

**Comprehensive Program Review**

**for**

**The Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies**

**Valdosta State University**

**Spring 2009**

**Section I–General Program Information 0.000g009**

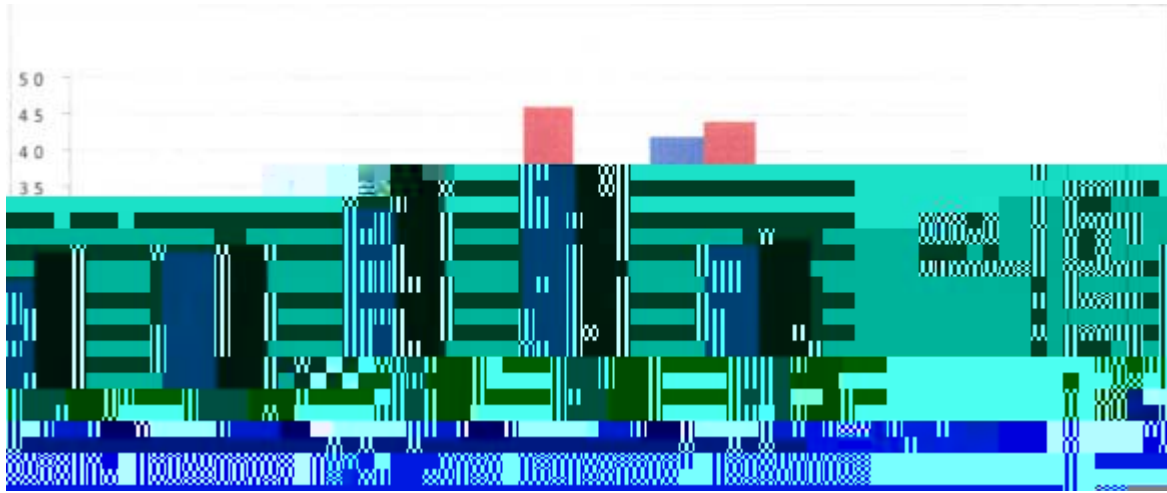


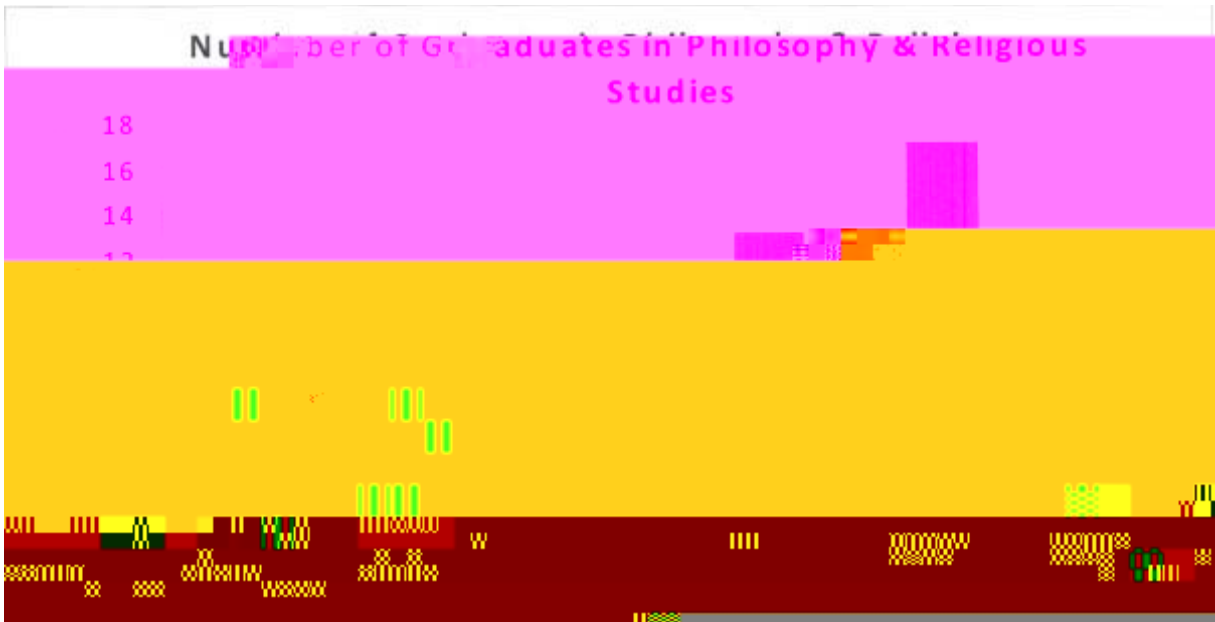
has grown significantly during the past five years. There was an average of 47.5 majors in the department during this five year period compared to an average of 22 per semester during the previous two year period (which is the last data in the Banner System for the department). This represents an increase during the five year period of 103.5 %. The current average is reflected in the chart below.



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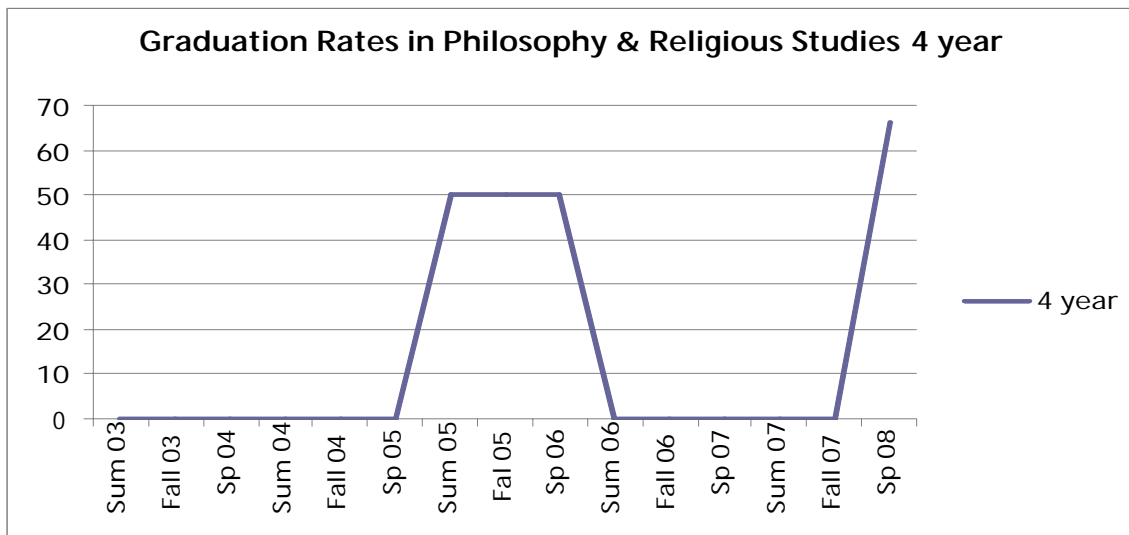
This is an increase of approximately 133 % over the previous two year period.





### II C. Program Completion Efficiency and Graduation Rates

Compare the program's graduation rates for the past five years.



The graduation rate at the beginning of this five year period was weak as shown by the four year rate in the chart. However, the six year rate was strong in the second year of this period as it reflects a rate of 100%. The weakest part of the period was the third year when the six year rate dipped to 0%. But then the six year rate rose to 100% in the fourth year and remained at 50% in the fifth year. This strong performance helped to create a trend of emerging strength and efficiency in graduation rates.

## **II D. Efficiency and Clarity of the Programs**

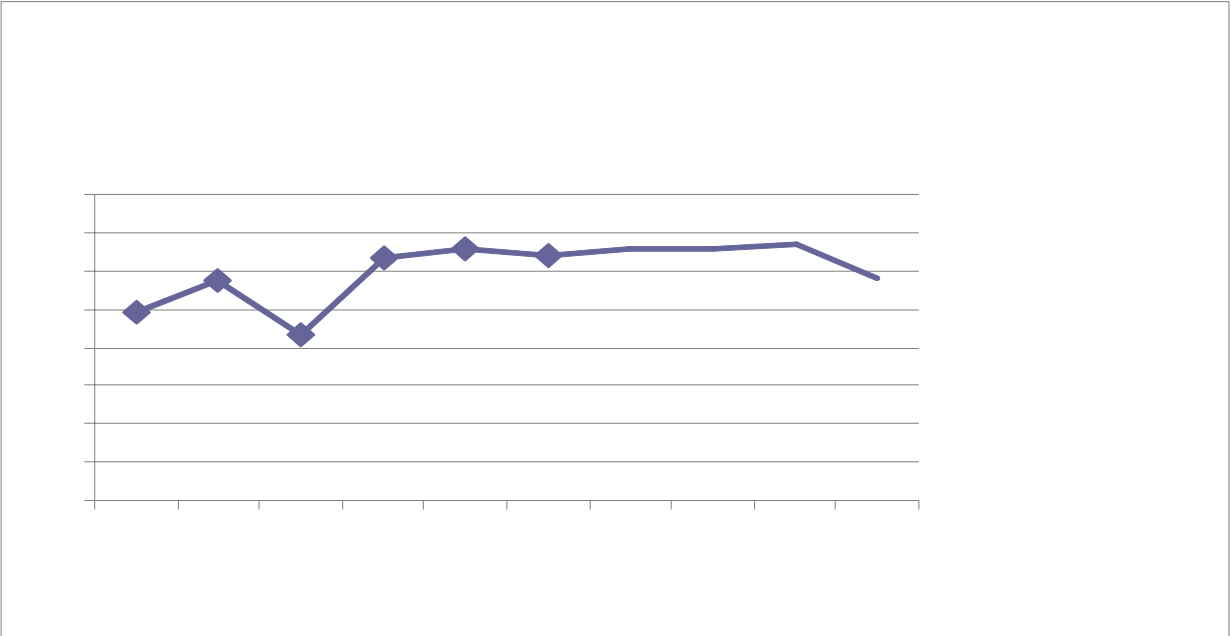
List the courses required in the curriculum and examine published course requirements in terms of the simplicity and efficiency of curricular design. Comment on the ease with which majors understand and successfully navigate through the required curriculum for program completion.

The courses which are required in the curriculum are: Fundamentals of Philosophy (PHIL 2010), Principles of Logic and Argumentation (PHIL 2020), World Religions (REL 2020), Senior Capstone (PHIL 4920/REL 4920). In addition to these basic courses, students choose from a series of sub groups or disciplines within the larger Philosophy or Religious Studies track. Each of the required courses are offered on a regular basis. All, except the Senior Capstone course, are offered in several sections each of the Falr19 Tc0 Tw( 6).

required courses. Both tracks—Philosophy and Religious Studies—have been revised in recent years (2006 & 2007) and reorganized for purposes of clarity. Likewise, the Religious Studies

semesters during the last five years, Philosophy and Religious Studies supported the African American Studies program and Women and Gender Studies in a cross listed course AFAM/WGST 2020–Race, Class, and Gender. The average enrollment in that class over this five year span is 47.18. The department has also supported the Core B requirement in





**II G. Diversity of the Program’s Upper Division Majors and Graduates**

Discuss gender, ethnicity, nationality, and age of the upper division majors and graduates.

During the past five years in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies the number of female majors has ranged from 13.89 % to 37.5 % with a five year average of 26.87 %. During that same period the number of male majors has ranged from 62.5 % to 86.11 % with a five year average of 73.12 %. That is, during this period males in the program have outnumbered females on average about 3 to 1.

In terms of ethnicity, whites have numbered on average between 60.00 % of the population of the major to a high of 82.86 % with a five year average of 70.15 %. Blacks have ranged between 7.32 % of the population of majors to a high of 23.55 % with a five year average of 18.20 %. Asians, Hispanics, and multiracial persons comprise a relatively small part of the departmental population of majors. The average age of these majors over the past five years has been 24.40 years.

All students and graduates have been U.S. citizens. The average age of the graduates from the department in the last five years has been 26.17 years. In terms of gender, 30.5 % of the graduates have been female and 69.5 % have been male. With regard to ethnicity, 23.9% of the graduates from the program in Philosophy and Religious Studies in the last five years have been black, 71.73 % have been white, 2.17 % have been multiracial and 2.17 % have been Asian.

## **II H. Instructional Productivity of FTE Faculty in the Program's Home Department**

Compare faculty productivity and credit-hour generation per full-time-equivalent faculty member in the program's home department. Discuss whether the program productivity affects instructional productivity of the FTE faculty in the department positively or adversely.



Discuss how the program meets or exceeds curricular guidelines and/or accreditation standards for quality programs in this academic field of study. Discuss coherence and relevance to program learning outcomes, effectiveness in relation to the findings of learning outcomes,



mentoring and development opportunities for new faculty.

Our faculty has been very active in the past five years. Together, the departmental faculty have presented 45 papers at national and international conferences, written 26 articles for refereed journals, published 2 books, edited 1 journal issue, and served in a supervisory role on 4 archaeological excavations in Israel. Our students are also active in the presentation of papers for the Council on Undergraduate Research at VSU. Christopher Parker won the “Outstanding Student” Award in Arts and Sciences in 2008. He also won the “Best Poster” Award at CUR 2008 and the “Best Paper” Award for CUR 2007. Stacey Wright won the “Best Paper” Award for CUR 2007. (For a full listing of student scholarship, see under III. J.)

The department is known for the quality of its faculty, creativity in the classroom, professional development, and interdisciplinary skill. In 2005, one of our junior faculty members became a Fellow, Wabash Center for Teaching & Learning in Theology & Religion–Workshop for Pre-Tenure Religion Faculty (2005-2006), as well as an Affiliate, Pluralism Project, Harvard University. In 2007, one departmental faculty member won the VSU Award for Excellence in Professional Development. In 2008, Christine James won the Arts and Sciences Award for Excellence in Service. In 2009, Fred Downing was nominated by Mercer University Press for a GAYA Award in the category of “Creative Nonfiction/Biography” for his book titled Elie Wiesel: A Religious Biography.

The department is also known to have some of the most gifted and creative classroom teachers in the university. Many of the departmental faculty use PowerPoint presentations, DVD, and online video presentations. Departmental faculty regularly use small group exercises as part of larger class room strategies and other creative strategies which seek out student involvement. The faculty of Philosophy and Religious Studies are in demand by their colleagues across the university for guest speaking. Several departmental faculty have demonstrated special skill as mentors to students as the department’s success in the Council of Undergraduate Research demonstrates.

To this point in time, the level of financial support has been adequate for departmental needs. The departmental faculty have been gratified by the support in acquiring an additional line in the Fall 08. Yet the department, like all departments in the university system, is threatened by the down turn in the economy and the looming budget cuts that will inevitably erode support from the system.

### **III. E. Quality of the University’s Annual Financial Investment in the Program’s Operation and Growth**

Discuss funding available to the program in all areas: personnel, supplies, travel, equipment, etc. Comment on the annual financial investment available to support the program’s operation, growth, and success.

Salaries for the personnel in the department can be grouped into two areas: senior faculty and junior faculty. A brief unofficial survey of these two groups would yield differing results. The

senior faculty have benefitted greatly from the recent faculty study and the initiative to adjust salaries for them. The junior faculty did not receive raises in the recent initiative and therefore may not be as competitive in a comparison with similar faculty at benchmark institutions. Funding for travel has recently been increased both for the department and for faculty development grants. Travel costs to national conferences, however, has increased dramatically in recent years leaving faculty with uncovered expenses. The departmental budget, like that of others, is a “bare bones” operation. There is little room for the repair of office equipment or for operational costs beyond the bare essentials. In a time of budget crisis, the first item to go is that of travel which hurts faculty. There are no additional funds to buy new equipment. For example, our copy machine is ten years old and will need to be replaced soon, but there is no funding source. Funds which might promote growth are nonexistent.

### **III. F. Quality of Program Advising, Enrollment Management and Student Services for this Program**

Evaluate program advising, enrollment management for the program, and any student services specifically designed to support the program’s majors (i.e. tutoring, internships, practica, etc.). Provide evidence documenting the effectiveness of these activities.

Advising is a strength of the department. The departmental faculty share the responsibility for advising students. The department head has an open door policy for meeting with students either for advising or for other student concerns. Several faculty in the department have strong mentoring skills and naturally draw students for advising and counseling. Enrollment management has been an important issue for the department. After the last program review, the faculty took responsibility for adding majors to the department, and thereby entered into a period of unprecedented growth. However, the department did not establish ongoing policies or procedures for sustaining growth.

The major student service designed to support the program’s majors is a departmental club. The Philosophy and Religious Studies Club sponsors regular meetings twice a month and organizes cultural and academic activities one a month. Dr. Serrán-Pagán is the faculty advisor. Since the creation of the Club faculty and students have reported that the Philosophy and Religious Studies Department has gained visibility on campus. The mission of the club is to promote a diverse program of cultural and intellectual activities on campus (interdisciplinary-pluralistic approach) that are in line with our departmental objectives and operational plans after the last program review (8.6( rev01 Enrollment Management and Student Services for this Program)).





critical analysis of a student's own culture. Each of the religious traditions studied in the course are presented in their unique historical and cultural contexts.

Religion is interpreted as a dynamic influence on cultural development and social transformation throughout history and across the globe. Each religious tradition is analyzed in terms of their diverse ethical teachings concerning individual and social responsibility. The influence of religious ethics in business, law, marriage and family, media, gender roles, and criminal justice is an integral aspect of the course structure. In addition, each religion is presented in terms of attitudes and ethical teachings concerning other religious traditions.

The program's commitment to Study Abroad is exemplified by the courses offered by the department for the Summer 09. Dr. Serran Pagan will teach World Religions and Spanish Mysticism as a part of the European Council's summer program in Spain. Dr. Michael Stoltzfus will teach Japanese Religion and Culture with a focus on Buddhism in Osaka, Japan as a part of the work of the VSU Center for International Programs. Dr. Ari Santas and Dr. Fred Downing will teach courses on the Ethics of the Ancient Mediterranean, and Early Christianity in the context of ancient sites in Italy, Greece, and Turkey. In addition, other faculty members have traveled widely to include programs and work in India, China, Europe, Egypt, Israel, the West Bank of Palestine, and Jordan.

In addition, the program is very open to the possibility of faculty exchanges from universities from other nations. Effective November 1, 2008 (through June 30, 2009) the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies will host a Brown Visiting Scholar, Professor Abdulmir Al

### **III. I. Quality: Program Honors and Awards**

Identify any awards or honors received by the program within the last five years. If the program has not attained a possible accreditation, explain why.

There is no separate accreditation possible for a program in philosophy or religious studies. The program in Philosophy and Religious Studies lead the College of Arts and Sciences in the production of student credit hours per FTE faculty in the last Delaware Study.

### **III J. Quality: Exceptional Achievements and Honors of the Program's Students, Graduates, and Faculty**

Discuss any awards or honor received by students, graduates or faculty members within the last five years.

Both students and faculty within the department of Philosophy and Religious Studies have received a number of awards and honors in recent years. Some of the more prominent awards and honors within the last five years include:

Christopher Parker–Outstanding Student in Arts and Sciences, 2008; Best Poster Award, CUR, 2008; Best Paper Award, CUR, 2007

Rich Amesbury–Fellow, Wabash Center for Teaching & Learning in Theology and Religion (2005-2006); VSU Award for Excellence in Professional Development (2007)  
Christine James–State Young Careerist Award, given by the Business and Professional Women of Georgia (2005); College of Arts and Sciences Excellence Award in Service (2008)

Frederick L. Downing–nominated by Mercer University Press for a GAYA Award (Georgia Author of the Year) in Creative Nonfiction/Biography for his book titled Elie Wiesel: A Religious Biography

#### **Full List of Awards and Honors**

#### **Awards and Honors–Students:**

- Christopher Parker, Outstanding Student in Arts and Sciences, 2008
- Christopher Parker, Best Poster Award, Council on Undergraduate Research, 2008, “Explaining Morality Away: Some Problems with the New Ethical Naturalism”
- Christopher Parker, Best Paper Award, Council on Undergraduate Research 2007, “The Ethics of International Business: A Hobbesian Analysis and Model”
- Christopher Parker, Published poetry in Odradek 2007
- Christopher Parker, Published in Snake Nation Press 2006
  
- John Taylor, published in Odradek, 2008
  
- Andy McClure, presented paper “Islam and European Culture,” January 18, 2007 at the conference Heresy, Blasphemy, and Freedom of Expression: An International, Multi-Disciplinary Conference on Information Fluency, Critical Thinking, and Ethics Presented



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- Alan Bernstein graduated with a BA in Philosophy in 1981. He is now the Circulation Manager at VSU's Odum Library, and is currently in the Ed.D. program at Valdosta State University
- Jeremy Jones graduated with a BA in Philosophy in 1997. Jeremy attended Asbury Seminary and is now an Ordained Methodist Minister

### **III L. Quality: Stakeholder Satisfaction with the Program**

Present data regarding satisfaction from students, alumni, employers, community partners, etc. concerning their satisfaction with the quality of the program. Include any program improvements initiated as a result of feedback.

Current students and alumni typically rate the program very high. On the SOI given at the end of the semester, the department faculty are usually ranked with high scores. All of the departmental faculty are typically scored by current students in the 4.0 to 5.0 range. Approximately 50 % of the departmental SOIs rank above 4.5. There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that for many current students and alumni their best educational experiences at VSU are to be found in the program of Philosophy and Religious Studies.

For that reason and others it is not surprising to find that the responses by program majors to the questions posed by the Senior Exit Survey tend to run high. When asked to rate the overall quality of the faculty in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, a five year average of 83.2 % of the graduating seniors in the program stated that the quality of the faculty was either excellent or good. Likewise, during that same five year period 90.4 % of the program seniors rate the quality of the instruction in the department as either excellent or good. The opportunities for interaction with faculty were rated at 90.2 % either excellent or good. The highest grades in the program were given by the seniors to the “organization of the curriculum” at 97.6 % (either excellent or good), the “attitude of the faculty to students” at 96.8 % (either excellent or good), and the fairness with which faculty graded students at 95.4 % (either excellent or good). When rating the program courses as preparation for other endeavors, the seniors over the past five years gave the following scores: as preparation for liberal education 81.8 % (either excellent or good), as preparation for graduation school 82 % (excellent or good), and as preparation for initial employment 76.75 % (excellent or good).

The overall high quality of the scores on the Senior Exit Survey implies an overall sensitivity to the nature of student life and to the opinions of students by program faculty. One of the recent major changes in the program came in response to student input. The impetus to re-organize the department as a two-track major came as the Religious Studies minor began to grow and students made known their wishes for the possibility of more course work in that area. It was the presence of these students in combination with a faculty analyzing the nature and scope of the present curriculum that gave rise to a new program and a new period of vitality.

### **III M. Quality: Selectivity and Academic Achievement of Students and Graduates in the**

## **Program.**

Evaluate admission standards of the program, including level of selectivity and skills required for entry. Include average SAT scores of majors, as well as GPA of majors, and distribution of GPA for program graduates.

Students who major in Philosophy and Religious Studies at VSU typically come to the program from a variety of standpoints. Some come to the university with the intent to take either the philosophy track or the religious studies track. Often these students have been influenced by a significant person such as a high school teacher, or someone in a religious organization. Others discover an interest in philosophy or religious studies during study at the university. Some students take an elective course and find a second major. For students who take the philosophy track, critical thinking skills are important as are analytical methods to deal with principal problems within philosophy. In religious studies an appreciation of the sense of the sacred or holy is fundamental to understanding the full sweep of the world's religions. Likewise, analytical skills are also important in religious studies to understand the cultural context of religion. For both philosophy and religious studies, the historical method is important. There is a historical component in each track—the history of philosophy, and the history of religions. Both tracks find focus in the examination of “lived experience.” The philosophy track tends to examine the nature of the “good” and the “ethical,” while the religious studies track questions the sense of the “sacred” which leads to living the “religious” life. In common ways, each track leads the student to examine what is the ethical or religious life. The core curriculum in Area F also requires 9 hours of foreign language. A cursory reading of the program in Philosophy and Religious Studies shows an initial complexity and basic sense of sophistication to the major. Each track has a foundations type course which leads the student into the discipline and its various methodologies. Then each track pursues the inquiry through a history of the discipline and traditions of study within the scope of upper division electives. In each track the program encourages the student to investigate and analyze human experience and to learn critical methods for doing so. Finally, in both the philosophy track and in religious studies, the student finishes the curriculum with a senior seminar.

As earlier sections of this review have indicated, students in the program have responded in qualitative ways to the challenge to investigate and explore the disciplines. The five year average GPA of Upper Division Majors is a “B-” (2.96). The five year average SAT score for Majors is 1045. The five year average GPA of program graduates is a solid “B” (3.23). Perhaps the important figure here is that the average GPA for program graduates is significantly higher than for Upper Division Majors. While this discrepancy may seem insignificant at first glance, it may be an indicator of the quality and rigor of the program--that program completion requires more than simply the accumulation of course work. As with other programs of quality within the university, the program in Philosophy and Religious Studies seems to require inherent characteristics such as discipline and focus, and the ability to sustain those characteristic aspects of the good student.

## **III N. Quality of the Program's Responsiveness to Change and Improvement**

Address significant program improvements made within the last five years, particularly those made in response to changing conditions, new external requirements, and/or departmental assessment initiatives.

During the last Comprehensive Program Review (presented in Spring 2002), the department assessed its then current situation as a program which had functioned almost solely as a “service-oriented” department for other areas of the university. Large numbers of courses were taught by departmental faculty outside of the department which led to a lack of concentration on cultivating the department as a major within its own right. At that time, there was a lack of planning and co-ordination within the department and a failure to development curriculum.

Based on the critical assessment that was done during that time, the department began to face future options. The department decided to take responsibility for the autonomous direction of the program and with renewed energy the program faculty entered a new and unprecedented period of growth. In 2003, the faculty implemented a dual track major including tracks for both philosophy and religious studies. During that same period, two young faculty were hired both of whom soon brought a new sense of charisma to the program. The more senior faculty injected a sense of stability and creative leadership. In the Summer of 2006, the Board of Regents approved a new title for the department—now the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. A new department head was added that same summer after a long period of interims. During this period, the program grew in number of majors, and began to lead the College of Arts and Sciences in student credit hour generation per FTE faculty (as reflected in the Delaware Study, 2005-2006). During this same period, the program in Philosophy and Religious Studies has had faculty members who won the VSU Excellence Award in Professional Development, and the Excellence in Service Award for the College of Arts and Sciences; faculty who published two books, one of whom was nominated for a GAYA Award (Georgia Author of the Year). Also during this period, the program had one of its students win the “Outstanding Student Award” in the College of Arts and Sciences. The last major achievement within the program is the addition of a new line (a lecturer) that extends the department in important and new ways by adding the ability to teach “Native American Studies” and “Indigenous Religions,” and her presence adds to the diversity of the department and the university. The quality of this program’s response to change and improvement in the last five years has been both dramatic and extraordinary.

### **III O. Overall Quality of the Program**

Building upon your responses from sections III A–III N, establish a summary conclusion of the program’s overall quality. Include any additional detailed data analyses, interpretations, rationales, and evidence necessary to support the summary conclusion of the program.

The quality of the program as defined by program guidelines is strong. The program moved away from an earlier “service” model and began to establish its own autonomy by creating a two track model in line with the university benchmark institutions. The department works effectively in relating to and promoting major educational outcomes such as teaching critical thinking and analytical skills demonstrated by the success of majors in CUR and A & S competitions.





curriculum was ranked on a five year average at 97.6 % (either excellent or good), and the attitude of the faculty to students was rated at 96.8 % (either excellent or good). The average GPA (over five years) for program graduates is 3.23.

The quality of this program's ability to respond to change and improvement is both dramatic and extraordinary. During the past five years, the departmental faculty have shown tremendous energy and creative ability to strengthen the work of the program in Philosophy and Religious Studies. In so doing, this department has demonstrated clearly that the quality of its program is very strong.

#### **Section IV–Program Viability**

##### **IV. Summary Conclusion of the Program's Viability at VSU**

Based on the productivity and quality findings, establish a summary conclusion of the program's viability at VSU. Include any additional detailed data analyses, interpretations, rationales, and evidence necessary to support the summary conclusion of the program.

The department has grown significantly during the past five years—a 103.5 % increase in majors. The average class size has increased 25.7 % in the last five years. The number of majors graduated in the last five years was an average of 9.2, and in the last two years an average of 15. Enrollment in departmental courses remains strong. The five year average for basic required courses in the major (without the senior seminar) is 39.50. In the last six years the department has experienced phenomenal growth in the generation of student credit hours—an increase of 118%rTcourses in the7'0TJurseum

GAYA Award (Georgia Author of the Year–2009). However, professional development has not come at the expense of service. One faculty member won the College of Arts and Sciences Award for Excellence in Service. Students continue to rank this faculty high (typically between 4.0–5.0) on the SOI. On the Senior Exit Survey, 90.4 % of program graduating seniors rank the quality of instruction as either excellent or good (on a 5 year average). The attitude of the faculty to the students was rated 96.9 % (either excellent or good) on the Senior Exit Survey (5 year average). The average GPA of program graduates (5 year average) is 3.23. In addition, it is also clear that this program has demonstrated a dramatic, if not extraordinary, ability to respond to change and make improvements.

Based on the leading indicators of productivity and quality, this program would have to be rated as a viable and well functioning unit which has distinguished itself in recent years in many of the aspects under scrutiny in this review

## **Section V–Program Improvement**

### **V. Program Quality and the Productivity Improvement Plan**

If the program is deemed viable, discuss plans and priorities for improving the program’s productivity and quality in the future. Especially address plans for those areas where improvement is needed (those rated as below average or notably deficient).

Though the program has shown dramatic improvement since the last review and has experienced a period of unprecedented growth, the policies and procedures for sustaining that growth have yet to be implemented on an ongoing basis. The program needs a plan for sustaining growth which includes an overall policy as well as individual strategies for recruitment and retention of students. Strategies of recruitment should include an understanding of how to market on a local level the two tracks of philosophy and religious studies. For example, the discipline of philosophy is undergoing a resurgence nationwide which also offers unique opportunities to the program at VSU. A recent New York Times article put the issue this way: “philosophy is being embraced at . . . universities by a new generation of college students who are drawing modern-day lessons from the age-old discipline as they try to make sense of their world, from the morality of the war in Iraq to the latest political scandal.”\* Some programs, such as the one at Rutgers, are up as much as 100 %. At Rutgers, “many students have double-majored in philosophy and . . . psychology or economics, in recent years, and go on to become doctors, lawyers, writers, investment bankers and even commodities traders.”\* Other double-majors include political science, or pre-law because philosophy emphasizes verbal and logic skills which are important to law schools. Rutgers encourages the double-major with pre-law because philosophy majors tend to score high on the LSAT.\* The program has potential for growth at VSU by encouraging a double major with the disciplines mentioned above.

A second opportunity for Philosophy and Religious Studies which has the potential to bolster the program is the current interest in Environmental Studies. In the Fall 2008, President Schloss created an advisory council to work on a presidential commitment for climate change on university campuses. A subcommittee of the council has expressed a need for two undergraduate

minors, one of which could be based in humanities with applied ethics course work. This could require special emphasis on courses offered by Philosophy and Religious Studies. These courses would include such topics as Ecology and World Religions, and Native American Traditions and the Environment, as well as specific courses already available in our catalog such as Ethical Theory, Social and Political Philosophy, Ethics and the Environment, Ethics and Public Policy, and Ethics and Public Administration. It is possible that in time such an initiative could grow into a "third track" for the program in Philosophy and Religious Studies. As noted in recent newspaper and magazine articles, philosophy is a growing area of interest in a number of businesses related to environmental ethics and technology. The skills of critical reasoning and logic, when brought to the applied ethics discussions of today's business world, ensure that philosophy majors will be welcome in today's job market.\*\*

A committee for sustaining program growth will be created. It will include three faculty members who participated in the re-organization of the department in 2002-2003. With the department head, they will discuss ways to enhance the growth of the department and will have the responsibility to draw up over all policies for enrollment growth as well as implementing the

The Program in Philosophy and Religious Studies should be enhanced and expanded. The program has gotten high ratings in both program productivity and quality. The program has grown significantly in recent years—majors have grown by 103.5 %; class size has increased by 25.8 %; graduation rates have improved by 102 % averaging 15 in each of the last two years; enrollment in program completion courses (without the capstone) is strong at a five year average of 39.50. The department has shown phenomenal growth in the generation of student credit hours per FTE faculty (on the Delaware Study) with an increase of 118 % (for the 5 year period ending 2006-7). This put the department at the 75<sup>th</sup>