What we have learned from the Census of Religion and Theology programs

Edward R. Gray, AAR Director of Academic Relations

W hat have we learned from this effort involving all accredited institutions of higher education in the US and Canada? The short answer is “a lot.” Our knowledge of the field has grown exponentially from the outset of this project a year ago. Then, I could not have provided with confidence the number of programs in religion. It is not that we did not have any sense of the size of the field, but rather, that we had no reliable, updated database against which to test that sense. Now, thanks to the cooperation of nearly 900 department chairs and program unit heads across the US and Canada, we can begin to answer some key questions about the undergraduate study of religion and theology. Already, the census data has been used to provide basic contact information on all undergraduate programs in religion and theology known to us. (See the Final Religion page of the AAR website, www.aarweb.org/department/finding.asp). Every department chair who completed the census has received a special respondent’s report showing how that program compares to similar ones, as measured by Carnegie classification, institutional affiliation, and region. The members of the Academic Relations Task Force, who conducted the Census, are especially pleased that we can provide these highlights of the (still) emerging profile of the field for readers of Religious Studies News, AAR Edition.

Turning field-wide statistical data into information for strategic institutional decision-making has been a hallmark of the AAR’s efforts to support departments through the Academic Relations Program. It was a guiding principle in the construction of the census questionnaire and project design. This report marks the first effort to provide such field-wide data from this survey. Thanks to it, we are better prepared to make the case that every student deserves an education that includes the study of religion.

Table A. Institution Type Frequency %
1. Public 222 24.7
2. Private non-sectarian 183 20.4
3. Catholic 153 17.1
4. Jewish 3 0.3
5. Protestant 324 36.1
6. Other religious affiliation 12 1.3

Half of the responding chairs described their programs as “free-standing” departments. Another third chose “combined department” as the best description of their program. The remaining programs are “borrowing” faculty from other departments or are themselves part of a humanities or social science division. Nearly 90% offer a major or minor.

The general introduction to religion course meets institutional distribution requirements at nearly three out of four institutions where it is offered (74%). The introduction to world religion course does so at 67% of institutions that offer such a course. Introduction to the Bible courses fulfill such requirements at 72% of all institutions.

Programs and departments, the Census indicates, benefit strongly from institutional policies requiring students to take religion courses. Fifty-five percent of all institutions have such policies for the bachelor’s degree.

This version of the Census targeted undergraduate departments. Of these responding departments, 25% reported that their institutions also offer a master’s degree; and 8%, a doctorate.

Undergraduate curricula
We were especially interested in constructing some picture of the undergraduate offerings of departments. The Census divided undergraduate course offerings into three areas: Introductory, Traditions, and Topics.

Fifty-six percent offer what the Census described as a “general introduction to religion.” A world religions introductory course is offered by 68% of respondents, and 69% offer an introduction to the Bible. Among quarter of responding programs (27%) offer an introductory course in sacred texts.

The Census could not capture every kind of introductory course. It did establish that fewer than four out of every ten departments offer separate introductions to Eastern (39%) and Western traditions (36%).

The Traditions section of the questionnaire reveals that Judaism is a subject of study at 40% of the departments responding. Islam and Buddhism are offered at nearly a third of departments, and Confucianism at a fifth. Hinduism is offered at 27% of responding departments, and indigenous traditions at 19%. While curricular offerings are decidedly focused on the Christian traditions at most responding departments, almost half of all departments (46%) offer comparative courses as well.

Table B. Programs offering courses in the following “topics” — by percentage of those responding.

Bible
Old Testament 78%
New Testament 84%
Christianity
Historical Christianity 71%
Christian Theology 65%
Christian Ethics 54%

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Slightly more than one in ten responding programs reported a comprehensive examination requirement for majors. Majors are twice as likely to be required to submit a thesis paper. An additional 14% of responding programs permit a thesis paper as an option. The most common integrative experience is the senior seminar, with nearly half of all departments requiring it.

Faculty

The questionnaire asked departments to report the number of full-time faculty during the 1999-2000 academic year by rank and gender. The largest departments during the 1999-2000 academic year by rank were departmental chairs. Nearly half of all departments requiring it.

A look at the field, by institutional affiliation

A look at the field, by Carnegie Classification

Data regarding majors and baccalaureate degrees not reported for institutions that do not grant baccalaureate degrees.

*Includes all sections of courses.

**Includes Gender and Sexuality.

Table D. Department size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Profile</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Private, non-sectarian</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Protestant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of religion majors to total enrollment</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of declared majors (average)</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of bachelor’s degrees (average)</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women receiving bachelor’s degrees (average)</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table E. Faculty Profile, By rank

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty Rank (%) at each rank</th>
<th>Professor</th>
<th>Associate professor</th>
<th>Assistant professor</th>
<th>Instructor/Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>avg.</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>std. deviation</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total range</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of reporting programs offering programs</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table F. Department/Program Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department/Program Resources</th>
<th>Department budgets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $50,000</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 - $99,999</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 - $249,999</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$250,000 - $499,999</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$500,000 - $999,999</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1 million - $2 million</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2 million or more</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NORC from p.i

Response rates by Carnegie type and Carnegie Class

To determine how representative the group of respondents was of the universe as a whole, we compared response rates across two institution-specific strata drawn from IPEDS data: institution type and Carnegie Classification. Because IPEDS supplies data only for US institutions, the group of Canadian academic units was treated as a separate stratum. The “institution type” variable classified institutions on the public/private and religious affiliation dimensions. Carnegie classifications, data also available on the IPEDS files, coded academic units according to their institutions’ 1994 Carnegie classifications.1

The overall survey response rate mirrors response rates for different categories of institutions (see table). In the Carnegie classification dimension, unit response rates varied from 71.2% to 83.3% for strata incorporating about 89% of the eligible universe. The lowest response rates were among the smallest and least typical strata. These two types of institutions — 2-year and community colleges and religious institutions that specialize in training clergy — do not organize their programs like the typical baccalaureate-granting institutions.

Nevertheless, the relative uniformity of response rates across institution strata suggests that responses to the AAR Census do not appear systematically to bias recorded data by failing to represent the universe of religion departments and programs as a whole.

1 Eligible to participate in Title IV programs as determined by the Education Department’s Office of Postsecondary Education, according to NCE’s IPEDS director, Susan Boyles (telephone conversa-

2 Because the calculation of a survey response rate depends on a definition of the size of the universe and studies of eligibility, we revised the survey after several different response rates can be calculated. All of them are equally legitimate measures of the degree of unit response to the survey, as long as assumptions about the universe and eligibility criteria are clearly stated. The American Association for Public Opinion Research lists six different methods of calculating survey response rates in its “best practices” guide, Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates for Surveys (Ann Arbor, Mich: American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2000), pp. 35-36.

3 For more information on the IPEDS Institution Characteristics data files, see documentation on the National Center for Education Statistics’ Web site at http://nces.ED.gov/ipeds/orpxv/5798. The Carnegie Foundation substantially revised its classifications of postsecondary institutions in December, 2000, when the AAR Census was in the field. This report uses the 1994 Carnegie classifications. Documentation can be found at: http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/Classification/classi-
fications.bnn.