I. Program Summary

Georgia State University first offered its B.A. in Religious Studies in 1991 when the Religious Studies Program was housed in the Department of Philosophy. In 2004, the Board of Regents approved the proposal for an M.A. in Religious Studies, creating the second such program in the state of Georgia. In 2005, Georgia State University granted the establishment of the Department of Religious Studies to serve as an autonomous unit although it still shares space and staff with the Department of Philosophy.

Faculty, Staff, Enrollments and Service. Over the reporting period (FY2006-2008), the Department of Religious Studies averaged 5.7 tenured/tenure-track, 0.3 permanent full-time non-tenure-track, and 1.0 visiting faculty members, and 2.7 graduate student instructors (GTAs). One female (5 males) and no underrepresented faculty (minority) were part of the department at the end of the self-study period. Female faculty included one assistant (FY2006) who was promoted to associate (FY2007, 2008) and one visiting professor (FY2006). Over the three years, the number of tenure-track faculty decreased from six to five, the number of permanent non-tenure-track faculty increased to one (in FY2008), and the number of visiting faculty decreased from two to zero. The department shares three staff members with the Department of Philosophy.

Total credit hours increased 25% from FY2006 to FY2007 and decreased 4% from FY2007 to FY2008. The Department Self-Study reports undergraduate core credit hours in RELS 2010, but the committee’s review of the self-study documents, the appendices, GSU College Catalog, and GoSolar Class Schedule Listing could not verify that information; only core credit-hours for PERS 2001 and PHIL 1010 were found. Average credit hour generation by faculty category appears in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty Type</th>
<th>Undergrad Core</th>
<th>Undergrad Lower Division</th>
<th>Undergrad Upper Division</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tenure-track: 5.7</td>
<td>398.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1592.3</td>
<td>474.7</td>
<td>2468.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non tenure-track: 0.3</td>
<td>138.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>206.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>347.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting faculty: 1.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>348.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>371.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTI: 0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTA: 2.7</td>
<td>596.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>596.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>92.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average total</td>
<td>1133.3</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>2238.3</td>
<td>477.7</td>
<td>3874.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>57.8%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table constructed by APRC based on data in the Department of Religious Studies’ Self-Study

On average, GSU TT faculty hold 1.3 positions within the AAR (The American Academy of Religion) while peer institutions’ (University of Georgia, Missouri State University, and University of South Florida) TT faculty average 0.19 AAR service positions and aspirational institutions’ (Florida State University and Temple University) TT faculty average 0.64 positions.
in AAR. A large amount of responsibility rests on this small group of faculty members as they work to grow their programs (8 faculty at GSU currently and two additional positions being filled for Fall 2009, compared to UGA’s 19).

**Scholarly Productivity and External Funding.** Research areas in the department include: investigations into different cultures’ rituals; the history and ethics of Far Eastern religions; comparative religious ethics; women and Islam; Hellenic religion and culture; history and practices of the Vatican; and religious identity. Over the reporting period, the tenured/tenure-track faculty members (5.7) annually averaged 2.6 unduplicated (by author) refereed publications and 0.3 unduplicated (by author) scholarly books per faculty member. GSU faculty have published more books compared to faculty at peer and aspirational institutions during the 2007-2008 Academic Year. GSU faculty published more peer-reviewed articles than faculty at peer institutions, and a comparable or greater number of peer-reviewed articles than faculty at aspirational institutions during the comparison year. During the review period, external reviewers indicate that publication activity is uneven, so the high volume in AY 2007-2008 may not necessarily represent other past years, though it may indicate a positive trend. The Appendix refers to a quality point value scheme established by an external panel for journals and presses faculty members published in, but no information was provided on the application of that scheme to demonstrate the quality of publications during FY2006-2008. Research has been supported by Fulbright, National Endowment for the Humanities, and American Academy of Religion Fellowships, as well as by one Teagle Foundation award of $75,000 and an NEH summer stipend.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Three-Year Total</th>
<th>Average Annual Funding Per Tenured/Tenure-Track Faculty Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External direct and indirect</td>
<td>$93,500</td>
<td>$5,468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal grants</td>
<td>$26,500</td>
<td>$1,550</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Self-Study Appendix Table B-2 shows $41,556 and $11,778 for average external and internal funding.

**Student Numbers by Degree Programs and Degrees Awarded.** The number of majors and the number of degrees by year and on average appears in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Majors FY2006</th>
<th>Degrees FY2006</th>
<th>Majors FY2007</th>
<th>Degrees FY2007</th>
<th>Majors FY2008</th>
<th>Degrees FY2008</th>
<th>3-Year Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B.A.-REL</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>71.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.A.-REL</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>92.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over the review period, undergraduate majors increased (33%) while degrees increased then decreased. Master’s students and degrees increased and then remained stable.

**Student and Learning Quality.** The self-study states that faculty assessments indicate that majors have been achieving high levels of competence. Student survey data are included highlighting student satisfaction with the undergraduate program, however data presented regarding the quality or achievement of the graduates of either program were inadequate to draw useful conclusions about the quality of graduating students.
Retention and graduation rates in the Master’s program are reportedly similar to peer institutions and lower than aspirational institutions. It is for this reason that the department is proposing to increase the stipend currently given to Master’s students and to decrease their teaching commitments. However, the self-study (Table B-7) indicates that the current stipend and teaching load for GTAs are comparable to other institutions (peer and aspirational). Admissions test scores for M.A. students appear in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number accepted</th>
<th>Percent accepted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FY06</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY07</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY08</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scores on the GRE are discrepant between tables in the self-study (Tables B-7 and E-1). Even though they are for different time periods and newly enrolled students, the committee assumes that the listed mean GRE of 1304 on Table B-7 is an error and that the more accurate presentation of GRE average (1176) is on self-study Table E-1. The scores reported on Table E-1 are a bit lower than Florida State but comparable to UGA and Temple (Table B-7).

No mission statement for either program (B.A. or M.A.), nor delineation of learning goals between the programs, were found in the submitted documents.

No assessment data are reported for PERS 2001. Learning outcomes for undergraduate majors are listed generally (not by course) in the Appendix and include: general knowledge of the great historical religious traditions, detailed knowledge of specific religious traditions, familiarity with the thought of major religious thinkers, familiarity with the thought of major theorists in the study of religion, knowledge of critical theories in the study of religion, knowledge of basic scholarly categories in religious studies, ability to compare two or more traditions with regard to specific themes, knowledge of the role religion plays historically in both popular and elite culture, knowledge of the ways that people in different cultures develop and apply religious resources, ability to read critically and with comprehension, ability to think critically and write persuasively, ability to apply principles of logic to the religious studies discourse, and ability to conduct effective research in religious studies. For the new course added in 2008 (RELS 2001), the self-study indicates that assessment protocol will be developed, therefore no data are yet available.

The learning outcomes are measured through the assessment of a senior research paper. The self-study indicates that these are assessed “blindly,” but no scoring rubric is included to show how these 13 learning outcomes are measured. Assessment reports were not included in the Appendix but are available on WEAVEOnline. A checklist for graduating undergraduates is included in the Appendix (pg. 33) as evidence of the procedures followed for assessment of student learning and quality. It is stated that 75% of the undergraduate students assessed (~50% of the total graduating majors) are ranked above average or higher in terms of content knowledge exhibited in their student papers, 67% of the students are ranked above average or higher in terms of the skills demonstrated in their student papers, and no students ranked “below average” for any of the eight articulated goals. Perhaps the Department meant to indicate student learning as above and below satisfactory rather than above and below average, as it would be impossible for no one to be below average if one calculated an average of all student scores.

The self-study reports in Objective 2 that the assessment procedures need to be modified to measure student achievement in light of new College and Department requirements for the major.
and the Critical Thinking through Writing (CTW) courses.

The Master’s Degree assessment of student learning quality is described but as this is a new program, no data are presented. An Assessment Form is used to assist with scoring of the theses. The alignment of the assessment form with the learning goals is difficult to understand, as the Department reports having six learning goals but only four assessment criteria are included on the assessment form (Appendix, pg. 36).

Former Master’s degree students are reported to be admitted as Ph.D. students at many top-ranked doctoral programs including Boston University, Duke Divinity School, Emory University, McGill University, New York University, Princeton University, and the University of California Santa Barbara, generally with partial to full funding. A student survey has been created for Master’s students, but as this survey is new and was not administered during the reporting period, no statistics are included in this review.

II. Assessment

The APRC concurs with the external reviewers that the department has made important, high-quality contributions to the university, through its publications, research, teaching and service courses.

1. Academic quality

   a. Instruction. Two identical mission statements for the undergraduate and master’s degrees are included in WeaveOnline but were not included in the self-study or appendices. Two courses have been developed to add CTW designation and the department is planning to create assessments for these courses. Currently, seniors present a paper for assessment of their work in the Religious Studies program. Simply assessing once (seniors submitting papers in 4000-level courses in fall term and M.A. students submitting theses) does not provide evidence sufficient to identify skill variations with the potential to inform curricular changes to improve learning, as this process displays an end-point only. The department’s report referred to the existence of measurement of learning outcomes; however it did not display a summarized set of data in the self-study to provide APRC with specificity, specific data, or evidence of quality. Final assessments of student learning outcomes data are given in WeaveOnline.

   Several courses are cross-listed as 4000/6000, somewhat detracting from the distinctiveness of the two programs. The committee concurs with the external reviewers that separating some of the combined 4000/6000 courses would enhance the educational experience of B.A. and M.A. students. B.A. and M.A. students are capable of and eager for different levels of discourse. Although the external reviewers proposed increasing faculty size, the department states (Self-study, p. 20) that its faculty resources are adequate for its instructional needs even while beginning to offer a core course, assuming its current hiring is successful, and APRC agrees, while noting that faculty diversity is limited.

   The department claims that the GRA stipends need to be raised to be more competitive with peer and aspirational Master’s Programs. However, APRC does not support this goal as the stipend plus tuition waiver packages are comparable or better compared to other packages at peer and aspirational institutions (Self-study, Table B-7). It is unclear in the table which of these institutions require teaching as a condition of the financial
package. Therefore, one cannot draw any conclusion about full packages at peer institutions.

b. **Research.** The quantity of research is equal to or greater than research at peer and aspirational institutions. The committee is unable to comment on research quality. The department self-study (Appendix, p. 28) indicates the availability of a panel to describe journal quality and ranking but there is no inclusion of data regarding this ranking. Furthermore the external reviewers comment on research quantity but are largely silent about research quality.

c. **Service.** Faculty are well-represented on AAR (American Association of Religion) activities. The APRC concurs that service to the profession is at a level exceeding both peer and aspirational institutions. The APRC notes an exceptional amount of service handled by one senior faculty member.

2. **Centrality of the programs.** Religious Studies supports the GSU Strategic Plan for the development of a curriculum with international and intercultural perspectives. External reviewers positively noted the department's "internationalization" of its programs while embracing the local cosmopolitan character of the Atlanta Metro Area (External Review Committee Report, p. 6). In addition, Religious Studies is an interdisciplinary area of study which "is also heavily focused on developing critical thinking, reading, and writing skills" (Self-study, p. 3 and Appendix D2, p. 37).

3. **Viability of programs** The number of undergraduate students has been growing since the department was established in 2005. The Master’s program offers many course options relative to its student enrollment, consistent with its desire to provide breadth across comparative religious traditions but raising questions about the efficiency of the number of electives offered for that enrollment. Average size of graduate classes is reported in Table B7 of the self-study to be 26, but many (if not all) graduate courses are cross listed 4000/6000, with small numbers of graduate students in any given class. The Self Study Template does not include tables of actual course enrollments, so that enrollment data was not provided to APRC though it would be more useful in departments like this with heavy dependence on 4000/6000 combination courses to offer their master’s program.

4. **Strategic focus.** The department’s strategic focus of comparative study of religion positions the department “to increase the ability of students to understand and deal with diverse cultures and to promote interdisciplinary approaches to the study of world problems” (Appendix, B2, p. 29). The External Reviewers noted the appropriateness of the comparative religious traditions model to the GSU context.

5. **Financial resource analysis.** APRC concurs with the self-study that the staffing with new hires is adequate. The committee could not calculate averages of course enrollment due to inadequate data. The question remains: How many students are taught by how many faculty in how many sections per term?

6. **Progress on strategic goals from previous program review.** Because Religious Studies was established as a separate department only in 2005, the current program review is its first.

7. **Evaluation of goals.** Self-Study Section H contains goals and objectives related to: Scholarly Activity (to raise the emerging national scholarly reputations and accomplishments of the Department’s faculty to a level competitive with those of the top 5 Religious Studies
departments in the Southeast); Program Development (to establish the program as one of the
top 5 public Religious Studies departments in the Southeast with regard to the quality of
student training and the nature of student achievement); and Resources. The committee
agrees with the external reviewers that the goals stated are appropriate and adequate. The
objectives are supporting but need more specific wording for development of action plans.
For example, the Objective 1 “Create an environment … faculty can reach their scholarly
potential,” “Create support structures conducive …” can be implemented in a number of
ways.

Overall, the goals and objectives are posed to position Georgia State University’s Religious
Studies program as a leading program in the Southeastern U. S. The external reviewers
recommend and the committee agrees that benchmarks should be in concert with other public
institutions that offer only B.A. and M.A. programs. They are aspiring to be the best of their
type in the Southeast and for a new department with new programs this is a worthy goal.

III. Recommendations

In addition to concurring with the department’s goals stated above, APRC makes the following
recommendations:

1. Strengthen assessment.

   a. Develop distinct missions for the B.A. program and the M.A program. The B.A. and
      M.A. mission statements found on WeaveOnline were identical but should reflect the
      distinctiveness of each program. No mission statement was found for the core course
      PERS 2001 and therefore one should be developed. We understand this is being done
      through the CAP Perspectives subcommittee.

   b. Learning objectives should be fewer (13 are too many to assess) and need to focus on
      higher-level learning outcomes. Several listed outcomes deal with types of knowledge
      which could also be captured through other learning outcomes already listed, such as
      “comparing two or more traditions with regard to specific themes” or part of “think
critically” or “writing persuasively.”

   c. APRC agrees with the department’s objective to improve and strengthen their assessment
      of student learning. Their self-study states that more formal assessment measures should
      be placed on CTW emphasis courses RELS 3740 and RELS 4750. Assessment should
      take place in more than one time period to gauge whether growth in student learning is
      occurring. Sequencing courses may assist with this task. In this way, one may assess
      growth over time rather than only a snapshot at the end of a program.

   d. The way in which undergraduate majors and Master’s students are assessed should
      include more specificity such as scoring rubrics.

2. Reduce number of 4000/6000 courses.

   Although the department does not state this as a goal, development of a top-ranked Master’s
   program may require greater delineation between coursework of the undergraduate and
   graduate students. The committee agrees with the external reviewers that offering a
distinctive set of graduate courses for Master’s students may help propel the Master’s
program to a premiere status, and recommends creating a plan to achieve the department’s
reputational goals for the Master’s Degree program. The relatively new M.A. program has enrollment totaling 20 graduate students. This program size, taken together with the department’s desire to offer great breadth of courses, results in small numbers of graduate students in any given class. This trade-off of desired breadth and likely program size will present challenges for 4000/600 separations and top-program aspirations. This may require review of the curriculum with an eye toward identifying and achieving a set of focused and sequenced courses

3. Revisit stated need for new faculty.

Neither the data in the appendix nor the department’s statements in the self-study indicate that additional faculty are needed, beyond the two replacement hires that were to join the department in fall 2008, based on data at the time of the self-study

APRC recommends the department continue to address faculty diversity by affirmatively seeking minority and women candidates when hiring opportunities arise.