



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION

6 December 2020

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Dear Governor Scott, Chair Lumbra, Vice-Chair Barnhart, President Garimella, Provost Prelock, Vice President Heading-Grant, Dean Falls, and members of the UVM Board of Trustees,

We, the leadership of the American Academy of Religion, write to express our dismay at the announced elimination of the University of Vermont Department of Religion and to advocate for the reversal of that decision and the enhancement of the program.

The American Academy of Religion (AAR) is the world’s largest scholarly society devoted to excellence in the academic study of religion and the enhancement of the public understanding of religion. With some 8,000 members across the globe, we sponsor an annual meeting that draws over 10,000 attendees and showcases cutting edge scholarship in religious studies.

Our members teach in schools and universities around the world—working with dedication to ensure that graduates of these schools and universities have the opportunity to understand the deep, complex, and nuanced role religion plays in the lives of all global citizens.

We write today to assert the critical importance of maintaining and promoting the Department of Religion at UVM. The academic study of religion is essential to preparing students to face the moral, cultural, and political complexities they will confront in life. It is part of preparing educated citizens for the world.

The current climate in higher education is challenging, to say the least, and we understand the need to carefully examine how UVM makes investments in people and programs. That said, there is a case to be made for retaining and strengthening this essential department.

At this critical moment in time, with the coalescence of the pandemic, environmental degradation, and cultural crises, complex and nuanced understandings of religions are more important than ever before. *All* people benefit from studying religion. Religion should hold a meaningful place in higher education as it holds such a influential position in both private and public lives. Religion matters. It is the way people around the world have expressed what matters most to them, including their social identities and aspirations. For this reason, the study of religion has become one of the main vehicles for informed reflection on human culture. People need to understand the controversies over religion that have shaped their society, the living reality of the various religions that are practiced in their midst, and the history of religious traditions currently influencing billions of people around the world. They need to understand how religion has been used to promote human flourishing, and how at times it has been marshalled in the service of evil: slavery, xenophobia, discrimination, and so forth. The urgency of the study of religion continues.

Religious ideas and values have been central to higher education from its beginning. In the last one hundred years, the modern field of religious studies has evolved into the scholarly analysis of the phenomena of religion from multifaceted and scientific points of view, helping to explain the customs, texts, arts, ideas, and social conflicts of religious communities around the world. Because religious phenomena are complex, the methodologies for studying them have been wide-ranging and interdisciplinary, but the study of religion cannot be reduced to any one method or discipline. The field of religious studies has always required its own domain separate from other departments and disciplines.

The study of religion can therefore be done adequately only in its own academic home. Although professors in other departments such as sociology and political science have increasingly and of necessity become concerned with religious issues—just as they have with economic issues—the field of religion is marginalized in those disciplines and not treated in a holistic way. Like economics, only religious studies courses can provide the intellectual coherence and fundamental grounding such study requires.

The O*NET program, the US's primary source of occupational information, identifies 30 unique occupations for which the knowledge and skills offered by religious studies programs are relevant and important. Over half of those occupations have been designated by the US Department of Labor/Employment and Training Administration as expected to grow rapidly or be in high demand. Already, according to Humanities Indicators research, religion faculty are more likely to teach courses in professional schools than other humanities faculty. With the support of the Teagle Foundation, the American Academy of Religion collected data on career outcomes for religion alumni across a national sample. These data showed that 82.5% were currently employed, 8.6% were not seeking employment, and 8.9% were not currently employed. Among those employed, the responses illustrated 19 different employment areas, many of which align with those projected by the O*NET system. Religion graduates have found meaningful

careers throughout P-20 (prenatal through adult) education, nonprofits, and governmental and religious organizations. Graduates also acquired skills that propelled them into growing areas related to the health fields, information technology, business and finance, and the law. Studying religion helps students contribute to the enhancement of society and enables them to make a meaningful living as full citizens.

The work of your Department of Religion is critical to your mission to educate students to put the liberal arts into action as citizens in a global society. Excellence in religious studies is crucial to the values that undergird your mission: academic excellence; diversity, equity, and shared governance; education of the entire person; adherence to crucial ethical and moral standards; community service and global citizenship; and environmental sustainability. To abolish the department would bring detriment to each of these values as well as to the overall mission.

We recognize ongoing pressures for colleges, and do not envy the hard decisions you face every day. But as you move forward, we hope you will give the most careful consideration to the role of religion and religious studies courses in your general education offerings, and thoroughly explore creative options for its future success.

If we can be of other service, please feel free to call upon us.

Sincerely,

Marla Frederick
President
American Academy of Religion

Mayra Rivera
President-Elect
American Academy of Religion

Amir Hussain
Vice President
American Academy of Religion

Alice Hunt
Executive Director
American Academy of Religion

cc: Seven Days/Vermont Digger
WCAX
Rev. Dr. Darrell Goodwin, UVM alum