

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

8 January 2022

RE: External Review of Religious Studies at Oakland University (Ten Year Review)

Dear Professor Henri Gooren and Whomever Else It May Concern:

The purpose of this letter is to offer an external evaluation of the Oakland University Religious Studies program's first ten-year assessment. In preparing this report, I have reviewed the following documents: (1) Religious Studies Program Review 2021-22: Self Study; (2) Statistics RS Concentration and Minors, 2013-2021; (3) Religious Studies 10 year enrollment comparison – Summer 2011 thru Winter 2021; (4) Outline for Decennial Program Review; and (5) a current brochure for Religious Studies at Oakland University. I have also surveyed the Religious Studies website, <https://oakland.edu/religiousstudies>. And, as you (Prof. Gooren) well know, in December 2019, I had the fortune of visiting Oakland University and meeting with faculty from the Religious Studies program.

In what follows, I shall not offer exhaustive commentary on the Religious Studies program and its ten-year assessment; instead, I shall highlight notable aspects and findings that stood out to me and offer suggestions. For additional observations, I would refer you to my 2019 report on the OU Religious Studies program (with special emphasis on the Islamic studies program), which I shared with you (Prof. Gooren) shortly after my aforementioned campus visit. **I must stress here that, despite some (hopefully) constructive critical feedback below, my overall impression of the Religious Studies program and its ten-year assessment is a very positive one.**

Observations and Suggestions

The OU Religious Studies program has existed for nearly four decades, with a Christianity Studies minor that is close to three decades old and Judaic Studies and Islamic Studies minors that are each over a decade and a half old. So it is certainly a positive development that the RS program has finally undertaken its first ten-year assessment.

One of the RS program's goals is to present the world's religions from an "academic—rather than faith—standpoint" (Self Study, p. 2; emphasis in the original). With this in mind, the academic credentials of the faculty (rather than their faith-based credentials) may need to be clarified and emphasized on the RS website in a couple of cases. (Of course, this is *not* to say that there is any issue with the RS faculty having faith-based credentials in addition to their academic ones.) Furthermore, the academic nature of the RS program must be emphasized



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as it considers developing certificate programs for non-traditional OU students, as it may be problematic if these public university programs are presented as continuing education opportunities for members of specific religious institutions (cf. Self Study, p. 7).

The Self Study (pp. 3-5) makes evident the strengths and weaknesses of the RS program as they pertain to student success, research, community engagement, and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion). It is clear that the pandemic, limited funding opportunities, and the decline in student population have all greatly limited efforts to grow the program. But despite the various challenges and external and internal limitations, the RS program is developing creative projects and recruitment approaches, creating and fostering meaningful relationships with local communities, and “punching above its weight.” This is especially critical in a context in which humanities units nationwide are witnessing declining enrollment throughout the country.

The Self Study (pp. 2, 6) notes that, since 2010, the RS program has benefitted from holding campus events that address pressing issues and attract diverse audiences. Needless to say, the COVID-19 pandemic has limited the potential for organizing such events, and this, by extension, affects recruitment and enrollment in RS courses. As such, for the time being, it is critical to continue organizing at least virtual events so as not to lose too much momentum. Assuming we soon return to some semblance of normalcy, the RS program will need to be aggressive in promoting itself, through its various events and study abroad programs. For, as indicated in the Self Study (p. 2), “many OU students currently are largely unaware that RS courses are available and will benefit their careers.”

The dramatic decline in students pursuing minors in recent years (see Statistics RS Concentration and Minors, 2013-2021) is worrisome. But just as the RS program bounced back after a major decline in 2017, all indications would suggest that the program will bounce back once conditions (hopefully) improve and more classes and events are offered in person.

I am impressed by the requirements for the minor. The fact that the various minors have different categories of requirements (i.e. core courses, field-related courses, and application courses) means that graduating students will have pursued multiple approaches in their desired area of study. Looking to the future, one would hope that the list of minors will expand to include non-Abrahamic traditions. This would be in line with the program’s attempts to recruit students to its courses on Hindu spirituality, Japanese religions, and East Asian religions and expand its course offerings (Self Study, p. 6). This would also further the DEI priorities of the RS program and expand its recruitment net. The RS program might also like to consider creating an American religions minor, as it seems that courses that focus on multiple religions and specifically religions in American contexts have been relatively popular (see Religious Studies 10 year

enrollment comparison). Here I will add that the study of American religions in particular has been especially popular in own Religious Studies unit.

I would have liked to have seen data and feedback from surveys of current and former students. The Self Study (p. 2) notes that student exit surveys are not currently being conducted due to low enrollment numbers, career interests outside of religious studies, and failed attempts in the past to conduct such surveys. This is a reasonable assessment; however, one wonders whether it would not hurt to request that all students, current and former, fill out a brief, online survey (comparable to an online instructor evaluation form). Such a survey would be relatively easy to produce, and the results may prove to be insightful.

Finally, I must say that the Self Study offers various compelling and creative ideas for strengthening the program. The accomplished faculty seem committed to improving the study of religion at OU. And one hopes that the RS program will only continue to thrive and grow. I wish you and your colleagues every success.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I may be reached by email at khalilmo@msu.edu or by phone at 517-927-5153.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mohammad Khalil', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mohammad Hassan Khalil
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Professor of Religious Studies
Adjunct Professor of Law
Michigan State University