

Religious Studies PhD

PhD Program in Religious Studies - Mission Statement

Program Mission Statement (Full Description):

The Graduate Program in Religious Studies (GPRS) includes the program of study leading to the PhD degree. The primary goal of the degree program is to prepare persons for academic leadership in the field, and hence for professional careers as teacher-scholars in colleges, universities, and schools of theology.

Does your program offer courses at an off-campus instructional site (not at SMU Dallas campus)?: No

Does your program offer courses through distance education technology (e.g., asynchronous, synchronous, or both)?: No

During which academic year were students first enrolled in this program?: Prior to AY2021-2022

Progress: Complete

1 History and Development

Step 1C: PLO Statement (Full Description):

Students will demonstrate expertise in the history and development of their chosen field of study.

Step 2A: Measure :

The following exams in the six fields of the GPRS evaluate the student's expertise in the historical or developmental aspects of the field:

- Hebrew Bible: Ancient Near Eastern, Hellenistic, and Greco-Roman Texts and Contexts; Hermeneutics and Basic Topics of Hebrew Bible Studies
- New Testament: Background of the New Testament; History of the Interpretation of the New Testament
- Christian Tradition: Survey of the history of Christian Doctrine and Theology; Survey over the History of Christian Ethics and Institutions; Ecclesiastical History; Intellectual and Cultural History
- Systematic Theology: Historical Theology
- Religious Ethics: History of Christian Ethics
- Religion and Culture: Modern Study of Religion; Religion and Comparative Perspective

Exams which essentially cover the basic aspects or topics above will also be considered within the Historical and Developmental Exam data. The combined data from all these exams will form the basis for the measure below.

Linked Documents

[GPRS Comprehensive Exam Explanations and Rubrics.docx](#)

Step 2B: Type of Measure (check all that apply): Essay exam
Qualifying exam

Step 2C: Is Measure direct or indirect?: Direct

Step 3A: Target for Measure:

Within the last two years, 80% of students who take a Historical / Developmental Exam will score with Honors (i.e., 93 and above). This target is based on the average of student scores in the program from the past six years.

Step 4A: Was the target met for this Measure?: Met

Step 4B: Results and Findings for this Measure:

For the past two years, students have done exceptionally well on the Historical / Developmental Exams. For this year's assessment, the vast majority (8/9 = 88.9%) of students scored Honors on the exams.

Attached Files

[2023 GPRS Assessment - HistDev Comp Exam - J2021-J2023.pdf](#)

Step 4C: Interpretation of Results :

1. The exams for History/Development traditionally hover around the 80% mark, sometimes over, sometimes under. This year's relatively overwhelming percentage is probably tied to a couple of aspects. First this is the first truly post-COVID-onset exam cycle, so students have been focused on preparing for exams in a more focused way than during the onset of COVID or before. Second, there were relatively fewer students who took the History / Development Exams during this cycle, so the percentages of success are higher. (Granted, they could have been lower, but the point is that the high--or possible low--scores are skewed by the low numbers of exams taken.) I suspect this will balance out in the next cycle, when those several students taking Method Exams this year will next take History Exams.
2. Since last cycle was still dealing with the effects of COVID-onset, whether this year's very high percentage is an aberration or is the "new normal" is unclear.

Step 5A: Use of Results for Seeking Improvement (Action Plan) :

Since it is unclear whether this year's high percentage of Honors is an aberration or an indication of higher student quality overall is unclear. The plan is to hold steady for a year and reevaluate the data during the next cycle when, most probably, this year's data will be seen as unique due to the aspects mentioned above.

Step 5B: Type of Action: Other

Step 5C: Dialogue Participants (check all that apply): Administrator

Step 5D: Evidence of Dialogue :

Step 5E: Type of other Improvements (check all that apply):

Step 5F: Other Improvements (Full Description):

The GPRS did have an APR this spring, from which I was hoping for some advice about our course structure. The reviewer, however, refused to submit a report because of interpersonal dysfunction between the other reviewers on the team. The review has been rescheduled for Fall 2024.

Step 6A: Status Update on Action(s) Identified in the Previous Assessment Cycle (Full Description):

None were proposed in the previous report.

Step 6B: Status Update on Previously Identified Action Plan(s):

Progress: Complete

2 Contemporary Methodologies

Step 1C: PLO Statement (Full Description):

Students will demonstrate expertise in contemporary methodologies of their chosen field of study.

Step 2A: Measure :

This outcome is measured by using the evaluations of comprehensive exams in each of the six fields of study:

The following exams in the six fields of the GPRS evaluate the student's expertise in contemporary methodological aspects of the field:

- Hebrew Bible: Methodologies of Hebrew Bible Studies; Dissertation Exam.
- New Testament: Contemporary Methods of Interpretation; Dissertation Exam.
- Systematic Theology: Systematic Theology; Philosophical Theology; Moral Theology.
- Religious Ethics: Contemporary Theological Ethics; Philosophical Ethics; Biblical, Applied, or Religious Ethics.
- Religion and Culture: Contemporary Theories and Critiques of Religion and Culture; Dissertation Exam.

Exams which essentially cover the basic aspects or topics above will also be considered within the Contemporary Methodologies Exam data.

Linked Documents

[GPRS Comprehensive Exam Explanations and Rubrics.docx](#)

Step 2B: Type of Measure (check all that apply): Essay exam
Qualifying exam

Step 2C: Is Measure direct or indirect?: Direct

Step 3A: Target for Measure:

Within the last two years, 80% of students will score with Honors (i.e., 93 and above) on the Methodologies Exams. This target is based on the average of student scores in the program from the past six years.

Step 4A: Was the target met for this Measure?: Partially Met

Step 4B: Results and Findings for this Measure:

The target this year was not met for the evaluations of the Contemporary Methodologies Exams. Of the 16 Methodologies Exams, 13 of them scored Honors (76.9%). However, the average score on all the exams was 93.9, a solid Honors score.

Attached Files

[2023 GPRS Assessment - Method Comp Exam - J2021-J2023.pdf](#)

Step 4C: Interpretation of Results :

The interpretation of the results for the Methodology Exam should probably be viewed with an eye toward the Historical / Developmental Exam for this year. Since so few exams were taken in the Historical area, the extremely high percentage of those making Honors can be seen as a skewing of the data. For the Methodology Exam the large number of students taking it caused the numbers to fall about where we might expect... but this year a little lower than usual. I suspect this is just a minor downturn this year and will even out again next year. In other words, it is unclear whether the percentage needs to be changed, if other changes need to be incorporated, or something else needs to happen.

Step 5A: Use of Results for Seeking Improvement (Action Plan) :

Since it is unclear whether this year's slight dip in the number of Honors is an aberration or an indication of higher student quality overall is unclear. The plan is to hold steady for a year and reevaluate the data during the next cycle when, most probably, this year's data will be seen as unique due to the aspects mentioned above.

Step 5B: Type of Action: Other

Step 5C: Dialogue Participants (check all that apply): Administrator

Step 5D: Evidence of Dialogue :

Step 5E: Type of other Improvements (check all that apply):

Step 5F: Other Improvements (Full Description):

The GPRS did have an APR this spring, from which I was hoping for some advice about our course structure. The reviewer, however, refused to submit a report because of interpersonal dysfunction between the other reviewers on the team. The review has been rescheduled for Fall 2024.

Step 6A: Status Update on Action(s) Identified in the Previous Assessment Cycle (Full Description):

None were proposed in the previous report.

Step 6B: Status Update on Previously Identified Action Plan(s): Not applicable for this cycle (explain in Step 6A)

Progress: Complete

3 Writing and Research

Step 1C: PLO Statement (Full Description):

Students will demonstrate proficiency in writing and research within their chosen field of study.

Step 2A: Measure :

This outcome is measured by using the evaluations of dissertations, which occurs during each dissertation defense. Every dissertation is evaluated with the following scores: Honors, High Pass, Pass, Fail.

This outcome is also measured by using the evaluations of dissertation oral defenses, which occur during each dissertation defense. Every dissertation oral defense is evaluated with the following scores: Honors, High Pass, Pass, Fail.

Step 2B: Type of Measure (check all that apply): Capstone project
Dissertation defense

Step 2C: Is Measure direct or indirect?: Direct

Step 3A: Target for Measure:

Within the past three years, 90% of dissertations score either Honors or High Pass.

Within the past three years, 90% of dissertation oral defenses score either Honors or High Pass.

These targets are based on the evaluations given to dissertations and defenses over the past six years.

Step 4A: Was the target met for this Measure?: Met

Step 4B: Results and Findings for this Measure:

This year, 100% of the dissertations were evaluated as either Honors or High Pass.

This year, 100% of the defenses were evaluated as either Honors or High Pass.

Attached Files

[2023 GPRS Assessment - Defense Evals - 2020-2022.pdf](#)

[2023 GPRS Assessment - Dissertation Evals - 2020-2022.pdf](#)

Step 4C: Interpretation of Results :

This year, as opposed to years past, we have an embarrassment of riches! I suspect that the lack of any "Pass" evaluations is dependent upon a few factors:

- We had a good number of students who received fellowships from Moody and from outside agencies. This allowed them to keep the momentum up and finish both on time and strongly.
- The quality of our students overall has improved significantly over the past five to seven years. They come in with at least one, if not two, Masters degrees. They are motivated to finish.
- The Moody Dissertation Completion Grants allowed four of our students to graduate in May, and the grant provided both the means to not rely on outside employment and the motivation to finish well.

Step 5A: Use of Results for Seeking Improvement (Action Plan) :

Clearly, this measure will need to be adjusted next year. We will probably adjust the percentages and consider how the evaluations can be adjusted to more accurately discern the research and writing proficiency of our graduates.

For the past two years, with the opening up of the defenses to a more general audience, we have seen an greater appreciation of the final stages of the dissertation process by our whole student body, which, likewise informs all students about what a "dissertation defense" looks like.

Step 5B: Type of Action: Other

Step 5C: Dialogue Participants (check all that apply): Administrator

Step 5D: Evidence of Dialogue :

Step 5E: Type of other Improvements (check all that apply):

Step 5F: Other Improvements (Full Description):

Step 6A: Status Update on Action(s) Identified in the Previous Assessment Cycle (Full Description):

None were proposed in the previous report.

Step 6B: Status Update on Previously Identified Action Plan(s): Not applicable for this cycle (explain in Step 6A)

Progress: Complete

4 Guild Participation

Step 1C: PLO Statement (Full Description):

Upon graduation from the Graduate Program in Religious Studies, students will demonstrate the ability to engage with current research, connect with other professionals, and contribute meaningfully to the scholarly community.

Step 2A: Measure :

Participation within local, state-wide, national, or international conferences/seminars with a focus on the academic study of religion.

Step 2B: Type of Measure (check all that apply): Presentation
Other

Step 2C: Is Measure direct or indirect?: Direct

Step 3A: Target for Measure:

For the previous year (June to May), 100% of GPRS students attended at least one regional or national conference relevant for their field of study.

Step 4A: Was the target met for this Measure?: Not Met

Step 4B: Results and Findings for this Measure:

Of the 19 GPRS students who were questioned about their conference attendance AY 2022-2023, 16 of them attended at least one conference during the year (84.3%). However, of those 16 who attended a conference, 11 attended more than one (68.75%).

Attached Files

[2023 Assess - Conferences and Publications 22-23.pdf](#)

Step 4C: Interpretation of Results :

While most regional and (inter)national conferences and meetings were held as they were before 2020, because of the aftereffects of COVID-19 upon our students, several of them were still reluctant or wary to attend any public conference.

On the other hand, the total number of student-attendants at conferences was close to one and a half times that of the total student body (142%).

Furthermore, of those 16 who attended at least once conference, 13 held some sort of leadership position within the conference (64.7%).

As our students become more acclimated to the aftereffects of COVID-19, we will encourage students to attend both national and regional academic meetings and conferences in 2023-2024.

Step 5A: Use of Results for Seeking Improvement (Action Plan) :

We will more actively encourage GPRS students to attend local, state, national, and international conferences that are focused on the academic study of religion.

Step 5B: Type of Action: Additional emphasis or time on content

Step 5C: Dialogue Participants (check all that apply): Administrator
Staff

Step 5D: Evidence of Dialogue :

Sent to all students in the program two weeks ago:

Dear XXXX,

I am writing to you and Prof. XXXXX in light of the upcoming report I have to make to Moody about the progress of our students in the program. I am attaching two documents:

A **2023 Progress Report** for you. This is a new form whose purpose is to let me know about your plans about completing the degree. This should be completed (in consultation with your advisor) and returned to me by **May 19**. Specific information about what I need is mentioned below.

You've drafted **Academic Profile**, which outlines your work thus far within and outside of the GPRS. This is the official form that Pamela Hogan uses to update your work in her office. *It is, therefore, very important that this is correct as it stands and is kept up to date.* You will note that, while it contains almost the same data as the Progress Report, it also provides spaces for you to add publication data, conference presentations, and conference attendance at the end. These types of data are used in the yearly assessment of the GPRS by Moody.

Specifically, I need these things:

1. Make sure all the information in both documents is correct. I have tried to double-check all the info, but something may have slipped by me. *Please let me know if it is correct.* If anything needs to be changed, *please correct the document(s) and return it/them to me* via email attachment by **May 19**.
2. **Add any relevant publication, presentation, or conference data that is not already in the Academic Profile.**
3. You obviously have outstanding grades for this semester. Pamela and I will add those when they are given; the shading is to help remind us to do that.
4. Please keep in mind the four comprehensive exams. Thank you for keeping on top of these (along with the four language exams!). Please be aware that, while you have extra time to complete the language exams, all four comprehensive exams must be completed by the exam period in August 2024. It wouldn't be a bad idea to complete all of your exams as early as you can, so that you can focus on other requirements and the dissertation proposal and research.
5. If you are planning to fulfill your practice teaching requirement through teaching one of the Religious Studies courses in Dedman in the future, be aware that one of your TA requirements should be for one of those courses.

Step 5E: Type of other Improvements (check all that apply): Other

Step 5F: Other Improvements (Full Description):

While the annual report that our students provide comes in May of every year, most conferences occur either the previous fall or earlier in the spring term. We will send out announcements from our office about those conferences that students most usually attend, encouraging them to attend and apply for travel funds from the GPRS office.

Step 6A: Status Update on Action(s) Identified in the Previous Assessment Cycle (Full Description):

The active encouragement for our students to attend conferences will occur this next year.

Step 6B: Status Update on Previously Identified Action Plan(s): Not applicable for this cycle (explain in Step 6A)

Progress: Complete

1 Graduate Placement

Step 1C: PO Statement (Full Description):

Graduates of the Graduate Program in Religious Studies will find a position related to the field of religious studies.

Step 2A: Measure :

Through email contact with GPRS graduates and consulting social media outlets, we determine where they are employed and whether that employment is academic and/or related to their degree.

Step 2B: Is Measure direct or indirect?: Direct

Step 3A: Target for Measure:

Within four years of graduation, 90% of our graduates will find employment directly related to their field of study. Those who do not find employment directly related to their field of study will find work in a corollary field.

Step 4A: Was the target met for this Measure?: Partially Met

Step 4B: Results and Findings for this Measure:

Of the 19 graduates from the GPRS from 2020 to 2023, 13 (69.0%) are in fields either directly or peripherally related to their degree. The remaining 6 (31.0%) have found work in a corollary field. This is above the target of 90%. Moreover, about half of our graduates (10 - 53%) have found academic positions in universities or para-academic institutions.

Attached Files

[2023 GPRS Assessment - Placement of Graduates 2020-2022.pdf](#)

Step 4C: Interpretation of Results :

When looked at over the past several years, the increase in the number of graduates who are employed in academic and semi-academic positions is truly remarkable in light of the general decrease of positions in the humanities across the board. Much of this success is tied to our large network of alumni.

Step 5A: Use of Results for Seeking Improvement (Action Plan) :

While there is little that we can do to improve the status of academia in the US, we can continue to reach out to alumni in order to strengthen those connections. We will also support our graduates in their search for positions by providing letters of recommendation, dossiers of their work in the GPRS, etc.

Step 5B: Dialogue Participants (check all that apply): Administrator
Staff

Step 5C: Evidence of Dialogue :

Step 5D: Type of other Improvements (check all that apply): Other

Step 5E: Other Improvements (Full Description):

We will continue to and increase our support of our graduating students with resources such as mock interviews, seminars on writing applications, etc. These should help our students in their search for positions.

Step 6A: Status Update on Action(s) Identified in the Previous Assessment Cycle (Full Description):

The actions planned will not occur until the next cycle.

Step 6B: Status Update on Previously Identified Action Plan(s): Not applicable for this cycle (explain in Step 6A)

Progress: Complete