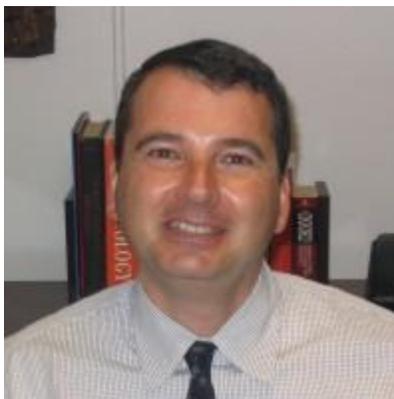


Interview with the Virtual Teaching and Learning Center Editor



Tell us a little about your background, and what brought you to Georgia State?

It took a semester in Washington, D.C. during my junior year at Dartmouth to bring me to the field of religion. It was the furthest thing from my mind at the time. I was in the process of completing my Government major and intending to go off to law school and discuss the big issues. (Okay, I was naïve.) Six months working in a Congressman's office cured me. During my internship, the greatest excitement came when news spread that an elderly, senior Congressman had died the night before and the staffs of other representatives began maneuvering to win his choice, corner office. (I'm pretty sure there's an idea for a hit reality series in here somewhere—with the winning staff getting the office in the most shocking rose ceremony ever....) I began taking religion courses when I returned to Dartmouth. I remember that the college had just initiated a new campus-wide teaching award, and the first two recipients, Ron Green and Robert Oden, were both from the Department of Religion. They were incredible examples of teacher-scholars and, along with Jeff Stout at Princeton, have had the greatest influence on my own teaching. In discussing the religious roots of our views on euthanasia or Paul's writings on women in I Corinthians, I finally was engaging the big issues I craved. I was hooked, and I never have left the field since.

What's your greatest joy in teaching?

At a large, diverse, and fascinatingly messy state school like Georgia State, my teaching takes on a different dimension than it had at Princeton. Most of the students are first generation college students, many are minority and immigrants. The state's Hope scholarship program (in which high school students with B averages or higher get free tuition at any instate school) has brought the university more and more traditional freshmen, and its 65-and-over, free tuition policy means that I have senior citizens in almost every class. For many of these students, college classes are not just another in a series of life's privileges; they are a real chance to substantively change their lives. When one of these students gets into Harvard, or wins a Fulbright, or goes off to the South Pacific in the Peace Corps, or lands in law school, or publishes a first article (in the *Journal of the AAR*, no less), there is a genuine excitement that comes only from someone who never imagined that such things were possible. Even among the less accomplished students, there is

often a palpable sense of discovery. It continually reminds me of why I got into teaching in the first place.

You moved from Dartmouth and Princeton, where you did your graduate work, to a large public university in Georgia. What impressed the TLC most was the way in which you demand very high intellectual standards – what people would expect from Ivy League students -- from your Georgia State students. And it’s clear that your students have risen to the challenge. What were some of the greatest challenges you faced in moving from an elite, private institution to a huge public university?

At Dartmouth and Princeton, I had been trained to study religion by means of primary texts, rich class discussions, and lots of writing. I was only 25 when I was hired by Georgia State, and my resulting naivety was an odd blessing: it never occurred to me to teach in a way other than I had been taught. I’ve never used a text book or given an “objective” exam at Georgia State. From the first semester, I did three things. First, I created my own substantive course readers--500 or so pages long—for every course. This allowed me to select primary sources, keep the readings brief but on topic, and keep the costs down to students who often were working their way through school. The more talented students thus had the original sources in their hands if they wished to pursue the materials further; and the less talented students were not too overwhelmed. Second, I structured each class discussion around an outline that evolved on the board during class. The class discussions would be quite nuanced (with the best students usually taking the lead), but basic points were organized and on the board—and all students felt a sense of investment as they helped to construct the outline. Third, not only did the students do a lot of writing, I did. From the start, I offered about a page worth of written comments for every assignment submitted. For students who took the time to read my comments, a great deal of personalized teaching went on here. The written comments allowed me to deal with the immense diversity of student abilities in a directed fashion. I adopted these three strategies my first semester, and I have never wavered from them since.

What would you say is your prevailing “teaching philosophy”?

There’s nothing fancy or revolutionary about my teaching. I believe in challenging students, and I respect them. I don’t shield them from controversial or difficult topics. We openly discuss the morality of President Bush’s decision to go to war in Iraq, “honor killings” in rural Pakistan, and the nature of societal reactions to bestiality. No serious topic is off limits. But respecting them means giving them both sides of the story—not just my versions, but the *best* versions. (The course readers are very helpful in this respect since I can have proponents of various positions speak for themselves.) Respecting them also means that they will at times—in fact, pretty darn often—walk away from the topic with a different belief than my own. So be it. They are adults, and they deserve that privilege. I take a similar attitude about course assignments. I know that some students will skip class and make up lame excuses, or will throw their paper in their bag after glancing at the grade and never read another word of my comments. That, too, is their privilege. I put a great deal of energy into designing courses; trying to make the material exciting, clear, and accessible; and grading papers. I do my job, and I respect—and expect--the students to do theirs. If they don’t, I don’t police or coerce them (though their grade is impacted). This approach most definitely does not work in all cases, but when it does, the results can be

exceptional. Given some basic resources and my trust, students begin to surprise me by what they are willing and capable of doing. Our program is only a decade old, and we've sent our students off to Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago, Columbia, Berkeley, and Brown. We had students awarded Fulbrights and NEHs. And, as alluded to earlier, we've had a former student publish an article in the *Journal of the AAR*.

What's one of your all time favorite assignments?

I never assign paper topics. Part of what I want my students to learn is the skill of developing a thesis which is appropriate to the context and one that they can defend given the available evidence. This is a skill important to whatever job or field they go on to pursue. By leaving the topic open, I also allow for students with a range of abilities and diverse interests to pursue a subject they find appropriate. Because my course readers are so personalized, I almost never have problems with students submitting essays they find on the internet; the generic essays on religious studies just don't fit with the particular course content. My favorite reading assignments are the ones that get the students excited about materials that they initially think will be deadly. If I can't find the pertinence in materials, how can I expect my students to? For any who teach "natural law" or Aquinas, add to your current readings the following: the sections of the *Summa* where Aquinas sets up his six-fold hierarchy of sexual sins and Jeff Stout's chapter on "Moral Abominations" from *Ethics After Babel*. Mix well.

What do you still want to get better at? What sorts of things would you love to do (in the classroom) but can't in your current setting? Do you have a sort of wish-list for things you'd like to try?

I use brief videos (5- to 10-minute segments) in the classroom on a regular basis, but I'm envious of my colleagues who have the technological ability to smoothly integrate Power Point slides, DVD, and other types of media into their courses. My attempts are rarely smooth and usually lead me back to more traditional approaches. I'd love to be able to formally integrate more experiences outside the classroom—field trips, attendance at public events, and so forth—into my course requirements. Atlanta offers incredibly rich opportunities in these respects (e.g. ten Wiccan covens advertise in a local, alternative newspaper; one of the fastest growing Hindu communities in the U.S. is just south of Atlanta)—but our students (who often commute and have jobs and families) make the logistics of out-of-class assignments difficult, and I haven't figured out a way to integrate such expectations into my courses fairly.

Any advice for up-and-coming educators – or experienced ones?

The field of religious studies couldn't be more timely. A whole generation of Americans now realizes that understanding religion is, quite simply, a matter of life and death. Given this, I'm amazed by the spate of books out there questioning the future of the field or by my colleagues who see their place on campus as peripheral. As teachers of religious studies, we need to make the case for the pertinence of our field—to our deans and presidents and to our students. I'm never an advocate for religion on campus or in the classroom, but I am continually an advocate for religious studies. My students sometimes kid me about this, but by their senior years, between a third and a half of our majors are applying for graduate school in the field.