about how these courses intersect with other areas of the college curriculum. We also discussed the results of the work of a student research assistant who analyzed institutional data (from the senior exit surveys for the past eight years) and compared curricula at other institutions in our consortium (ACS, Associated Colleges of the South). These opportunities for ongoing conversation about our grant work over the course of the academic year focused our annual departmental workshop in May 2016 on vetting ideas and preliminary proposals about a revised sequence. Our time together was very productive: we articulated a set of expectations, standards, and learning goals for a revised model for Religious Studies 101-102 and outlined the course development that then occurred over the summer months.

We repeated part of this process at the commencement of the 2016-17 academic year. Faculty members' presentations in department meetings remained an ideal forum for vetting draft syllabi and for sharing concrete examples of how we might teach a specific reading in order to highlight content and pedagogy in the new course. Once this was completed, early in the spring 2017 semester, we turned to the preparation, vetting and final approval of course descriptions, catalogue language, new student orientation information, and course registration materials. In our annual departmental workshop in May 2017, we had a strong discussion about the grant work and its products; we reflected again on the grant activities and considered how our work might open into revision of the Religious Studies major. When we decided to incorporate the process of vetting new or significantly revised Religious Studies 101-102 course syllabi as a standing element of department work (and monthly meetings), another benefit of our grant work became clear: faculty members now envision curriculum reform and revision as a relevant part of our collective department identity. Over the summer months, faculty members finalized work on course development; final versions of syllabi were submitted with a final assessment of the summer work by August 1. Anything not yet vetted was presented in the August and September 2017 department meetings.

The fall 2015 work undertaken in preparation for the formal grant work to begin in January 2016 was important to the overall success of this grant project. Planning conversations within the department and with administrators produced a stronger grant structure and clarity in the design of activities and assessment. As a result, the presenting question was the guidepost for the entire grant period. The impact of thoughtful planning was apparent especially in those moments during the grant period when department members were accommodated due to sabbatical leaves and when new department members were incorporated into the grant project. We decided that all department members would continue to participate in the grant over the entire period to the extent that they were able; as a result, department members who were on sabbatical vetted syllabi when they were in town or with the use of electronic media. New faculty brought into the grant work benefitted by the materials prepared by veteran department members and by the reports of activities and meetings generated over the course of the grant period; sharing documents and exchanging ideas brought new members into the grant work at a similar point in the process as we were all working on constructing course syllabi at some stage. As well, veteran members volunteered to assist new faculty in the development of syllabi which further strengthened the collaborative nature of the course revision process. The grant served, in some sense, as a binding element for all department members during this period and the required ongoing participation kept morale for the grant high.

Learning Abstract

Our department undertook curricular revision to improve teaching and learning in our Religious Studies 101-102 courses, one of two first-year sequences required for incoming students at our institution. Over the course of the grant period, we engaged in a process of critical reflection about how we teach these courses; we learned more about how these courses might intersect with other areas of the college curriculum; we articulated a set of expectations, standards, and learning goals for a revised course sequence; and we developed courses for a revised sequence. These courses are foundational and central to the strength of our liberal arts curriculum. They are relevant sites for engaging issues of identity and difference, inclusivity and diversity. Our revised Religious Studies 101-102 sequence seeks to better serve our curriculum, pedagogical aims, and institutional mission.