OUR JOB DESCRIPTION changed six years ago. Many of us in the field of religion had struggled for years to convince secular colleagues, skeptical administrators, and a suspicious public of the importance of educating undergraduates about religion, often to little avail. We were all familiar with the arguments against religious studies. Religion was too personal, too private. Scholars were too liberal, too critical. Departments of religion were a luxury, an anachronism, or a threat to church-state separation. Until 9/11. On a single day, the conversation about religion changed in this country. Arguments we had been making for years no longer fell on deaf ears. In fact, they began to be made by others. The news media began to turn to scholars of religion on a daily basis to clarify the seemingly overwhelming complexities surrounding religious sects and movements. The Times of London urged U.S. universities to take steps to aid Americans "to become more religiously literate so that they can [better] judge public policy issues." Former secretary of state Madeleine Albright wrote that a failure to understand other religions "poses one of the greatest challenges to national security." In the face of oftentimes mystifying acts of religious violence globally, American colleges and universities increasingly turned to the academic field of religion for reason and insight.

The impact on the discipline has been profound. Time magazine has traced a large and widespread increase in enrollments in religious studies courses at the university level since September 2001. On many campuses, religion courses have emerged as the most popular electives. In not only private colleges but also state universities, courses in the field are increasingly required as a part of core requirements, thus impacting all aspects of undergraduate education. Several new degree programs have sprung up.

The Challenge to the Field

With the rapid growth of the major in religion, with the unique place it occupies in the modern academy, and with significant changes in the national and global context in which Americans view religion, there is a need for the field to reassess the relationship between the goals of the concentration and those of liberal education. The Teagle Foundation grant on "The Religion Major and Liberal Education" provides a unique opportunity for members of the American Academy of Religion to engage in a sustained dialogue regarding our central role in shaping the religious and cultural literacy of the next generation of Americans.

There is perhaps no academic field more centrally involved in addressing essential learning outcomes involving not only intellectual and practical skills (such as critical inquiry, written and oral communication, and problem solving) but also the areas of personal and social responsibility (including ethical reasoning and action, intercultural knowledge, and civic knowledge and engagement) than the field of religion. There also are few academic fields that are more diverse with undergraduate programs of religion variously situated in liberal arts colleges, religiously affiliated colleges, research universities, and theology schools. In 2000, the American Academy of Religion, with a grant from the Lilly Endowment, examined the present state of the field in its Census of Religion and Theology Programs. With a 79 percent response rate, the census revealed diverse conceptions of the major curriculum and a range of approaches to achieving what are, at times, very different learning outcomes. Some member programs have added requirements that students undertake coursework in world religions, non-Western religions, Islam, religious violence, or ethics. Others have begun to expect that students conduct fieldwork in local religious communities. Still others mandate that students engage in service learning as a component of their studies through internships in nonprofit, religious, and community organizations. Despite the survey and the wealth of approaches it revealed, there has been little opportunity for a sustained follow-up discussion about the nature of the major, the effectiveness of various approaches in impacting student learning, and alternate steps that might be considered. There also has been little opportunity to disseminate information about the success or lack of success of approaches that have been tried by member institutions, leaving each institution, in effect, to reinvent the wheel. These steps are particularly crucial given the changes wrought on both the nation and the field by the events of 9/11. They also are crucial given the increasingly prominent role that undergraduate courses in religion play in shaping the cultural literacy of a broad range of Americans, from journalists and...
The project formally will extend almost multiple lawyersto government employees, business

leaders, and clergypersons. This project has, in one sense, a very sim-

ple goal: to promote a sustained public dialogue within the field concerning how the concentration in religion can serve the evolving goals of liberal education and the needs of American society. The project seeks to encourage broad and diverse participation within the AAR in considering the following questions:

1. How might we invigorate learning in the field in light of recent global events?
2. In a context of growing religious violence and radicalism, how can we encourage students to engage ethical issues in a way that is both academical-

ly rigorous and morally constructive?
3. How can we best create learning envi-

ronments which encourage students to intelligently and critically engage the moral, religious, and spiritual issues central to humanit y while in the major and throughout their lives?
4. How can the concentration enhance its role in promoting practical skills cen-

tral to liberal education such as written and oral communication, critical think-

ing, and problem solving? How might the major be integrated with achieving the personal and social outcomes outlined above?
5. In light of the growing number of institutions that require undergraduates to take courses in religion, what should be the shape of foundation or core courses in the field?

Multiple Opportunities for Participation

The project formally will extend almost two full years, from the initial convening of the working group in early 2007 to the AAR Annual Meeting in November 2008, when there will be a special open forum to discuss the completed White Paper. Ideally, the impact of the initiative will extend years beyond this initial period. All work, in addition to regular meet-

ings of a distinguished and diverse "work-

ing group," will be a total of five significant public undertakings that the AAR will undertake.

All of these undertakings will encourage participation by AAR members, and some are already under-

way.

First, a series of ten $500 seed grants were awarded to individual institutions to promote the discussion of the religious studies majors on a diverse group of cam-

puses. The call for these proposals went out in this publication and in the White Paper this spring. Over 30 proposals were submitted, and members of the AAR's Academic Relations Committee ranked the top 10. For those of us who read through the proposals, it is clear that there are a large number of challenges facing our field — from diffi-
culties getting programs started to grow-

ing pains as existing programs evolve into something new — and also a great deal of creativity, ideas, and enthusiasm in response to these challenges. The reports of the 10 institutions receiving seed grants will be integrated into the final White Paper.

Second, a daylong Leadership Workshop on "The Religion Major and Liberal Education" will be held on Friday, November 16, in San Diego, the day before the official start of the 2007 Annual Meeting. The workshop will pro-

vide a forum for a sustained discussion of the goals of and the challenges to the major, as well as interactive sessions exploring what is working and what is not on individual campuses. The keynote speaker will be Stephen Prothero of Boston University, author of Religious Literacy. All signa tors to this being the most popular AAR workshop ever, with over 40 people already registered, but seats are still available. We hope you can attend.

Third, a special paper session on "The Religion Major and Liberal Education" will be held at the 2007 Annual Meeting (Saturday, November 17, 1:00-3:30 pm).

Five interesting perspectives on the major will be heard, with scholars representing church-related colleges, public universi-
ties, community colleges, and liberal arts institutions. Please attend the session and join in the dialogue.

Fourth, in spring 2008 and led by work-

ing group members, a White Paper will be written discussing the state of the reli-
gion major and outlining findings and best practices that have surfaced from the seed grants, workshop, and paper session. This White Paper will be distributed to all AAR members before the 2008 Annual Meeting.

Finally, at the 2008 Meeting, a special session will be held to discuss the White Paper and map out issues for AAR mem-

bers to consider in the years ahead.

Why This Project?

Perhaps too often, our participation in the AAR serves to remind us of our dif-

ferences — differences in institutional and religious affiliation, methodological approach, and disciplinary expertise. It’s clear, though, that there are certain issues that concern the religious literacy of our students. We all believe that what our discipline does is genuinely important. We are all commit-
ted to being better at what we do.

Through the support of the Tagle Foundation, the current project provides us resources to explore these common goals in a sustained fashion. It provides us with a context to learn from each other, both with regard to what is working and what is not. The project will only be a success, though, with your participation. I hope you will contact me (renickc@gwu.edu) or other members of the working group with ideas and sugges-
tions, and I hope you will participate in the workshop, the paper session, and the various other forums we have planned.

Recent world events present our field with a unique opportunity to reconsider and potentially to redefine our roles and respon-
sibilities. How we respond to this opportu-

nity will not only shape the future of our profession but also the religious literacy of the next generation of Americans.

Wildcard Session Features Papers on Liberal Education

As part of the project "The Religion Major and Liberal Education," a wildcard session has been scheduled for the 2007 Annual Meeting in San Diego. The session has a variety of papers addressing the evolving place of the religion major in the modern academy — from reflections of the institutional impact upon the reli-
gion major to addressing how the religion major better prepares students to meet the needs of liberal education, the professions, and society.

Timothy Renick, Georgia State University and principal investigator for the project, will preside. Five papers will be presented:

• "The Religious Other and the Goals of the Liberal Arts" by Katherine Janice Jones, Wofford College
• "For Sapiental Literacy: The Role of Religion at Public Colleges" by Anthony Mansuro, Collin County CommunityCollege
• "The Place and Purpose of Religion at a Church-Related College" by David C. Ratke,Lenoir-Rhyne College
• "A Reconciliation of Religious Studies in Three Settings: Developing Discursive Values" by David Reinhardt,DePaul University
• "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Religious Studies and the Community College" by Steve Young,McHenry County College

The Religion Major and Liberal Education" is a two-year project to reassess the relationship between the goals and objectives of undergraduate concentrations in religion and those of liberal education. As such, the AAR wants to involve as many as possible in the conversation. You are encouraged to attend this session and the leadership workshop to discuss this important initiative.

Center for the Study of Law and Religion From Silver to Gold: The Next 25 Years of Law and Religion

A Silver Anniversary Celebration

October 24–26, 2007, Emory University School of Law, Atlanta, Georgia

The world’s leading scholars will:

• Anticipate and articulate the hardest questions of law and religion to be faced during the next quarter century.
• Formulate how these questions might be best approached and answered.

Themes they will address:

• Religious liberty, human rights, and church-state relations
• Sex, marriage, and family life
• Christian, Jewish, and Islamic law

Conveners: John Witte, Jr., Director, Center for the Study of Law and Religion
Frank Alexander, Founding Director, Center for the Study of Law and Religion

Seats are limited. Register at www.law.emory.edu/cslr/silveranniversary Registration deadlines: early/September 21, late/October 21. Fee to Emory faculty, staff, students, and alumni/e. Fees apply to non-Emory registrants. For more information, go to www.law.emory.edu/cslr or call 404-712-8710.

The Religion Major and Liberal Education Working Group Members

Timothy Renick (Principal Investigator), Chair and founder of the Department of Religious Studies at Georgia State University and a member of the Teaching and Learning Committee of the AAR

Lynn Schofield Clark, Assistant Professor of Mass Communication and Director of the Eckerd International Center for Journalism and New Media, Denver University, and author of From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural (2005) and co-editor of Media, Home, and Family (2004), editor of Religion, Media, and the Marketplace (2007) and co-editor of Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media (2002)

Kyle Cole, Director of College Programs, American Academy of Religion

Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, ordained American Baptist minister, Associate Professor of Religious Education, Claremont School of Theology, and author of Hispanic Bible Institutes and co-author of A Martyr Colonel Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation


Amia Shiraiz, senior partner in the Shirai Group, a law firm specializing in immigration law, and an undergraduate major in Religious Studies

Chava Weisler, Philip and Muriel Berman Professor of Jewish Civilization in the Department of Religion Studies, Lehigh University, author of Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women (1999), and a teacher at Lafayette College, DeSales University, and Moravian College
The Religion Major and Liberal Education: A Conversation

The AAR’s Working Group for The Religion Major and Liberal Education Project believed a conversation among three scholars with deep ties to religious studies would help to illuminate the intricacies involved in the project. In different academic positions, we are fortunate to publish this interview with Colgate University’s Rebecca Chopp, Northwestern University’s Eugene Lowe Jr., and Pomona College’s Zayn Kassam.

RSN: In order to function as a contributing member of society, are there central ideas and concepts that every undergraduate—regardless of major—should know about religion? If so, have these ideas and topics changed over the past generation?

Rebecca Chopp: More than ever, undergraduates need to master the basic assumptions and become handy with some of the skills involved in religious studies and in theological studies. Over the past generation religion has emerged as a significant force for societal, cultural, and personal meaning. One of the many implications of 9/11 is that few Westerners can afford the luxury of thinking that religion will disappear or be reduced to the fringes of society. Secularization theories, once so popular in the academy, now seem largely irrelevant and dangerously outdated. Globalization has included the realization that religions are a real force in our contemporary period and we have to understand how meaning operates differently in different religious traditions. However, 9/11 and subsequent events are not the only reasons religion is alive and well on our campuses. More and more faculty in departments such as political science, physics, and geology and professional schools including law, medicine, public health, and business consider some aspect of religion as subject matter. The immigration of new religions in America is another key phenomenon, as well as the growing dialogue about spirituality, a term that was once a rather negative term, is now part of the vocabulary. There are also new religious movements, including the growth of Islam and of various spiritual practices and perspectives shared with the Western world. A significant material and devotional form of this is the popular spirituality movement. Most of these developments have happened since 9/11, and some have been a result of 9/11. However, many of these developments are not new, but they have been accelerated by the events of 9/11 and the subsequent events. So I think it is important to think about the role of religion in society and in our daily lives.

Eugene Y. Lowe Jr.: Over the last generation, academic institutions and academic disciplines have engaged questions of diversity from a number of vantage points. In our conversations with issues of access by underrepresented groups, colleges and universities also faced questions about diversity requirements in the curriculum and in student life programs. The study of religion, which from the beginning has been concerned with the religious heritage of the United States and the place of religion in American public life, offers an opportunity to engage issues that are central to the study of religion as a whole. However, the study of religion cannot be reduced to a discussion of religious diversity alone. The study of religion must be understood in its cultural and political context. The study of religion must be understood in its historical context as well. The study of religion must be understood in its ethical context. The study of religion must be understood in its social and cultural context. The study of religion must be understood in its political context as well. The study of religion must be understood in its psychological context. The study of religion must be understood in its philosophical context. The study of religion must be understood in its theological context. The study of religion must be understood in its literary context. The study of religion must be understood in its artistic context. The study of religion must be understood in its archival context. The study of religion must be understood in its archival context.

RSN: Similarly, are there central skills that every undergraduate major in religion should possess? If so, have these skills changed over the past generation?

Chopp: As I suggested above, I think all students graduating in the twenty-first century need to understand the critical thinking skills offered by religious studies and theological studies. I think undergraduates need to understand how religions can be forces for good and evil and how religions are both social-cultural realities and individual constructions of meaning. Study of intellectual thought, aesthetic performance, political action, and social responsibility are core skills, and these skills should be included in undergraduate study of religion. Lowe: It seems that religious studies scholars are always asking questions about what we should study and how. This fact creates both intellectual excitement and a sense of inclusivity. A coherent undergraduate program in religious studies provides the opportunity for students to develop critical methodological self-consciousness about the data of religious experience and the way in which they interpret it. In the United States, I think this means a familiarity with the role of Christianity and the Bible in American history, and the ironies and paradoxes of their development in a historically Christian culture, to becoming the most diverse religious country in the world, while maintaining a dominant identification with Christianity. The last generation will not only be concerned with the study of religious texts but also with the study of the cultural and political context in which they are created. The study of religious texts and the study of the cultural and political context in which they are created should be equally important. The study of religious texts should be understood in the context of the cultural and political context in which they are created. The study of religious texts should be understood in the context of the cultural and political context in which they are created.

Kassam: While in the past every undergraduate major in religion might have been expected to identify the key beliefs and practices of the major religious traditions, which number about five or six, now every religious studies major should emerge with a sense of wonder at the sheer diversity of ways in which human beings are religious. Yes, of course, a student should know the central figures, the authoritative texts, the key rituals and observances, the organizing institutions, and the significant material and devotional forms of expression of the major world traditions. However, all of these must be related to the historical and cultural context in which they arose and a sense of the issues they were grappling with. In addition, and this is what makes the study of religion so exciting and so important, seeking to understand how people have understood and found ways to be religious in connection with their existential realities through the ages is a significant part of the study of religion not only fascinating, but also central to understanding human civilization. The image that comes most readily to mind is the one invoked by Salman Rushdie in Haroun and the Sea of Stories, in which the source stories generated by the ocean of stories continually interact with each other, meld with each other, and bring fresh life into, and generate new stories that are related to the source story but in a different and intriguing way. What are the afterlives of the text? What happens when religious texts migrate through conquest or immigration? How does the context create a new story? How do we make sense of tragedy? What kinds of stories are created to mobilize exercises in power? What are the shadows they create?

RSN: How can we if we are effective teaching these central ideas and skills to our students? How do we best show others that we have done so?

Chopp: The study of religion includes disciplinary practices and perspectives shared with the social sciences and the humanities. Almost all social science and humanities disciplines are impossible to assess in order to yield hard-core quantitative data. If the point of intellectual thought and spiritual practice in a religious tradition is wisdom gained over a lifetime, then assessment has to be shaped to fit each school. I have not seen evidence to support the claim that we can size “fit all assessment” that works for all programs of religion in all schools.

Lowe: I think a good test of our teaching is how students learn to address new and unexpected questions that address experiences and values different from their own. In a time when accountability looms as an important question for many stakeholders on our campuses and universities, being able to explain and justify outcomes is important. We need to exercise caution here, and make clear that religious studies as a part of the academic humanities does not.

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Proposals Offer Insight into Complexities of Religion Major

EARLIER THIS YEAR, 31 religious studies departments submitted proposals to secure a “seed grant” to study their unique academic environment vis-à-vis the religion major and liberal education. The working group for the project, with advice from the Academic Relations Committee, selected ten programs to receive the seed grants, funded by the AAR through the Teagle Foundation grant it received for the Religion Major and Liberal Education Project. Here, we are reprinting portions of the grant proposals from some of those programs to give readers an idea of what is envisioned.

Religious Studies at the Community College

Steve Young, McHenry County (IL) College

Close to half of all American college stu-
dents attend community colleges, and the bulk of these young men and women complete the majority of their general education requirements before transferring to a four-year institution. Approximately 70 percent of these transfer students will change their major at least once as an undergraduate. From this it follows that (a) community colleges are poised to play an important role in developing the pool of potential religious studies majors at four-year institutions, and (b) a large percentage of transfer students who major in religion at community colleges will continue their studies at a four-year institution. From this it follows that (a) community colleges are poised to play an important role in developing the pool of potential religious studies majors at four-year institutions, and (b) a large percentage of transfer students who major in religion at community colleges will continue their studies at a four-year institution.

McHenry County College in Crystal Lake, Illinois, has experienced a 64 percent increase in total student body. Since the mid-1990s, this has experienced an average annual growth rate of 6 percent and would likely experience continued growth over the next several years. The college now serves a younger, more traditional student body. Since the mid-1990s, it has experienced an average annual growth rate of 6 percent and would likely experience continued growth over the next several years.

Yet in their first two years of college, most students at MCC are exposed to religious studies mostly and indirectly through other disciplines. For example, different sorts of Islam might be touched upon in an introductory course on the history of Western civilization, an English course on comparative literature, or even during an art history class. More in-depth teaching — to promote intercultural knowledge, to engage the moral and spiritual issues central to humanity, or to invigorate more critical and constructive learning in a light of recent global events — is not, however, offered in the core coursework most students will complete before transferring to a four-year institution.

The challenges for religious studies at MCC, therefore, are similar to those at many other community colleges. And attempts to identify and address these challenges should be useful for both MCC and potentially for other community colleges as well. The key challenges we face at MCC are as follows: few course offerings in religious studies; few faculty trained in religious studies; difficulty in finding qualified adjunct instructors; coordinating the interdisciplinary study of religion; addressing the appropriateness of religious studies at a secular educational institution given cultural marginalization and privatization of religious studies; forming appropriate discipline offer-
ings and linking them with Illinois Articulation Initiative and programs at four-year schools; and generating and sustaining sufficient enrollment for new courses in religious studies.

The religion major is central to a liberal education in America. Students must become more religiously literate to better understand the root belief systems of other cultures, the foundations of their own culture, and intelligently and ethically judge the pressing public policy issues of the day in a more global context. Community colleges can be decisive in offering courses and introducing studies to course as a foundation to baccalaureate-seeking transfer students who will continue this field of study at a four-year institution. To that end, and in response to a sustained dialogue over the challenges listed above, and based on the popularity of the “Religions of the World” course thus far, the Philosophy Department at MCC has explored the possibility of instituting a much broader religious studies program at McHenry County College.

Religion at Colorado Christian University: The Challenge

Jeffrey Mallinson and Frank Mitchel Ames, Colorado Christian University

The American Academy of Religion’s mission “welcomes all disciplined reflection on religion — both from within and outside of communities of belief and practice — and seeks to enhance its broad public understanding.” Colorado Christian University’s School of Theology is arguably located near the geographical epicenter of North American Evangelicalism. The challenge, in this context, is to help students and community members understand the tools of the academic study of religion to the extent that it can become appropriately self-critical, even within a community of belief and practice. This proposal solicits much-needed help toward creating a viable and respectable religion major despite the historic difficulties of such work within the evangelical academy. A seed grant would help our academic unit formulate a strong proposal for a religion major, complete with grants for preserving academic freedom and the integrity of scholarship alongside confessional restrictions. We believe this process will produce both a successful religion program as well as an interesting report to the American Academy of Religion regarding the unique challenges of a comparative religion program at a distinctly Christian institution, especially regarding programmatic emphases on the nature of fundamentalisms.

After careful planning and study, the School of Theology hopes to inaugurate a religion major. This will draw on those confessional institutions that use the term “religion” as an umbrella for a variety of dogmatic, historical, and textual studies within Christian theology. Rather, the religion program at Colorado Christian University will train students in the methodologies and literature that are part of the top religion programs in the academy.

Sorcery for curricular development will come from Jeffrey Mallinson, dean of the School of Theology. The primary faculty member to direct the process will be Frank Ames. Planning will emphasize the role of the study of fundamentalisms, and strategies to ensure academic freedom within a confessional institution. Long term, our goal is to create a center for the understanding of American Evangelicalism within the movement, in order to provide students with the academic tools for productive and sensitive self-criticism.

Religious Studies in Texas: A Mission without a Major

Rebecca Raphael, Texas State University—San Marcos

No public university in Texas has an independent department of religion. Only one, the University of Texas at Austin, has a religion major. Attempts to establish majors and departments often meet with entrenched opposition at both the local and state level. The purpose of this proposal is two-fold: first, to examine the hurdles involved in the expansion of religious studies at Texas State University—San Marcos; and second, to explore what the American Academy of Religion can do to support religious studies in the absence of a major or department. Since the second most populous state is unlikely to support departments in the near future, the AAR should plan outside the department-centric model of religious studies in the liberal arts.

In 1999, the Philosophy Department hired Rebecca Raphael as the only religious studies scholar on the faculty of Texas State University. She revised courses formerly taught by local ministers, obtained normal academic funding for all of them, and became the coordinator of the department’s interdisciplinary minor in religion. Enrollment in the minor has increased six-fold, and average course enrollment has tripled. In spite of this demonstrated demand, the department’s proposal to establish a tenure line and to move toward a major have been consistently rejected by administrators. In fact, the religion minor remains tenured only inasmuch as it is supported not by at least one tenure line. During the 2007–2008 academic year, the principal investigator will organize two public panel discussions. One will bring biblical scholars and First Amendment specialists to campus to discuss academic study of the Bible in the state’s public high schools and universities. The other will initiate a dialogue on how a liberal arts curricular, absent a religion major, can better address the urgent public need for better knowledge of the world’s religions. Speaker invitations will draw on those confessional institutions with the issues in Texas, e.g., Mark Chavee of SMU or Douglas Laycock of the University of Michigan School of Law. In addition, the principal investigator will conduct a survey of students and administrators to determine perceptions about religious studies. The survey and follow-up interviews will determine the relative importance of several factors (e.g., perceptions about constitutionality or the academic quality of the field) in obstructing development of a major. The results should also provide the AAR with insight into how to promote the study of religion in the absence of a major or department.

Texas State University trains more public school teachers than any other university in Texas. The presence or absence of religious studies in its curriculum thus directly affects what prospective elementary and secondary teachers take into their future classrooms. Finally, the AAR still needs to attend to suspicion of religious studies, especially in the public university system of such a large and influential state as Texas.

Religious Studies in a Jesuit Context

Paul G. Crowley, SJ, Santa Clara University

Santa Clara, a Jesuit University in the heart of California’s Silicon Valley, is the oldest institution of higher learning in the State of California. Santa Clara is today a comprehensive liberal arts university with some 9,500 undergraduate students, most of whom are enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences, the remainder in the Schools of Business and Engineering. As part of the Santa Clara Core Curriculum, all undergraduates take...
three courses in the department, one of the largest units in the university. We find that we are a unique department among Catholic and even Jesuit universities. We know what we’re trying to teach, but a “religious studies” department, and offers courses in areas broadly defined as Abuses, and Ransom That Matters: Ecology, God, and Brain drain caused by such efforts; about the homogenizing and flattening of program types, expectations, and learning that can come about when we all march to the same drummer (or accreditation rubric, as the case may be); about the loss of risk-taking, courses, teachers, scholars, and students.

On the whole, it appears that assessment practices that can yield meaningful longitudinal information about the religion major are relatively rare in our field at this time. Given the increased emphasis on assessment in higher education, however, this situation is bound to change.

Whatever our attitude toward the assessment wave, we are inevitably in its wake. Even those who regard dissent about its motivations or methods might still benefit from considering this question: How does the fact that our students studied religion as undergraduates inform their post-baccalaureate working and living? (e.g., do they tend to pursue discipline-related work? do they employ a “religious studies” knowledge base or set of methodological tools in their professional or personal lives? do they pay special attention to or enjoy an agility in interpreting or interrogating “religion” as it presents itself in the complexity of today’s world?)

I expect many of us would be interested to know this sort of thing about our students and, by extension, the long-term impact of our teaching. But are any of us actually asking the questions and considering the answers? What strategies of inquiry seem to work best, and what difference does the information make? My preliminary queries indicate that most departments track their majors (and minors, in some cases) only informally. We know what our graduates are doing because we bump into them at a homecoming football game or are asked to serve as references for them as they pursue a new trajectory. Often, and as a colleague at Waburg College in Iowa notes, “it’s really more a matter of [students] keeping track of us than of our keeping track of them.” They send us the occasional e-mail, invite us to keep up with their blogs, send us a wedding invitation, or drop by our office when they pass through town.

Increasingly, and often under the impress of accrediting bodies, religion departments are developing more formal tools. Most often, these take the shape of exit interviews for graduating seniors and brief surveys for alums. Seattle Pacific University, for example, sends surveys to religion major alums at two years and five years after graduation, while in Minnesota, the College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University conducts a senior exit survey. An abiding concern in relation to such tools is the rate of response or overall number of responses, which can undermine the statistical significance of the data collected. In the whole, it appears that assessment practices that can yield meaningful longitudinal information about the religion major are relatively rare in our field at this time. Given the increased emphasis on assessment in higher education, however, this situation is bound to change. A key partner in the work of tracking religion majors, says Chris Stanley of Saint Bonaventure University in New York, is an institution’s alumni office. When contact information for graduates is out of date or difficult to access, tracking one’s students becomes that much more arduous.

Based on my preliminary, unscientific review of the field, informal and formal strategies for keeping track of religion majors appear to produce similar conclusions. By and large, graduates of our programs have good feelings about the time they spent with us learning about religion; though they are not without complaint or constructive criticism, our alums feel like they were well served by their major. One trend many institutions report these days is an increase in double majors — students who major in religion because they’re genuinely interested in the subject matter but who also accru a “safer” (i.e., more marketable) major. The choice of the nonreligion major seems to depend in large part on the particular strengths, programs, character, and priorities of individual departments. Not surprisingly, undergraduate religion majors do a variety of things after graduation. It appears that up to one-third of them pursue religion-specific vocations, most often in the church or the academy; and roughly another third in a human services field (social work, Peace Corps, counseling, nonprofit work, etc.). The final third engage in a wide range of pursuits, from medicine and law to administration and exercise physiology.

The time is ripe for considerations of whether and how best to track our undergraduate religion majors. My initial inquiries revealed a surprisingly high level of interest in the topic among my colleagues around the nation, most often motivated by the recognition that traditional anecdotal methods may well need to be augmented by more systematic and thorough approaches.

SEED GRANTS, from p.24

OUTCOMES. Assessment. Feedback loops. Like it or not, we in higher education have had to add these terms to our lexicon. Some of us are daunted, excited, by the new challenges and possibilities. We are genuinely curious to know how we’re doing: we know what we’re trying to teach, but what are our students actually learning? And what are they doing with that knowledge and skill set once they graduate? Are we preparing them well for their diverse postbaccalaureate lives in a complex, globalized world? We wager that answers to such questions will help us improve our teaching, our curriculum, and maybe even the reputation, vitality, and utility of our discipline. Others of us are not so sanguine. We worry about the time, energy,
make simplistic claims about outcomes. Our goal is to illuminate and critically analyze central questions about the meaning in human experience across the ages and around the world.

**Kassam:** I’m not much interested in quantifying excellence, although I realize that it is necessary to do so for administrative purposes. What interests me is what goes on in the classroom, as that is our first point of contact with students. We are lucky in that the study of religion in the academy continues to evolve and to surface the many complexities associated with the study of religion, which now is no longer just the study of “essences,” if I might use that term. We have been so greatly enriched through appropriating multidisciplinary approaches to the study of religions, bringing in the wealth of fields such as anthropology, political science, cultural studies, economics, fine arts, theater, music, philosophy, gender studies, ethnic studies, linguistics, literature, media studies, and others. So, effectiveness in teaching the central ideas and skills pertaining to the study of religion all depends on what is done in the classroom, as a first indicator. Religious studies are by and large a service department that trains far more students than it produces majors, so showing how many students actually take religious studies courses, and how well they do in those courses, is one way to measure whether students are even being exposed to the skills necessary to read religion, let alone master such skills. That said, I prefer to take the longer view. Is the study of religion being mainstreamed into the larger academy sufficient that every student, regardless of major, feels he must take at least one course in religious studies? How is religion being factored into the theorizing being done in other disciplines? Education about religion is so critical, more so today than ever before, so to me the best indicator of effective teaching about religion is when you have opinion makers in society who can talk intelligently about religion. I’m afraid I don’t think we are there yet.

**RSN:** What do you think is the greatest strength about the way our field currently trains its undergraduates? What is the greatest weakness?

**Chopp:** Our greatest strength is the incredible expansion of our field and the sheer creativity of the scholarship over the last 30 years. We have expanded the number of religions studied and the tools with which we study them. We have begun to embrace seriously the diverse experience of men and women within any one religious tradition. We have also embraced studying popular relig- ion as well as official religion. The greatest difficulty is that we are still too porous about the intellectual reflection — in understanding how and why persons create meaning within a religious tradition. Many of the undergraduates I talk with wish faculty members would be more open to this kind of discussion in and outside of the classroom.

**LOWE:** As a field that uses several disciplines and modes of analysis in the examination of ideas, practices, and texts, we are a diverse community of scholars. The more diverse we become, the more we are vulnerable to merely describing differences, and not taking the time to analyze and make critical distinctions and evaluations. We have been more resistant than any traditions to terrorism is a case in point. We need to be able to point out ways in which religion is a “problem.”

**Kassam:** Our greatest strength — and concomitantly, our most vulnerable area — is and will continue to be our faculty. Creative and innovative ways in teaching students how to engage with, think about, study, understand, and explore religion and ways of being religious have the greatest impact on what a student takes away from perhaps just that one class in one’s entire career as an undergraduate. No matter how small the institution, and how low the numbers of faculty teaching religious studies, the quality of the faculty member matters. We need continually to pay attention to faculty development. In addition, it is clear to me that educational institutions have to make a concerted effort to include religious studies as part of their curriculum, and the field as a whole needs to be strengthened in that area. I also think that the move to include a lived understanding of religion in addition to the traditional text-based curriculum is a move in an enriching direction, and we need much more of that, whether through the incorporation of films, site visits, ethnohistoric accounts, and so forth. What we need much more of are study abroad programs that will allow students to participate in, observe, discuss, debate, experience, and add to the complexity of the variety of understandings of religions. We need to work with the study abroad programs at our institutions to see if there are ways that the study of religion could be incorporated into their programs. A third area is the study of languages. To be able to read source texts or news papers in their languages of production is so critical to understanding the nuances of what is going on.

**RSN:** Harvard University recently has been in the news for revamping its undergraduate core curriculum. How do you see the needs and nature of liberal education evolving? Is this a good thing?

**Chopp:** After spending five years in a residential liberal arts college, I think that this type of school (not only Colgate, but others as well) should be the model for all undergraduate education. What I have learned from faculty members and students at Colgate about the evolution of liberal arts is that creative thinking can and must be married to integrative thought. The twenty-first century may be about disassembling information but is always and everywhere about recombining. Synthesizing will be as important as the specialization of knowledge that was dominated since the 1950s: 2) Technology shapes not only to whom we convey knowledge but how we manage and produce it; and 3) The liberal arts, according to tradition and contempo- rary aspirations, teach the obligation of being a citizen-leader in society. To educate for leadership, which seems to be the require- ment of the liberal arts in the twenty-first century, means formation of skills, values, and habits as well as the mastering of critical, creative, and integrative thinking.

**LOWE:** The idea of liberal education has been evolving for cen- turies. The Harvard effort, which is still a work in progress, is a reminder both that we should resist a simplistic consumerism in undergraduate education, and that it very difficult to get faculty to agree about anything. The educational principle of “In loco paren- tes” — which is very our favor — had some good things about it, one is that students should not be expected to know everything about what is good for them before they matriculate in college.

**Kassam:** Liberal education faces the challenge of striking a balance between traditional subjects and newer epistemologies that become increasingly relevant as societies change and new fields of analysis and knowledge open up. We need to bring the fields of religious studies and environmental studies to the atten- tion of the intellectual community for, regardless of whether one is religious or concerned about global warming, one needs to understand the currency, the issues, and the ways in which each of these species significant power in creating and exacerbating the challenges of the 21st century and simultaneously, in prov-iding the means to address them.