

**California State University, Sacramento**  
**2012–2013 Annual Assessment Report**  
**Department of Humanities & Religious Studies**

1. As a result of last year's assessment effort, our department has reduced the number of learning outcomes in order realistically to be able over time to assess them all. We have continued to develop our assessment plan, mapping correlation between courses and program learning outcomes, determining specific courses in which to assess specific learning outcomes, and planning in more detail the nature of the assessment methods and measures, including specific assignments and rubrics. We have developed program learning goals and outcomes for our new master's program in Humanities. We also have settled on a year-to-year schedule for assessment of skills-related outcomes in order to ensure that we assess all five within the six-year program review cycle. The department is satisfied that this approach to the assessment process will prove manageable and meaningful.

2. As a result of last year's assessment effort, based as it was on the learning outcome assessment template of the IPP process, the department has reflected on the "big picture" and the place of assessment within it. Carrying through on our major curricular revision that was officially implemented with the Fall 2012 Catalog, the department is focusing on the two concentration tracks and the core courses within them, most especially the junior-level methodology course HRS 105 (Approaches to the Humanities) and HRS 108 (Approaches to Religious Studies) and the complementary capstone seminars HRS 195 (Seminar in Humanities) and HRS 198 (Seminar in Religious Studies). This curricular structure is proving advantageous for purposes of meaningful assessment by providing a clear segmental path to completion of the major. Our ability to provide effective advising to our majors has been enhanced by this clarity, and by the new curriculum's more distinctive sets of electives for each concentration. This in turn has helped with curricular and budgetary planning as we now have the clear goal of offering at least one elective course in each required area each semester.

3. During the 2012–2013 academic year our department assessed three Program Learning Outcomes:

- 1) PLO 2.4, Written Communication Skills: Use appropriate structure, development, usage, and reference sources to write clear, purposeful, analytical prose.
- 2) Religious Studies 5.3 (RS-5.3), Demonstrate familiarity with the ways "religion" is conceptualized and categorized in academic study.
- 3) Religious Studies 5.5 (RS-5.5). Apply appropriate academic approaches (e.g. empathy) to the study of religions, and demonstrate ability to distinguish academic study of religion from personal perspectives (e.g. "faith" perspective).

4. The methods/measures used were:

PLO 2.4:

Three faculty members (Donath, Nystrom, Shek) met to review their evaluation of anonymous

student papers from HRS 108 and HRS 195. The faculty members were provided with the assignments as well as the students' responses. One faculty member read all the HRS 195 papers, one faculty member read seven HRS 108 papers, and one faculty member read all the papers. The readers evaluated the papers using the VALUE rubric for Written Communication and the rubric provided by the course instructor.

HRS 108 is a required junior-level course for students concentrating in Religious Studies. HRS 195 is the new capstone seminar for seniors concentrating in Humanities.

PLOs RS-5.3 and RS-5.5:

These learning objectives were assessed via embedded assignments in HRS 108. Written responses to readings (app. 500 words) addressed specific questions closely aligned with PLO RS-5.5. PLO RS-5.3 was assessed via an assigned essay that was part of the final exam. Copies of ten students' papers for each objective have been archived. The department will compare these paper to work produced this coming fall by students in the capstone seminar HRS 198.

5. The criteria and/or standards of performance for the program learning outcome are:

PLO 2.4:

For this academic year, the department depended on the criteria set forth by the VALUE rubric for Written Communication (Benchmark, Milestones 2 and 3, Capstone). We plan to establish meaningful expectations and standards for our major students as data based on campus-wide, CSU system-wide, and nationwide use of the VALUE rubric becomes accessible.

PLOs RS-5.3 and RS-5.5:

The standards for these PLOs have on one hand been undergoing development for many years, as these have been course learning outcomes for HRS 108 since at least 2000. The new advantage involves our opportunity to assess the same PLOs in the capstone setting of HRS 198, thus allowing us to track progress made between these segments.

6. The following paragraphs summarize the nature of the data collected, results and findings, and areas in which students are, on one hand, doing well and achieving the expectations and, on the other hand, in need of improvement.

PLO 2.4:

In general, the faculty found that students in both classes made "good faith" attempts to focus on the intentions of the assignments. In both classes, students appeared to understand the assignments and brought content knowledge from the classes to their essays. Generally, student performance on the comparison elements of the assignments was aligned with the level of their class standing (there was marked improvement on this skill at the senior level when compared to work by students at the junior level). There was a broad spectrum of achievement in the five categories of the VALUE rubric. For both classes, the most successful papers were consistently scored at 3 or high 2s (milestone) in each of the VALUE rubric categories. Less successful papers were marred by mechanical and conceptual weaknesses and scored at the low 2 and high 1 level (milestone and benchmark). There was a consensus among the reviewers that all students

whose papers were reviewed need to improve their use of “sources and evidence” and their “control of syntax and mechanics.” The faculty members of the assessment group discussed the VALUE rubric categories and agreed that while a score of 4 on the VALUE rubric for all HRS student papers is a worthy goal, it may be difficult to achieve, given the previous preparation of our students and our sense that they do not have as much experience doing “formal” writing in their University careers as we might hope.

PLOs RS-5.3 and RS-5.5:

Scores for the written responses to readings that pertain to RS-5.5 ranged from 5.8, which is unsatisfactory, to 9.9, which is excellent. The mean score was 8.8, which is very good. This score is strong relative to overall mean score for assigned work in HRS 108, indicating that student learning with regard to his PLO is relatively strong. Results of the assessment of RS-5.3 were very similar, with a mean score of 9.0. The more important findings for both PLOs will be generated through assessment in HRS 198 this coming fall, and comparison to these current findings.

7. The following paragraphs summarize anticipated or proposed changes resulting from this year’s assessment efforts.

PLO 2.4:

As the VALUE rubric makes explicit, “written communication abilities develop through iterative experiences across the curriculum.” The assessment group discussed possible steps the department faculty might take to support improved student performance in written communication. Several recommendations were generated:

- Evidence suggests that there should be more “formal” writing (writing evaluated for both form and content including writing done in class, rather than informal, out-of-class responses) in ALL HRS classes. The GE requirement of a minimum of 1,500 words of formal graded writing in upper-division GE courses seemed to the group to be a minimal threshold for HRS class writing assignments;
- The department should consider an examination of the writing expectations in all GE courses (perhaps through a syllabus review) and should discuss the establishment of a policy for the minimum of formal graded writing to be required in both lower- and upper-division HRS classes;
- The department should identify, perhaps through curriculum mapping, the classes in which skillful use of sources and evidence is emphasized in the HRS course offerings;
- The department should encourage faculty to offer some instruction in writing (perhaps the department could draw on the expertise of the Writing Across the Curriculum director to organize a workshop to improve faculty efforts in this area).

PLOs RS-5.3 and RS-5.5:

Pending the results of this coming fall’s assessment of these PLOs in HRS 198, changes will likely involve reconfiguration of the partially integrated curricula of these two courses. At this stage of review, it would seem that focus on the issues germane to these PLOs in HRS 108 is satisfactory, but perhaps the findings in HRS 198 will reveal specific weaknesses or will indicate need for broader consideration of these issues. RS-5.3 and RS-5.5 are relevant for other courses

in the Religious Studies curriculum, most especially HRS 140, Exploring World Religions (also GE Area C3 and WI). Findings pertaining to HRS 108 and 198 will likely affect future planning for HRS 140 and other RS courses as well.

8. The department undergoes program review in the 2013-2014 cycle. Along with providing a summary overview of our assessment efforts and their impact over the course of the past five years, we look forward to attaining data via the alumni survey to be administered by the Office of Institutional Research.

In addition to assessment projects relating to program review the department plans this academic year to assess three learning outcomes:

- 1) PLO 2.2, Critical thinking skills: Demonstrate comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.
- 2) PLO RS-5.3, Demonstrate familiarity with the ways “religion” is conceptualized and categorized in academic study.
- 3) PLO RS-5.5, Apply appropriate academic approaches (e.g. empathy) to the study of religions, and demonstrate ability to distinguish academic study of religion from personal perspectives (e.g. “faith” perspective).

As noted in the foregoing, assessment of PLOs RS-5.3 and RS-5.5 will be undertaken in HRS 198, Seminar in Religious Studies. This is the capstone course for the Religious Studies concentration. The department is interested in comparing student learning as evinced in HRS 198 to that evinced in HRS 108, the junior-level core methodology course for the RS concentration, during this current academic year. This will involve embedded essay questions similar to those employed this year in HRS 108.

PLO 2.2 is one of five learning outcomes encompassed by PLG 2 Intellectual and Communication Skills. The department plans to assess one of the five in successive years. We shall apply a modified version of the VALUE rubric for critical thinking and we shall draw data from courses required in both concentrations. This approach will draw upon the strategies explored in the CTL’s Faculty Learning Collaborative “Institutional Level Assessment of Critical Thinking” (Spring 2013 through Fall 2013), in which two HRS faculty (Brodd and Dubois) are involved.