

Fostering Religious Understanding in Going Global First Year Seminar Courses Shenandoah University

Presenting Question

Students are not required to take religion courses at Shenandoah University, yet the school emphasizes that students gain proficiency in global awareness, including religious understanding. This proficiency is assessed as an outcome of the First Year Seminar Going Global program, an assessment in which students have demonstrated improvement in every aspect of global competencies with the exception of religious understanding. In response, the goals of this project were to prepare faculty to infuse religious literacy into their First Year Seminar courses and that, as a result of this infusion, students will become more religiously literate. More broadly, we wanted to consider whether religion could be positioned as a pivot discipline between STEM, Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Professions at Shenandoah University.

Activities

To begin, the Religion Program had a series of conversations about the role of the department at the institution and the relationship between the Religion Program and Spiritual Life. These conversations resulted in a clarification of the relationship between the Religion curriculum and the Faith Seeking Justice curriculum. Next, the process of conversation with faculty outside of the department began primarily with interested faculty in related humanities and social sciences fields. With these faculty, we formed a group of four linked seminar classes to be taught during Spring 2016 that were an extension of our First Year Seminar classes. In January 2016, we conducted a two-day workshop for the faculty with the goal of developing an eye for religious significance in cultural and historical productions that they could then apply to their own courses. Drawing on an existing model of common events in First Year Seminar, the courses then met together five times during the semester in order to explore develop what we called a toolbox for religious studies analysis that could be applied outside of the study of specific religious traditions. Drawing on the feedback from these initial activities, I prepared a workshop for faculty called "Teaching Your Non-Religion Class in a Religiously-Diverse World." In this 4-hour workshop, about 20 faculty members in a process of understanding connections between their specific course content and religion and developing assignments for students to better understand these connections. After the workshop, mini-grants were made available to faculty members to pilot these assignments in First Year Seminar courses during Fall 2016 and five mini-grants were awarded for projects to be completed during Fall 2016. As a final stage of the grant, we offered faculty development resources for a new certificate program in Religious Diversity and Leadership for the Professions.

Reflections

First Year Seminar courses seemed like a natural place to focus on improving the religious literacy of students because they were the only place on campus where the religious literacy of students was being assessed. But this excitement for integrating teaching about religion quickly spread from FYS and led to the development of a new program in which teaching about religion has been integrated into professional fields including the health professions, education, business, mass communication, and criminal justice. The College of Arts and Sciences just approved several similar programs modeled on the new Religious Diversity and Leadership for the Professions program (a program in Health Humanities, for example) so there's clearly excitement for the model. The challenges moving forward will be 1) maintaining the coherence of the program across different schools and 2) promoting the program in the midst of the new competing programs.