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The Academic Study of Religion in the Face of Budget Cuts

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Amidst the economic downturn, many departments and schools of religion or theology are facing the prospect of severe budget cutbacks.

This spring, for example, the religious studies departments at Florida International University and the University of Florida faced the prospect of closure and the elimination of many of their religion faculty positions. The University of Florida, which has bachelor's, master's, and PhD programs and fifteen full-time faculty positions, faced a cutback to four full-time positions. At one point, Florida International University (FIU) faced the elimination of its bachelor's and master's programs in religion and half its thirteen full-time faculty.

In response, the AAR sent each of these university administrations a letter strongly urging continued support for their religion programs.

Independently, FIU received support from another direction as well: a \$100,000 contribution from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The university has since embarked on a “Religious Studies Endowment Campaign,” which aims to raise \$5 million. As *RSN* went to press, it looked as if the university had decided to keep the department, all full-time faculty positions, and the bachelor’s and master’s degree programs. FIU lost no religious studies faculty, one position from another department is being added, and TA support has been increased. However, “it’s unclear what will happen next year,” said Department Chair Christine Gudorf, “if the fundraising campaign is not successful.”

By May, the situation at the University of Florida had brightened as well. Except through attrition, no religion faculty positions were lost, and all degree programs are still being offered.

At several institutions elsewhere, mergers have been under discussion. In the Northeast, for example, Towson University and Baltimore Hebrew University have agreed to merge, and Andover Newton and Colgate Rochester Crozier divinity schools have discussed merging.

At the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, the administration proposed merging the religious studies and philosophy departments. Although the faculty spent “many anxious and chaotic hours, weeks, and even months meeting, discussing, and crafting responses to the college’s proposal,” one upside was that “the faculty had to put aside individual agendas and work together for the good of the whole, which made this a unifying experience that strengthened us internally,” commented Gilya Gerda Schmidt, head of the Religious Studies Department. “We mobilized the support of colleagues and friends within and outside the university, and we kept the lines of communication open with the College administration.” In the end, the administration’s initial proposal was successfully resisted. The religious studies department remains free-standing; and though three of eleven faculty positions were lost through attrition, all other faculty has been retained.

At Arizona State University (ASU), the departments of history, philosophy, and religious studies recently merged to become the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies. “In addition to achieving ‘economies of scale,’ this development,” commented Linell Cady, ASU Professor of Religious Studies and the director of its Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict, “reflects a larger institutional vision of the university’s president to break down what he considers departmental ‘silos’ by merging them into larger schools.” The faculty of religious studies remains separate within the school, retaining its positions as well as its BA, MA, and PhD programs.

In light of the continuing financial challenges facing schools and departments, *RSN* interviewed AAR members Mark Juergensmeyer and Vasudha Narayanan, who were recently involved in encouraging University of Florida officials to keep religious studies programs and faculty, and Gilya Gerda Schmidt, who was recently involved in encouraging the University of Tennessee at Knoxville to reconsider its plan to merge its religion and philosophy departments.

***RSN:* In light of the current economy, what efforts would you suggest that chairs and faculty of religion departments take toward preserving adequate funding for their programs (even if not currently under threat of substantial funding loss)?**

Juergensmeyer: The allocation of funds is a political decision, and campus administrators are political animals. So make your department visible — both on campus and in the community (community leaders can be your biggest supporters in a budget crunch). Encourage members of your faculty to be on campus-wide committees and take administrative assignments. Show that you’re central to the university, not peripheral.

Narayanan: I would add that in large universities the administration may not be aware of what religion departments really do; it would be helpful for chairs or associate chairs to regularly meet some of the administrators and talk about one's colleagues. Invite the administrators to some of your talks or functions, so they get to know you.

Schmidt: The head and faculty of religious studies departments must aggressively pursue raising private funds. To this end, our department has a board of visitors whose members have been helpful in various ways in our fundraising efforts. Individual faculty, in cooperation with the college development officer, and at times the dean, also have raised funds for positions, salary supplements, conferences, and symposia. The department has one endowed chair, and we will continue to actively and persistently work on bringing in private funds to endow other positions. This will become necessary for all humanities departments as state funds for higher education shrink.

RSN: In some recent cases, it seems that religion departments have been far more heavily targeted than other arts and sciences programs. Why do you think this happens? What implications are there, if any, for the kind of educating that religion faculty should pursue beyond that of their own students?

Juergensmeyer: The prejudice against religious studies is not what you think it is. When we checked into the reasons for religion being targeted in recent budget cuts, we expected to find the old Sunday school image of religion and the mistaken notion that religious studies departments are propagating religion or training clergy.

But that was not the reason most often given; rather, it was the idea that the study of religion does not need to have its own department. Many of our colleagues and administrators think that religion can be studied sufficiently through other disciplinary perspectives, such as philosophy or sociology or anthropology.

So we need to educate our colleagues — through campus newspaper articles, symposia, and informal conversations that promote the idea that the study of religion requires the interdisciplinary balance and focus that only stand-alone religious studies departments and programs are able to provide.

Though economics and mathematics can be studied in many departments, no university in its right mind would axe the economics and mathematics departments. The same should be true of religious studies.

Schmidt: The department of religious studies at the University of Tennessee was not more heavily targeted than other Arts and Sciences programs. Several other departments also lost a large percentage of their faculty to retirements and attrition. We do know, however, that in the future we will have to collaborate more closely with other humanities and social science departments, perhaps in sharing positions and/or staff resources.

RSN: If a religion department does find itself disproportionately targeted for budget cuts, what resources are available for making the case for better funding?

Juergensmeyer: Once your head is on the budgetary chopping block, you need to go immediately into crisis mode. First, take the inside strategy and quietly set up meetings with administrators to make your claims and present counterarguments to ones they may give. If this doesn't work, then shout like hell.

Don't go quietly to the sacrificial altar. Do what the University of Florida and Florida International

University departments did when they were threatened — marshal internal support, evoke outcries from community leaders, exert political pressure from leading politicians, excite media attention including interviews and op-ed pieces, present letters from kindred departments around the country, and gain national support — including letters and statements from your AAR leaders, who are ready to help you.

Narayanan: If you think your department is vulnerable, I would encourage you to have a “first aid” kit ready. Get in touch with the chairs of departments in peer institutions. Consult your faculty and have a list of the contact information for a number of institutions and people who head various organizations. I am thinking of presidents of the AAR, Association for Asian Studies, Middle East Studies Association, Society of Biblical Literature, American Oriental Society et al. Have a list of people within the university who can support you. You will need them in a hurry when the administration is moving swiftly. These people can be invaluable in writing letters on behalf of your department or supply you with crucial numbers.

To help people who are writing letters, you should have a packet of materials ready — information which you can send electronically. They may not have the time to go through the websites and find out about your colleagues; your “Cliff notes” should have the highlights of your department, the major grants/fellowships the faculty have received, their publications, the courses the department teaches, what your alumni do — that kind of thing.

In getting letters, you have to decide whether it is useful to deluge the administration with letters or get a few which may carry more weight. Do you want professional organizations to write (may not be of any use if your university does not care about them) or local people? The letter the AAR did for us carried the full force of the academy and was very impressive. Other colleges may pay more attention to donors or well-known alumni.

I would also suggest contacting peer institutions and marshalling basic numbers — full time faculty, number of undergraduate/graduate students taught (or equivalent student credit hours), number of majors, etc. We have to get these numbers when our departments have external reviews anyway, and chances are that at least one of the peer institutions went through this review process in the last year and has the data handy.

RSN: What are the arguments that you think administration officials find most persuasive?

Juergensmeyer: Remind administrators of all that they get out of religious studies departments. They are cost effective, especially in smaller institutions where they provide comparative cultural studies, ethics, and the study of ancient societies all in one department. They give luster to a university’s reputation as a cultured repository of the traditions of humanities and liberal arts.

And they’re visible — unlike a lot of arcane subjects the university teaches, the public easily understands what religion is and why it’s important. And for this reason, you might quietly add, it would be politically embarrassing if an administrator tried to axe one of them — or to put it more bluntly, the phrase “holy hell” comes to mind.

Narayanan: Above all, the administration of your university may want to see how your “numbers” stack up against peer institutions. I know this is not what we were trained to do in graduate school; nevertheless, this is crucial. Administrators need to know that while the number of your majors may not be as much as in, say, psychology, it is comparable to your peer institutions. Many administrators in your university are there to work with you — these numbers help them.

Be sure that the administration has the right statistics for your department. Frequently the grants you get may go uncounted. In large universities, there are different ways of counting external grants, and unless a grant is recorded and disbursed through the office of grants/division of sponsored research or its equivalent, it is invisible to the administration. In some universities only “expenditures” are tracked — the method favored in disciplines like chemistry. In the humanities, however, many fellowships are given directly to the applicant and bypass the university — so they are not noted. Keep a list of all the monies received by the department through grants, fellowships, and private donations.

If faculty lines in your department are being cut purely on budgetary grounds, it does not help to tell the administration, “not us, cut them.” The administrator may want suggestions on what to cut if your lines are going to be saved. Work with colleagues to think of various alternatives about where cuts can be made and propose them. Obviously I am not talking about suggesting cutting other units, but sometimes, mergers or “clusters” may be preferable to the firing of faculty. In having clusters, for instance, the administration may save on chairs’ salaries, supplements, etc. Certainly this is not the best option, but it may save your faculty positions if worse things are being contemplated.

Schmidt: Oddly enough, teaching large numbers of undergraduates, perhaps more than some other humanities departments, may not be seen as sufficiently meritorious. Our college administration would have been more favorably impressed by a large number of majors; the collectively small number of majors over the past five years was cited again and again as one reason for merging us with philosophy. Administrators need to be educated that numbers (especially of majors) are not everything. Nevertheless, our department implemented a new undergraduate honors program and new 200-level courses that correspond to areas of focus and strength within our major, hoping that these efforts will eventually translate into more religious studies majors. Administration officials find outcomes the most persuasive argument — in funding, publications, good graduate programs, and majors.

RSN: Economic downturns don’t last forever. Looking long term over the coming decade, what should religion departments be doing to strengthen their position for receiving strong financial support from their universities?

Juergensmeyer: Departments endure when they are seen to be central to the university’s mission, indispensable to its operations, and valuable for its future. In addition to developing ties to the administration and to campus governance committees, the religious studies department should demonstrate the distinction of its faculty — for instance, it might hold events to recognize its faculty members when they publish articles and books and receive grants and other distinctions.

Departments should also look outside the university for sources of support from the community, and seek financial funding for lectures, courses, scholarships, and endowed professorships. It’s hard to axe a department that is bringing in money! Harder still to eliminate a department that demonstrates how essential it is to the university’s success.

Schmidt: In a quantitative, business-style environment, only numbers matter. We can compete neither with the sciences in external funding nor with more traditional departments as regards numbers of majors. Difficult economic times require departments to be willing to make some changes. These sacrifices include a smaller faculty for the immediate future and possibly shared resources. Better funding will occur through private giving, external faculty grants, and the sharing of internal resources across the college and the campus. Ultimately though, over the coming decade, religious studies departments need to do what we do best. Education, education, education about the significance and value of the field of religious studies, not only of students and colleagues, but of administrators at the highest level, needs to be a permanent goal.