



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION

9 June 2020

Katherine Bergeron, President  
Connecticut College  
270 Mohegan Avenue  
New London, CT 06320

DeFred (Fritz) G. Folts III  
Chair, Connecticut College Trustees  
3EDGE Asset Management  
One International Place  
Suite 4430  
Boston, MA 02110

Jeffrey E. Cole, Dean of the Faculty  
Connecticut College  
270 Mohegan Avenue  
New London, CT 06320

Lina Perkins Wilder  
Chair, Educational Policy Committee  
Connecticut College  
270 Mohegan Avenue  
New London, CT 06320

R. Danielle Egan  
Chair, Faculty Steering and Conference Committee  
Connecticut College  
270 Mohegan Avenue  
New London, CT 06320

Dear Mr. Folts and Drs. Bergeron, Cole, Wilder, and Egan,

We, the leadership of the American Academy of Religion, write to advocate for the retention and enhancement of the Religious Studies Department at Connecticut College.

The American Academy of Religion (AAR) is the world's largest scholarly society devoted to excellence in the academic study of religion and the enhancement of the public understanding of religion. With some 8,000 members across the globe, we

sponsor an annual meeting that draws over 10,000 attendees and showcases cutting edge scholarship in religious studies.

Our members teach in schools and universities around the world—working with dedication to ensure that graduates of these schools and universities have the opportunity to understand the deep, complex, and nuanced role religion plays in the lives of all global citizens.

We write today to assert the critical importance of maintaining and promoting the Religious Studies Department at Connecticut College.

The current climate in higher education is challenging, to say the least, and we understand the need to carefully examine how a university makes investments in people and programs. That said, there is a case to be made to pause before eliminating religion and religious studies courses from the general education offerings.

Religion should hold an important position in higher education as it holds such an important position in both private and public lives. Religion matters. It is the way people around the world have expressed what matters most to them, including their social identities and aspirations. For this reason, the study of religion has become one of the main vehicles for informed reflection on human culture. People need to understand the controversies over religion that have shaped their culture, the living reality of the various religions that are practiced in their midst, and the history of religious traditions currently influencing millions of people around the world. The urgency of the study of religion continues. Religious ideas and values have been central to higher education from its beginning. In the last one hundred years, the modern field of religious studies has evolved into the scholarly analysis of the phenomena of religion from multifaceted and scientific points of view, helping to explain the customs, texts, arts, ideas, and social conflicts of religious communities around the world. Because religious phenomena are complex, the methodologies for studying them have been wide-ranging and interdisciplinary, but the study of religion cannot be reduced to any one method or discipline. The field of religious studies has always required its own domain separate from other departments and disciplines.

The study of religion can therefore be done adequately only in its own academic home. Although professors in other departments such as sociology and political science have increasingly and of necessity become concerned with religious issues—just as they have with economic issues—the field of religion is marginalized in those disciplines and not treated in a holistic way. Like economics, only religious studies courses can provide the intellectual coherence and fundamental grounding such study requires.

The work of your Religious Studies Department is critical to your mission to educate students to put the liberal arts into action as citizens in a global society. Excellence in religious studies is crucial to the values that undergird your mission: academic excellence; diversity, equity, and shared governance; education of the entire person; adherence to crucial ethical and moral standards; community service and global citizenship; and environmental sustainability. To abolish the department would bring detriment to each of these values as well as to the overall mission.

We recognize ongoing pressures for colleges, and do not envy the hard decisions you face every day. But as you move forward, we hope you will give the most careful consideration to the role of religion and religious studies courses in your general education offerings, and thoroughly explore creative options for its future success.

If we can be of other service, please feel free to call upon us.

Sincerely,

José Cabezon  
President  
American Academy of Religion

Marla Frederick  
President-Elect  
American Academy of Religion

Mayra Rivera  
Vice President  
American Academy of Religion

Alice Hunt  
Executive Director  
American Academy of Religion

cc: Dr. Garrett Green  
Class of 1943 Professor of Religious Studies Emeritus  
47 Westomere Terrace  
New London, CT 06320

The Day Publishing Company  
47 Eugene O'Neill Dr.  
P.O. Box 1231  
New London, CT 06320