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Trinity University: "Capstone Creation and Curricular Mapping for the Religion Major"

Presenting Questions and Goals:

The Religion Department's presenting problem was our need for a senior capstone course with clearly defined and consistent learning objectives. In designing a capstone for the major we planned to enable a process of backward design to embed skills and learning activities into courses students take before the capstone, which is complicated by the fact that there is no one "direct" course through the major. Our main goal was to design a new capstone that will flow from the material in Reli 2400 (our sophomore major seminar), and to embed specific skills into our lower division courses, and possibly, upper division courses. We aspired to create a major that parallels the new Pathways curriculum and that best serves our majors regardless of their career paths.

What We Did:

We decided to hold three weekend workshops, on 2/5-2/6 2016, 10/7-10/8 2016, 2/3-2/4 2017 with the entire religion faculty off campus, facilitated by our outside consultant Gene Gallagher (Connecticut College). In our first workshop we drew up a list of tentative goals for the grant project overall and hashed out the structure of the Capstone. With that in mind, Chad Spigel (who will be teaching the first Capstone) was tasked with drawing up a syllabus by the next workshop. In the second workshop we revisited what we had completed in the first workshop and then laid out a long list of skills we hoped students met in our courses. We shortened the list to a workable list of skills that we wanted to embed into the curriculum and worked our way through the lower division courses to see what skills certain courses contained. In the final workshop we continued with the short list of skills and worked our way through the upper division courses, taking care to see what skills fit into the classes, identified courses that might need to be more intentional about the skills that are taught, and re-affirmed our vision for the Capstone as well as our commitment to Reli 2400. The Capstone will be taught for the first time in Fall 2018.

What We Learned:

Prior to the second workshop we compiled data on the path that different students took through the major. This helped us identify the major gateway classes in the major, but also showed it was near impossible to predict the order of the courses that a student would take through the major. This left us facing the issues of how one would map particular skills into a non-linear major in a way that students would still manage to complete the majority of the skills that we envisioned for them. As a department we were also confronted with how to create a Capstone that our majors could find useful and productive given the wide range of student skills and post-graduate plans, and also realized that staffing the Capstone would be more difficult than we initially envisioned because of faculty course loads. Finally, I think we were a little surprised to discover that many of the skills that we wished to embed in our courses were already there, but that we also had to think about how to draw them out in our courses in a more deliberate manner.