

FACULTY MEETING
May 18, 2016

MOTION

MOTION: The Committee on Educational Policies and Planning moves to approve the proposal, originating from the faculty of the Department of Philosophy and Religion, to establish two distinct departments: The Department of Philosophy and The Department of Religious Studies.

RATIONALE:

This proposal is based on enhancing student and faculty experience, administrative communication, efficiency and autonomy; hiring; evaluation of personnel; student and faculty perception; and institutional comparisons with similar colleges.

Since its inception, the Religious Studies Major has been housed in the Department of Philosophy and Religion. There is no disciplinary reason that the two programs should be housed in the same department. Indeed, the great majority of our peer and aspirant schools house the programs in separate departments. This choice makes disciplinary sense as the two areas of study overlap very little in terms of their objects and methods of study. While the co-habitation has been mostly amicable, it has also generated confusion among our students and (even senior) administration about the separate identities of each program. The conjoint structure has also made it difficult to recruit staff in either program, as scholars trained in one discipline are understandably reluctant to be evaluated by those trained in another. Recent external reviewers of the Religion Program emphasized and added to this point, writing that:

the current model of housing Religion and Philosophy under a single department is problematic. Every person we interviewed advocated an administrative split be accomplished as soon as possible. It is our sense that the current model accounts at least in part for difficulties in retaining tenure-track faculty hired for the Religion program in the joint department. The current model has also meant, in practice, since all department chairs have been appointments in Philosophy, that the Religion program has been overseen and managed by faculty without the training and understanding to guide it most effectively. Minimally, this means that the Religion program has not had the best advocates for its significance and value through official administrative channels. Establishing new structures of governance and rethought policies and procedures for evaluating untenured faculty are two vital components for a successful future.”

The members of each program concur with external reviewers and are unanimous in their belief that each program would benefit from being housed in its own department and that significant disadvantages would thereby be overcome.

For the past year, we have been meeting separately and this has already enhanced both faculty and student experience by allowing us to arrive efficiently at decisions without getting bogged down in questions of equity. For example, operating autonomously with regard to department programming allowed both Philosophy and Religion to run their own series of brown-bag faculty lectures and to launch their own student-led SGA club. With minimal outlay of time, effort and funding for refreshments, these two initiatives have fostered community and stimulated excellent intellectual engagement outside the classroom. If we were still trying to share a lecture series, we would still be arguing about which wing of the program got more speakers, and whether X- topic would likely appeal to the students or faculty from the other wing. If our proposal to establish two distinct departments is accepted, we expect that this capacity to come to decisions that enhance the

experience of both faculty and students will extend to every other aspect of our operations, especially in the hiring and evaluation of new faculty, which has long-lasting effects not only on our individual programs, but on Skidmore as a whole. Further, the budget structure of the department means that the Religion director must always ask the Chairperson for funding for initiatives. This is an administrative hassle but it also forces the chairperson to make decisions about the worthiness of initiatives but without the disciplinary and program knowledge requisite for successful deliberation. Fairness to each program is difficult to guarantee in such a situation.

Resource Implications and Personnel

Splitting the department into two distinct and autonomous departments should have no substantial resource implications. Our offices will remain in the same location, on the second floor of Ladd, and we will continue to share an Administrative Assistant. The two programs currently operate entirely independently with regards to allocating both contingent and tenure-track faculty lines, and this will not change. Similarly, both the Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion the Program Director of Religious Studies currently receive course releases to carry out their administrative duties, which will not change.