

Department of Religious Studies

Response to the PhD Program years 2-4 Survey

1. The Graduate School's initiative in conducting this survey specifically on years 2-4 of the PhD program seems opportune. Independently of this initiative, and prior to it, the Religious Studies Department had some evidence of dissatisfaction with some aspects of the conduct of this part of the program. Formal consultation with a significant proportion of current PhD students collectively, conversations conducted individually by the DGS with others, and the written responses from students received via the Graduate school, all confirm three preliminary impressions: that **(a) there is a general level of satisfaction with the program in Religious Studies taken as a whole; (b) there is room for improvement;** and that **(c) the main point of weakness is in the conduct of years 2-4.**

Years 2-4

2. Unlike the period in which they are writing up their dissertations, students in years 2 - 4 may lack the direct contact and critical exchange with an assigned faculty advisor which structures their work and offers them clear advice on expectations. Students report a degree of uncertainty about the expectations made of them in years 2 - 4, that they can feel unclear as to how to measure their rate of progress, and in general report a sense of relative isolation, even in some cases of demoralization. There appear to be two considerations in response to this student perception. The first is that there is some value in exposing students to a comparatively unregulated academic experience, since it is just at the point immediately prior to the writing of their dissertations that they must learn to stand on their own two feet, internalize for themselves a sense of standards and expectations, learn disciplines of self-organization and learn to work towards self-set targets. The other is that if students are to learn these disciplines for themselves they will not do so in the absence of readily available systems of support and advice. Clearly, in principle well-run programs in years 2-4 need to achieve some balance between these two considerations. In the meantime, and in fact, it is also clear that if there is a point within the PhD program at which student experience is less than fully positive and at which student progress to completion is likely to be delayed, it is in years 2-4 – as *rationale* for the Graduate School's survey appears to imply.

3. In this connection, one general comment, forcefully presented by a number of students, is not shared by Department faculty: this being that the motivation of the Graduate School in initiating this survey was to achieve completion rates for the PhD nearer to the target deadlines of 5-5½ years, and that such a reduction from current actual average rates of completion (probably nearer to 7 years) would place Yale PhD students at a competitive disadvantage relative to students in other comparably prestigious schools. For it is believed by some that current practice in Yale and elsewhere allows for a more extended, and so deeper, professional training than could be achieved within that shorter time. It is the view of the Religious Studies Department that, on the contrary, the PhD degree is a time-limited exercise, and that ability to complete within predetermined deadlines major long-term academic projects, the PhD course being one such, is an indicator of ability to meet the sort

of professional challenge with which academics are routinely faced in their work. In short, **the Religious Studies Department welcomes reasonable measures designed to achieve more disciplined progress through the PhD program as being in itself an important element of just that professional training.**

4. On the other hand, precisely because it takes that view, the **Department also takes very seriously the indications, persistent in all forms of student response, that its micro-management of student progress through the PhD program, and most particularly in its management of years 2-4, is overall inconsistent, and sometimes falls short of satisfactory levels.** In the best cases, students expressed satisfaction that from the outset of their course what is expected of them is made clear, as is what they can in turn expect of their advisors; that they knew to whom to turn when faced with questions or difficulties; that they were able to take advantage of a regular and well-publicized schedule of meetings with ADGS and/or advisors. Less than satisfactory is the perception by significant numbers of students in some other fields that they could not count on any equivalent common culture of supervision and advice. At the worst, some students admitted that the first they knew of their failure to meet a deadline (in almost all cases in years 2-4) was upon reception of a letter from the Graduate School informing them of their registration having been placed on hold. The Department's record in this respect has improved in recent times. Nonetheless, even granted that responsibility for such a situation cannot always be laid at the door of the Department's systems, there evidently remain some failures of micro-management, or at the very least some failures of communication, which the department acknowledges are in need of rectification.

5. The Department's program is spread across ten quite disparate academic fields, falling into two major groupings: of those fields which do, and those which do not, have intensive language requirements. There are, therefore, good reasons why practice should vary to some degree at least between these major groupings, as also to some lesser degree between fields within a grouping. Nonetheless, basic standards of advising and supervision of academic progress through the degree course ought not vary in any important way, and the Department is considering two measures bearing on this issue. The first is **the proposal that each graduate student is assigned an advisor upon entry into the first year of the program who would take responsibility for seeing the student through all stages of progression up to (and in many cases including) the writing of the dissertation.** It is likely that in many smaller fields this advisor would be none other than the relevant ADGS, who in any case bears this responsibility. But even when this is so the importance of the advising role would be reinforced on the side of faculty, and from the students' point of view they would be provided with a reference-point of continuing advice and monitoring. Secondly, **it is the intention of the Department to spell out common standards of advising and monitoring of student progress and incorporate them into a manual of good practice.** This manual will advertise to students and faculty alike the common norms as to at least the following: the timetable governing progress through the various stages of the degree, the expectations which students are entitled to have of meetings with their advisor and/or ADGS, and would aim to clarify the division of responsibilities between ADGS and DGS on the one hand, and those of students on the other.

6. The diversity of the Department's academic program has advantages and disadvantages from the point of view of the student experience. On the plus side, there is a richness and a

stimulating complexity both of substantive content and of methodology contained within this diversity. On the other, at the levels both of teaching and learning, the Department's program can seem fragmented, and a number of students has commented that the advantages of the program's rich diversity are lost if interchange between students in different fields is limited to social events, lacking an integrated academic component. **There is widespread support within the student body for a required course on method in religious studies within years 1-2, common to all students in those years, and the department has agreed to investigate how such a required class might be introduced within the taught part of the program.** It is not easy to see how this might be done without overloading already heavy schedules of courses in place on the one hand, and on the other without sacrificing anything essential currently in place (see 8 below).

7. Again more directly relevant to years 2-4, and more specifically as addressing the problem of student 'isolation' within those years, is the **proposal – again widely supported by students – to introduce (possibly in year 3) a series of discussion classes designed for two purposes: (a) to assist students on issues of structure, scope and method in the construction of their dissertation prospectus; and (b) to encourage inter-disciplinary exchange between students of a kind likely to benefit dissertation proposals in their specialized fields.**

Wider Issues

8. There are two sorts of wider constraint which limit the practicality even of the somewhat small-scale proposals for improvement of the PhD program in Religious Studies. Moreover, both constraints fall outside the Department's power directly to modify. In the first place, **the program as it stands can seem unacceptably 'front-loaded', and it becomes all the more so insofar as pressure is exerted to improve rates of completion within the 5/5½ year deadlines.** Given that good academic reasons persuade us to consider adding to course requirements in years 1 or 2 (see 6 above) and in year 3 (see 7 above), and given that reasons of good professional training urge efficient completion within 5 years or so, the time left for the writing of a dissertation is reduced, effectively, to twelve months or little more. The PhD is essentially a research degree. No amount of hands-off formal training in research methods in years 1-4 is any substitute for the actual hands-on independent research of dissertation writing, especially in the humanities. And good research takes *real* time which cannot be compressed into the sort of timescale which in other universities world-wide would be thought acceptable for dissertations at Masters rather than PhD level.

9. **The second constraint** – which bears principally but not exclusively upon the factors outlined in 7 above – **is the much reduced number of admissions permitted by the Graduate School.** For critical mass is a necessary condition of a good research community. And however energetically the department pursues the goal of cross-disciplinary cooperation in its own admissions policy (and we accept the need to resist an excessive 'balkanisation' in this connection) as also within the teaching of the PhD program itself, the fact remains that our ten different fields contain core elements which are highly specific to their academic disciplines. Hence, critical mass *within* each field is as important to the achievement of our academic goals as is critical mass across the whole cohort of graduate students. At present levels of admission it is very difficult to reconcile the conflicting pressures imposed upon our PhD program.

10. For these reasons, **we believe that, in the course of its consideration of the broad issues of policy governing the conduct of PhD programs across the University, the Graduate School should take account of the total impact of the pressures it may wish to exert upon small, but highly diverse, departmental programs such as ours.** The issues raised concerning years 2-4 of the PhD program cannot helpfully be taken in isolation from those concerning the structure of the program as a whole. At that level of the overall balance of the program, and at the worst, the combined effect of pressure to improve completion rates on the one hand, and on the other, to maximize the opportunities for academic coherence and interchange across our very diverse range of fields, could be to reduce the effectiveness of the professional training which we offer our graduate students. We do not, in recognizing the possibility of this risk, think it to be inevitably incurred. But we do believe that the Graduate School needs to give careful and sensitive consideration to the overall impact upon the PhD program as a whole of measures taken specifically to improve the management of years 2 – 4.

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