

Re-Certification Report

REL 2121 – American Religious History (D, H)

Sub-Committee #3
General Education Committee
University of Florida
May 4, 2012

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Course Information:

Title: *REL 2121 – American Religious History* (3 credits; D, H)
Enrollment: 150
Main Lectures: Tuesday, Thursday; Period 3
Location: Turlington L011
Discussion Sections: Friday; Periods 2, 3, 5

Instructor:

Dr. David G. Hatchett
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Recommendation

The Sub-Committee found *REL 2121 – American Religious History* satisfactory in all aspects of the review process. The course meets the requirements and expectations of a General Education course, and the Sub-Committee recommends “Re-Certify” for REL 2121, with the area designations of Diversity and the Humanities.

Overview of Review Process

The recertification review process included 9 components: (1) obtaining a syllabus, readings, and supplemental material provided by the instructor; (2) holding a pre-review meeting with the instructor; (3) attending course main lectures; (4) attending course discussion sections; (5) conducting informal conversations with students enrolled in the course; (6) preparing a draft report; (7) sharing the draft report with the instructor for feedback; (8) holding a post-review meeting with the instructor; and (9) preparing a final report for the General Education Committee.

Syllabus and Course Content

According to the syllabus, the course offers an overview of the American religious experience from historical and cultural perspectives. It examines the interaction of American religions and cultures in 3 chronological periods: Colonial America 1500-1800, the Nineteenth Century, and the Twentieth Century. Placed in the context of U.S. history since 1500, course content traces the evolution of religious beliefs and practices among several prominent groups including Native Americans, Europeans, European Americans, African Americans, Women, and Men. It addresses 3 prominent religions (i.e. Judaism, Catholicism, Evangelical Christianity), as well as providing a survey of other world religions and emerging religions.

The course syllabus included the standard components: course title and description, General Education areas of designation (D, H), instructor and TA contact information, office hours, course objectives, assignments, grading, readings, and a weekly schedule of topics and content, as well as course management guidelines, campus resources for students, etc.

Overall, course content, methods, assignments, and readings related to the course objectives. Course content followed the weekly schedule of topics. Student evaluation included a full range of grades, including minus (-) grades. Readings were current and offered a range of perspectives. Additional reading opportunities were available to students as well. Student learning objectives for Diversity and the Humanities were addressed adequately through course lecture, discussion, and assignments.

Course assignments were particularly creative in achieving course objectives. For example, in one assignment the students visited a religious service. According to the instructor:

“The purpose is to have students try to describe and explain a religious ritual outside of their personal experience. I want undergraduates to experience firsthand

a religious ceremony, describe what they saw and then grapple to explain it through the resources of the course. I also want them to step outside of their particular racial, socioeconomic, and/or denominational/religious comfort zones to try to understand a religious practice foreign to their experience ... For my students this is often an intimidating assignment yet, upon completion, they are almost always grateful for having done it. In this way, students from diverse backgrounds are stretched to truly encounter *the other*. Through their descriptions and interpretations, they arrive at better understandings than simply the *weird* which formerly served as a place holder for a religious group about whom they previously had no understanding". (Hackett DG, *Teaching Philosophy*, p. 3, n.d.)

Pre-Review Meeting

The pre-review meeting established a helpful context for the overall review process. At the meeting, the Sub-Committee members described the purpose and specific steps involved in the re-certification review. Dr. Hackett provided copies of reading materials used in the course as well as additional documents. The Sub-Committee posed a number of questions to Dr. Hackett related to the course, and Dr. Hackett's philosophy of teaching the course, including the overall goal for REL 2121, how the course relates to General Education, and specifically to the area designations in Diversity and the Humanities. Specific discussion focused on how the course encourages students to examine their personal values and belief systems, and increases understanding and receptivity to those with different values and belief systems. Dr. Hackett described his approach to the course as follows:

"I began teaching the American religious history course at UF in 1987. This was at a time that the field was in the early stages of a transition from a canonical white, middle-class, Christian, northeastern, male, intellectual historians' understanding of the field to what is now the established approach that includes all manner of racial, class, gender, region, denominations and religions accompanied with a wide array of methods ... I try to inspire students to become aware of their received values, religious and cultural, by showing them that there are multiple religious strands weaving through the American cultural past, some of which conflict with their own ... To this end, I frame the study of religion as an opportunity to explore how individuals from a variety of faith traditions, historical periods, economic and social circumstances, and cultural settings have employed theological beliefs, devotional practices and religious institutions as they have wrestled with ethical predicaments, political and social problems, and personal life circumstances. While this approach to religious studies encourages students to consider how people in diverse situations have dealt with common human dilemmas, it also challenges them to reflect upon the role of social, economic, cultural and historical context in shaping religious worldviews, organizations, and practices". (Hackett DG, *Teaching Philosophy*, pp. 1-2, n.d.)

Main Lectures

The main lecture content matched the topics indicated on the syllabus' weekly schedule of topics. The lectures generally were well attended. Some students arrived early to ask questions, while some remained after class to

continue discussions stimulated by the lecture. The main lectures created a fast-paced, high-energy learning environment. Through the effective use of prompts and open-ended questions, Dr. Hackett moved students from passive listeners to involved participants. The exchanges included both instructor-generated and student-generated questions. Potentially emotion-laden topics, such as race, were handled with sensitivity in a way that promoted analysis and introspection. Dr. Hackett explained his approach to promoting introspection and self-analysis:

"For many individuals, the prospect of considering existential, epistemological, and moral questions within the context of the classroom is exhilarating ... for others, the notion of exposing their deeply-cherished values to scrutiny is profoundly disconcerting. I aim to channel the passions and relieve the anxieties of students ... by cultivating a learning environment that fosters respectful engagement with modes of thinking, believing, and acting that may differ from one's own". (Hackett DG, *Teaching Philosophy*, pp. 1-2, n.d.)

Discussion Sections

REL 2121 includes 6 discussion sections, with approximately 25 students per section. All discussion sections meet on Friday. Early each week, Dr. Hackett meets with the 2 course TAs to review content for the lectures to be held on Tuesday and Thursday of that week. They identify provocative and thought-provoking questions the TAs will pose to reinforce and extend the main lectures. The discussion sections generally were well attended. Most students participated in the discussion. Quality of interaction varied somewhat by section, but all achieved the purpose of applying and extending dialogue from the main lectures.

Student Conversations

Conversations with students enrolled in REL 2121 were held before or following the discussion sections. Most knew that REL 2121 is a General Education course, with a few not knowing the specific area designations (D, H). Students generally liked the course. The conversations showed that students respect Dr. Hackett and respond favorably to him as their instructor. Comments generally were favorable regarding effectiveness of the TAs as well. While some students were equivocal, a number commented specifically on how they benefitted from the course, particularly in challenging them to assess their own religious and moral values, and to better understand and accept a diversity of belief systems. When asked if they would recommend REL 2121 as a General Education course to a friend, most said yes.

Post-Review Meeting

The post-review meeting brought positive closure to the assessment portion of the review process for REL 2121. Prior to the post-review meeting, the Sub-Committee shared with Dr. Hackett a draft version of the report from the review. Following the meeting, the Sub-Committee incorporated additional narrative in two sections of the report. First, under the section, "Syllabus and Course Content", narrative was added amplifying one example of a course assignment (i.e. attending

a religious service). Second, under the section, "Main Lectures", narrative was added describing Dr. Hackett's approach to promoting student introspection and self-analysis in the course.

Conclusions

The Sub-Committee felt comfortable with the analysis, interactions, and outcomes that occurred in conducting the review of REL 2121. Dr. Hackett and the TAs enjoy an effective, professional working relationship that ensures continuity between the main lectures and the discussion sections. The course provides a forum that encourages self-analysis and introspection on sensitive personal issues. Students examine their own religious beliefs and practices, including the influence of factors such as background, biases, gender, and social status. Some find the experience gratifying as they grow in their understanding of cultural differences and their acceptance of diversity. Thus, REL 2121 represents a substantial, effectively taught course that proves both challenging and transformational for students in determining the place of religion in their belief systems. In that respect, the course contributes meaningfully to the general education of students, particularly in terms of promoting diversity and appreciation for the Humanities.