

Department of Religious Studies Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan  
1 June 2016

*Introduction*

The University has asked all departments to develop a *Departmental Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan* (DIAP), a requirement that the Department of Religious Studies sees as a significant opportunity. For some time now, we have been committed to addressing issues pertaining to diversity and inclusion. Especially in recent years, we have been considering how to become a more open, inclusive department that welcomes diverse perspectives and combats all forms of oppressive discrimination. However, while we have expressed our desire to have a diverse body of faculty, staff, and students, and to have a curriculum that addresses diversity and inclusion through its topics and pedagogical approaches, we have never systematically addressed issues of diversity and inclusion, nor have we set concrete goals for ourselves. Hence we see the creation of our departmental DIAP as a chance to help achieve both of those ends. We see the production of the DIAP as a first step in a long, continuous process. In general terms, our goal—as expressed variously in this plan—is to become a model department by pursuing and achieving the following priorities: cultivating a diverse faculty, staff, and student body; sustaining diversity and inclusion via wise mentoring and a supportive departmental culture; and fostering research, courses, and events that critically engage with issues of diversity and inclusion (for example, addressing race, power, and privilege) in the context of the academic study of religion. We understand the University's DIAP to express our ideals, aspirations, and actionable goals, while nonetheless appreciating that our department—as well as different members within our department—will express the spirit of the DIAP in different ways.

*Process*

Before the University announced that departments were required to generate their own DIAPs, the Department of Religious Studies decided that it wanted to hold meetings to reflect on issues pertaining to diversity and inclusion and to establish beneficial goals and practices. Hence, the staff, faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate concentrators each held their own separate meetings. Additionally, Liza Cariaga-Lo joined a portion of a departmental faculty meeting to help the faculty think about issues of diversity and inclusion. The Department also sent out a survey to undergraduates who had taken RS courses during the last two semesters (see the Appendix); and we hosted another meeting for undergraduates (non-RS concentrators) to discuss the Department in relation to diversity and inclusion. The undergraduate survey and meeting were designed to capture the views of students taking our courses but not necessarily concentrating in Religious Studies. Finally, a Departmental committee on diversity and inclusion was established: Rachel Leiken and Joshua Silver (undergraduates); Caroline Kory and David Lê (graduate students); Nicole Vadnais (staff); and Nancy Khalek, Daniel Vaca, and Mark Cladis (faculty). This committee, chaired by Cladis, was charged with drafting a departmental DIAP. Each member was to

represent their respective groups (e.g., graduate students, faculty) as well as to contribute their own independent perspectives while collectively producing the departmental DIAP.

Early in the process, the Department had decided that the departmental DIAP would use the guidelines and language of the University DIAP (e.g., keep the diversity focus on HUGS while also being mindful of inclusion of other categories of people, and forefront issues of race, privilege, and power) *as well as* include other kinds of language and issues that are distinctively relevant to diversity and inclusion in the context of Religious Studies (e.g., religious diversity, perceptions of the Department as being hostile to students' religious commitments or, in contrast, as being a place only for students with religious commitments; and the inclusion of such categories as people of color, women, and LGBTQ+ people). The goal, then, was to pursue a *stereoscopic* approach: to embrace the University's DIAP language and develop our own. In addition to meeting twice, the committee members, through a division of labor, drafted various sections of the DIAP and then worked collectively to produce a full draft of the document. That draft was circulated throughout the department for comment, and then, based on received comments, a final version was created.

The remainder of the main portion of his document addresses each of the areas in which we hope to enhance the quality of our Department, and is followed by an Appendix that contains details regarding the data described above.

### *Curriculum*

Faculty in RS are encouraged to undertake an evaluation of their existing syllabi and consider how new courses they are devising touch on issues of race, power, and privilege (all of these being broadly conceived so as to accommodate the fact that our faculty work in both pre-modern and modern periods). Faculty are also encouraged to review existing syllabi with an eye toward expanding traditional definitions of their subfields' respective "canons" to include the scholarship of people of color, women, and LGBTQ+ people. Newly devised courses that are explicitly designed to discuss religion and race, ethnicity, power and privilege should seek course development grants from the DOC (or possibly, from the OID) to help fund new course development.

In addition to examining particular religious traditions, themes, and theories of religion, courses could be enhanced by devoting attention to the historical and social contexts that orient their study. This might entail including the histories of colonialism, orientalism, race, and/or the shape of the modern university. The methods course for undergraduate students presents one, but not the only, opportunity to investigate these issues.

In addition to revising existing courses and developing new courses with the goal of including primary and secondary materials that include the perspectives and scholarship of people of color, women, and LGBTQ+ people, faculty will consider opportunities to co-teach courses with colleagues both inside and outside of the department. Ideally, co-teaching opportunities would enable teaching partners to bring their respective expertise to bear especially on critical questions that such address as issues of race, power, and privilege. In addition to enabling faculty to address issues in their teaching that they might not otherwise

have felt comfortable or equipped to engage on their own, these co-teaching experiences also would provide an opportunity for faculty members to learn from one another.

### *Students*

#### *Undergraduates*

Through conversations with concentrators in Religious Studies and non-concentrators in Religious Studies courses, we learn that many students increasingly have come to see courses and concentrations in the humanities as an academic luxury which might complement but not replace concentrations and courses that suit a more pre-professional course of study. This perspective prevails especially among students who are first-generation college students and students from historically underrepresented groups. In addition, students often mistakenly presume either that "religious studies" is tantamount to religious education or, ironically, that the academic study of religion is hostile toward religion per se. Although students often revise these perspectives and misunderstandings by the end of their undergraduate studies, they often experience that revision too late to alter their course of study.

Recognizing and responding to these views, the Department of Religious Studies will seek to communicate more clearly how and why the academic study of religion, like other disciplines in the humanities, provides students with both academic and professional skills. By enabling students across the university to understand the intellectual and potential professional benefits of enrolling in our courses or pursuing a concentration in our field, we hope to increase both the quantity and the socio-economic diversity of our students. To share this information about our department and the possibilities it offers, we not only plan to develop public events that highlight our field's interdisciplinary contribution to conversations about diversity but also seek to cultivate deeper relationships with organizations that already perform outreach to first- and second-year students—and especially students from historically underrepresented groups. These organizations include the Office of Religious Life, the Minority Peer Counselor Program, and the Brown Center for Students of Color, among others.

To communicate the department's objectives and opportunities more effectively to prospective undergraduates, graduates, and even faculty, the Department will overhaul its website. This overhaul will include a more robust explanation of the many ways that the academic of religion study can provide students with incomparable understanding of diverse societies and social problems. The overhaul also will include a more robust and accessible description of individual faculty members, graduate students, and their scholarship.

While the Department does not "direct" the DUG, the Department can support the DUG's own plans to sponsor events with other DUG groups on campus, to strengthen the connection between RS and departments that explicitly focus on issues of race, power, and privilege (for example, collaborate with such departments as American Studies, Ethnic Studies, East Asian Studies, Africana Studies, Archaeology, Anthropology, and Sociology).

### *Graduates*

The Department is strongly committed to bringing meaningful change to the graduate program in accordance with principles of diversity and inclusion. In absence of such change, we risk hindering the development of graduate students as teachers and scholars. This year, the graduate program admitted four students who identified as members of Historically Underrepresented Groups; two of these students accepted our offers. And this year for the first time, the Department used GSIP funds to successfully recruit an outstanding student from a HUG who had been heavily courted by a peer institution. Nonetheless, we have much work to do. We take the most pressing issues to be:

- The homogeneity of the graduate cohort itself and the disincentive that this presents for prospective students of color.
- The lack of more robust engagement on the issues of race, power, and LGBTQ+ identity in the department's graduate-level course offerings and in courses that the graduate students would serve as TAs.

As correctives, we wish to pursue:

- The recruitment of a cohort of graduate students of color.
- Develop programming that is geared towards recruitment and networking amongst historically underrepresented groups within the discipline. For example, we would like to create a reception at the annual meeting in our field, the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Biblical Literature (AAR/SBL), for HUG graduate students, allowing the Department to cultivate relationships with graduate students, and hopefully identify and up and coming PhDs in our field.
- More emphasis on race, power, and LGBTQ+ identity within the department's course offerings at the graduate level and the undergraduate level, in part so that teaching assistants may become familiar with models for how this material may be productively engaged.
- Consideration of expanding the department's graduate theory seminar into a two-semester course, with the addition of material that addresses issues concerning race, power, and LGBTQ+ identity.

### *Faculty*

The department should consider its current configuration and future possibilities in light of the possibility of preponed positions in specific subfields and other opportunities for targeted hiring. Efforts will be made to craft job descriptions that attract and signal to prospective applicants that the department is committed to seeking diverse applicants beyond the boilerplate language of EOE statements at the ends of job descriptions. To that end, positions in fields that are traditionally seen as less diverse may be reconceived so as to

broaden the fields and encourage diverse applicants to apply. For example, a position in South Asian Religion may explicitly call for a specialist in post-colonial theory or critical race theory, or a position in the study of Christianity may explicitly call for expertise in social justice movements. We anticipate retirements that may fall in the next five years (AY 2016-2021). We see, then, significant opportunities for the Department to diversify its faculty within an approximately five-year framework.

The Presidential post-doctoral program may be a resource for the department, if Fellows with specialization in the study of religion should come to the attention of the OID, and we would welcome the opportunity to host a Presidential post-doc in RS. Additionally, as noted, we would like to create a reception at the (AAR/SBL) for HUG faculty, allowing the Department to cultivate relationships with these scholars and perhaps identify future faculty for the department.

### *Programing*

Symposia, departmental colloquia, and public lectures spaced throughout the year and which feature the work of scholars from historically underrepresented groups, other scholars of color, or from LGBTQ+ perspectives will be a significant consideration in departmental planning for AY 2016-2021 (5-year plan). Possible themes for these events can include the relationship of Religious Studies, as a discipline, to communities of color, to social justice initiatives in the United States, and to public discourse on national and international politics or international relations. Programing should also bring scholars and lectures on religious traditions not represented by professors in the Department, including but not limited to Latin American, South American, African religious traditions, and Native and indigenous religious traditions. These events offer opportunities for collaboration with American Studies, Ethnic Studies, the Swearer Center, Anthropology, the Program in Women's and Gender Studies and the Watson Institute, among others.

Mentorship has been identified as a key element in recruiting and retaining students, faculty, and staff. Religious Studies would like to take advantage of University mentorship programs already in place (e.g the Faculty of Color Network, co-directed by a member of the RS faculty; mentorship programs at the Sheridan Center) and find ways to heighten the Department's participation – for faculty, students and staff – whether it be in the co-sponsoring of networking events for HUGs in the humanities, or by providing access to training for those parties interested in becoming mentors.

### *Professional Development*

We recognize the importance of our faculty, staff, and graduate students having special opportunities to reflect on a variety of issues that pertain to diversity and inclusion in the context of Religious Studies. In this document, while not specifying exact topics or limiting the potential formats of these events, we wish to make clear our commitment to planning and hosting them with the understanding that the specifics of each will be determined by the Department as its needs and perspectives evolve and change over time. Still, here are some potential options:

- Meeting to discuss pre-circulated readings pertaining to pedagogies of diversity. (For example: *Race, Equity, and the Learning Environment: The Global Relevance of Critical and Inclusive Pedagogies in Higher Education* by Frank Tuitt and Chayla Haynes; *Engaging the "Race Question": Accountability and Equity in U.S. Higher Education* by Alicia C. Dowd and Estela Mara Bensimon; *Race and Higher Education: Rethinking Pedagogy in Diverse College Classrooms* by Annie Howell and Frank Tuitt; *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* edited by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris)
- Meeting to share our syllabi and discuss our efforts to achieve diversity and inclusion, with a focus on both course content and inclusive pedagogy.
- Invite guest speakers, perhaps in conjunction with other departments, to help us critically reflect on such issues as unconscious bias, stereotype threat, racial disparity in Higher Education, and privilege in the Academy.

*Goals: Short Term and Long Term*

For next year:

- We have scheduled by public lecture by Melvin Rogers, a professor of Political Science and African American Studies at UCLA whose work explores democratic and republican theory, American and African-American political thought, classical and contemporary pragmatism, and issues of religion, race, and gender.
- We have broadened our Early Christianity job description for next year's search to help generate a wider pool of applicants.
- We will encourage faculty to: 1) make more transparent issues pertaining to race, identity, privilege, power and other issues of diversity in their current syllabi; and 2) to develop new courses that address these themes.
- We will host a reception at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Biblical Literature for HUG faculty and graduate students.
- We will host one workshop on pedagogies of diversity per term.
- We will have a session during our annual retreat (held in August) dedicated to how best to implement the recommendations in this departmental DIAP as pertains to the graduate program and the undergraduate concentration.
- Throughout the year, in the context of monthly Departmental faculty meetings and additional meetings that include students and staff, we will discuss how best to implement and measure progress on the recommendations in this DIAP.

In future years, we will review this DIAP during Departmental meetings and use it as a benchmark for past and future progress.

*Conclusion*

As stated in the Introduction, we see the production of this departmental DIAP as a first step in a long, continuous process. Our hope is that we will become a model department on campus that manifests the necessity of diversity and inclusion for the achievement of academic excellence.

*Appendix*

Departmental Demographics

Below is a summary of the demographic make-up of the department for the past five years, as provided by the University.

*Gender:* Religious Studies has been at or around the 50% mark in terms of male/female in our enrollment in courses and in our undergraduate concentrators. Currently our graduate program has 23 students, 9 of whom identify as female, and 14 as male. This number has been largely consistent over the past several years, seeing a fluctuation of one or two in either direction.

As for faculty, we currently have 12 full time (non-visiting) faculty on our roster, a quarter of whom are female. We have two staff members, both of whom are female.

*Race and Ethnicity:* In 2011, 100% of our undergraduate concentrators identified as white, in the years since, 2012-2015, the number was near the 50% range (2012: 55.6%; 2013: 61.5%; 2014: 42.9%; 2015: 54.5%). In other categories, there are fluctuations from year to year.

Enrollments in our courses at the undergraduate level (1000 level and below) have seen HUG enrollment around 15%, with a high in 2011 at 20.9% and a low in 2015 at 10.4%.

Our graduate program is largely white, the numbers of HUG enrollments have been incredibly low, 2.3% as our high number. This is a key area we identify for improvement.

Currently, we have two faculty members who identify in a historically underrepresented group (as of 2015), another who identifies as a person of color, and another as an openly gay faculty member. We also have a staff member who is Asian American.