

Religious Studies PhD

PhD Program in Religious Studies - Mission Statement

Mission Statement (Full Description):

The Graduate Program in Religious Studies (GPRS) is dedicated to fostering academic excellence and leadership in the study of religion. Our PhD program is designed to prepare students for impactful careers as teacher-scholars in colleges, universities, and schools of theology. We emphasize rigorous scholarship, critical inquiry, and a deep understanding of diverse religious traditions. Our curriculum allows students to specialize in six key fields—Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Christian Tradition, Systematic Theology, Religious Ethics, and Religion and Culture—geared toward students seeking advanced exploration within the liberal arts and sciences. Through a commitment to intellectual growth, ethical reflection, and interdisciplinary engagement, we strive to cultivate informed and compassionate leaders who will contribute to the academic community and society at large.

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 AY2023-2024

Progress:

Complete

History and Development

Step 1A: SLO Number:

1

Step 1C: SLO Statement (Full Description):

Commented [SS1]: Align with SMU Mission Statement

Strengths:

- Clear articulation of **purpose**—preparing PhD students for careers as teacher-scholars.
- Explicit emphasis on **academic rigor, ethical reflection, and interdisciplinary engagement**, aligning well with SMU's institutional mission of fostering leadership, intellectual inquiry, and societal contribution.
- Inclusion of **distinct areas of specialization** enhances the program's identity and specificity.

B. Suggestions for Improvement

1. **Add institutional context:** Explicitly reference **Southern Methodist University** and its commitment to ethical leadership, scholarly excellence, and societal impact to strengthen alignment with SMU's broader mission.
2. **Include delivery details:** Specify that the PhD program is delivered **on SMU's main campus** (and whether courses are in-person, hybrid, or online).
3. **Emphasize graduate outcomes:** Consider reframing part of the mission around **the competencies and impacts graduates are expected to demonstrate** (e.g., ability to teach, publish, and engage diverse communities).

The **Graduate Program in Religious Studies (GPRS)** at **Southern Methodist University** advances academic excellence and ethical leadership in the scholarly study of religion. Offered **in person on SMU's main campus in Dallas**, the PhD program prepares students for impactful careers as teacher-scholars in universities, colleges, and schools of theology. Through rigorous research, critical inquiry, and engagement with six fields of specialization—**Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Christian Tradition, Systematic Theology, Religious Ethics, and Religion and Culture**—students develop the intellectual and moral insight to interpret diverse religious traditions. Committed to interdisciplinary dialogue and public understanding, the program cultivates informed, compassionate leaders who contribute meaningfully to academic and civic communities.

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.

Linked Documents

- [NT Background Rubric 100 Point Landscape.docx](#)
- [HB Ancient Contexts Exam Rubric 100 Point Landscape.docx](#)
- [NT Interpretation History Rubric 100 Point Landscape.docx](#)
- [CT Relevant Developments Period Rubric 100 Point Landscape.docx](#)
- [RE History Christian Ethics Rubric.docx](#)
- [ST Historical Theology Rubric.docx](#)
- [RC Comparative Religion Rubric.docx](#)
- [HB Hermeneutics Hebrew Bible Rubric 100 Point Landscape.docx](#)
- [RC Modern Study of Religion Rubric.docx](#)
- [CT History Christian Doctrine Rubric 100 Point Landscape.docx](#)
- [CT Intellectual Cultural Social History Rubric 100 Point Landscape.docx](#)

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

Commented [SS2]: Include time component, and include some of the information from the measure. I suggest

By graduation, students will critically analyze the historical development of their chosen field by interpreting key texts, contexts, and scholarly movements using appropriate disciplinary methods.

Essay exam,Qualifying exam

Step 2C: Is Measure direct or indirect?:

Direct

Step 3A: Target for Measure:

80% of students who take a Historical / Developmental Exam will score with Honors (i.e., 92 and above). This measure is based on an average score for exams over the past decade.

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

Not Met

Step 4B: Results and Findings for this Measure:

There were 16 exams taken during the period. Of those, only 9 scored with an Honors. Therefore, 56% of the exams were scored with Honors.

Linked Documents

[2025 Assessment GPRS DATA- HISTORICAL FIELD EXAMS.pdf](#)

Step 4C: Interpretation of Results:

This was a highly unusual year for this exam. Part of the aberration was a single student (who has since been discontinued from the program) who failed two exams. This caused the numbers to skew downward. Next year, these exams will not be accounted for and so the percentages will, probably, right themselves.

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

Since this was truly an usual year concerning Historical Exam scores, the plan at present is to measure the exams again next year when the downward skewed

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):

We observed the scores again this year but, because of the failing grades by the single student, they were skewed again this year. So we assume at this point that the measure and target are well placed.

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

In progress

Progress:

Complete

Contemporary Methodologies

Step 1A: SLO Number:

2

Step 1C: SLO Statement (Full Description):

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

Commented [SS3]: Same as the SLO1-Include some of the specific information you have included in the measure .

By graduation, students will employ contemporary interpretive methodologies to analyze primary texts and assess their significance within the field.

Or

By graduation, students will critically evaluate and employ contemporary methodological frameworks relevant to their field to interpret scholarly questions and evidence.

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

[HB Methodologies Hebrew Bible Rubric 100 Point Landscape.docx](#)

[ST Moral Theology Rubric.docx](#)

[RE Interdisciplinary Ethics Rubric.docx](#)

[NT Contemporary Methods Rubric 100 Point Landscape.docx](#)

[RE Contemporary Theological Ethics Rubric.docx](#)

[RC Contemporary Theories Critiques Rubric.docx](#)

[ST Systematic Theology Rubric.docx](#)

[ST Philosophical Theology Rubric.docx](#)

[RE Philosophical Ethics Rubric.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:

80% of students will score with Honors (i.e., 92 and above) on the Methodologies Exams. This target is based upon general student performance over several years of data.

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

Not Met

Step 4B: Results and Findings for this Measure:

Of the 18 exams taken focused on Contemporary Methodologies, only 10 scored Honors. This is merely 55%, far from the hoped-for 80%.

Step 4C: Interpretation of Results:

While it is true that only 55% of the exams scored with an Honors, the average grade for all the exams taken together was 91.6, incredibly close to the Honors threshold of 92. This shows that, while the actual scores were mostly in the HP range, those HPs were very, very high, often within one or two points of receiving honors.

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

Since the evaluations of the exams were so close to the hoped-for range on Honors, it would be good to wait another year and see if this coming year produces the hoped-for results.

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):

The previous year's actions proposed to see if the trend of exceeding the Honors threshold would continue, but it did not. With the regular cycle of the average for exam scores being slightly above or slightly below the Honors threshold, probably indicates that it is an appropriate target.

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

Progress:

Complete

Writing and Research

Step 1A: SLO Number:

3

Step 1C: SLO 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:

90% of dissertations score either Honors or High Pass.

90% of dissertation oral defenses score either Honors or High Pass.

These targets are based upon the average of dissertation and oral defense scores over the past several years.

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

Met

Step 4B: Results and Findings for this Measure:

The sample size included 7 dissertations/defenses. Of the 7 dissertations, 2 (that is 28%) scored Honors; 5 (that is, 71%) scored High Pass. Of the 7 defenses, 3 (that is, 43%) scored Honors and 4 (that is, 57%) scored High Pass.

Regardless, all 7 dissertations and 7 defenses scored either Honors or High Pass.

Step 4C: Interpretation of Results:

This was a rare sample for both dissertations and defenses. Usually there is at least one or two evaluations of Pass for a dissertation or defense. This sample included none at all.

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

It is clear that the GPRS program is producing students who can both research and write well. This sample however was unusual. It would be important to see in the future if there is a pattern of which fields produce dissertations or defenses that do not meet the mark. If there is a pattern detected during the next couple of years, it would be necessary to implement some review of that field.

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):

While we had expected this year to run about where it had in the past (that is, nearer to the 90% mark for Honors/High Pass for both dissertations and defenses), this year was an aberration for the good! It will be good to see if these high marks continue next year. If so, it would probably be good to raise the threshold to 100%!

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

In progress

Progress:

Complete

Guild Participation

Step 1A: SLO Number:

4

Step 1C: SLO Statement (Full Description):

Students are required to present a paper, serve on a panel, or otherwise provide leadership at an academic conference.

Step 2A: Measure:

Students will participate in the Guild by attending a number of conferences devoted to the academic field of religious studies.

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

Presentation ,Other

Step 2C: Is Measure direct or indirect?:

Direct

Step 3A: Target for Measure:

90% of PhD students in Religious Studies will present a paper, serve on a panel, or otherwise provide leadership at least once at a local, regional, or national conference devoted to the academic field of religious studies.

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

Partially Met

Step 4B: Results and Findings for this Measure:

Of the 16 PhD students in the GPRS, all of them attended at least one conference. Almost 90% (88%) had some sort of leadership presence at at least one conference that they attended.

Linked Documents

[2025 GPRS Assessment - Conferences and Publications 2024-2025a.pdf](#)

Step 4C: Interpretation of Results:

While the target for the measure was not quite attained, the data overall are incredibly encouraging. While only 88% had a leadership position at a conference that they attended, over half of those who did have a leadership position had more than one. Moreover, while all students attended a conference, 11 of the 16 attended more than one conference

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

We will encourage students to not only attend conferences, but also to assume leadership positions at them.

Step 5B: Type of Action:

Program leadership involvement ,Other

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

Administrator

Step 5D: Evidence of Dialogue:

Several emails were shared with students about local and national conferences. This is just one example.

Linked Documents

[RE SWCRS conference March 1-3 2024 in Irving TX.txt](#)

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):

We tried to reach out to students last year, encouraging them to attend conferences, which clearly had a positive effect.

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

Progress:

Complete

Graduate Placement

Step 1A: PG Number:

1

Step 1C: PG Statement (Full Description):

Graduates of the Graduate Program in Religious Studies will find a position within one year of graduating. Optimally, the position will be 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, Indirect

Commented [SS4]: A. Summary Assessment

This Program Goal expresses an important aspiration—successful post-graduate placement—but as written it is **not fully aligned with rubric expectations** for clarity, measurability, or integration into curricular planning. PGs should describe **what the program will achieve** (e.g., program performance, curriculum effectiveness, resource alignment), not what **students will do after graduation**. Career placement is meaningful, but it is typically considered an **indirect indicator**, not a program goal itself.

As written, the PG focuses entirely on student employment outcomes without specifying:

- how the program will influence placement,
- how the program will measure or support this goal, or
- how the goal connects to program mission or institutional planning.

B. Suggestions for Improvement

1. Shift from student employment to program-level performance.

PGs should describe what the program intends to accomplish or improve (e.g., advising, professionalization support, research training), not the future choices of graduates.

2. Clarify what program practice or outcome is being assessed.

For example, career preparation services, professional skills development, or placement support could be framed as assessable goals.

3. Use measurable language tied to program activities.

Instead of “graduates will find a position,” identify what the program will provide (e.g., mentoring, workshops, networking opportunities) and how the program will evaluate its effectiveness.

4. Align with the mission and academic focus of Religious Studies.

You might emphasize scholarly preparation, academic and professional readiness, disciplinary competencies, or community partnerships.

5. Ensure the goal can be supported with direct or indirect measures.

Placement data can be an **assessment measure**, but not the **goal** itself.

C. Suggested Revision(s)

Below are two possible directions depending on your intent:

Option 1: Focus on Academic/Professional Preparation

Suggested Revision:

“The Graduate Program in Religious Studies will equip students with the academic, research, and professional skills needed to pursue advanced scholarship and related career pathways, as demonstrated through annual evaluations of advising, mentoring, and professional-development support.”

Step 3A: Target for Measure:

Within one year of graduation, 100% of our graduates will find employment.

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

Met

Step 4B: Results and Findings for this Measure:

Of the 8 graduates from the PhD program of the GPRS in the past two years, all have secured a position and are working profitably at it. Among those 8:

- 2 have tenure track positions at universities/colleges
- 3 have visiting or instructor positions at universities/colleges
- 2 have positions outside of academia related to their studies.

Linked Documents

[2025 GPRS ASSESSMENT - PLACEMENT of Graduates 2022-2025.pdf](#)

Step 4C: Interpretation of Results:

While doctoral programs should not be judged solely on whether their graduates can "get a job," it is encouraging that not only do our graduates secure positions after graduation, but that so many of them secure positions within academia.

Step 5A: Use of Results for Seeking Improvement (Action Plan):**Step 5B: Dialogue Participants (check all that apply):**

Administrator

Step 5C: Evidence of Dialogue:**Step 5D: Type of other Improvements (check all that apply):**

Step 5E: Other Improvements (Full Description):

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

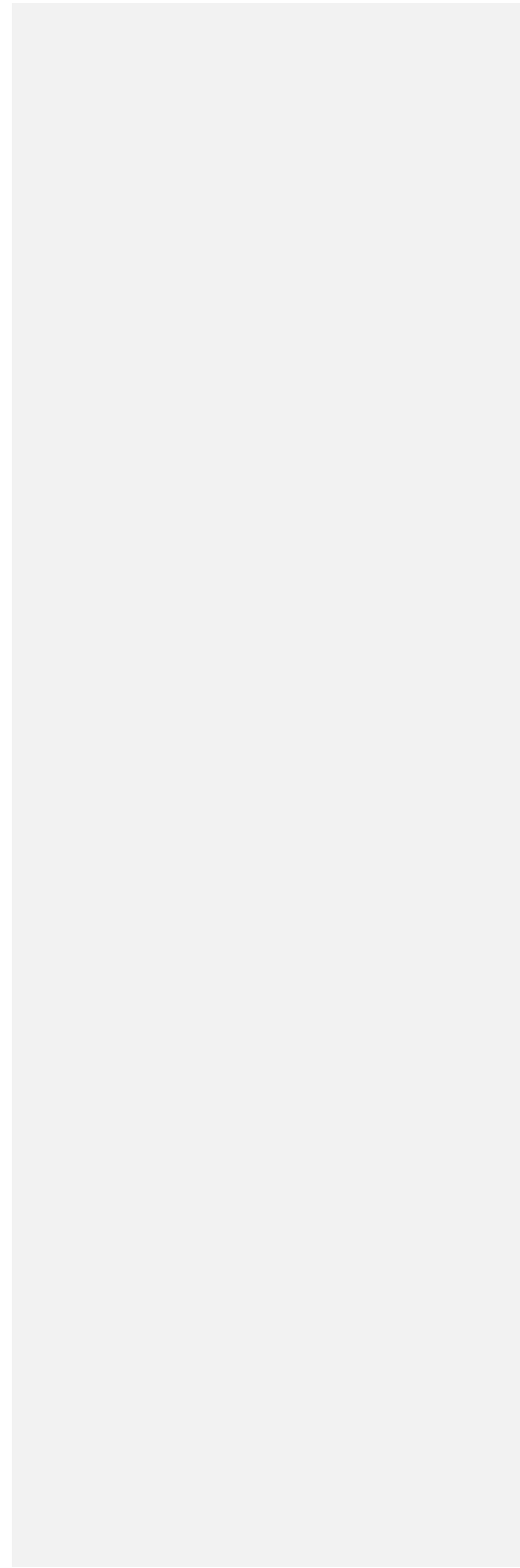
We have been encouraged over the past few years about the placement record for the program. This year's assessment data is indicative of our continued success.

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

In progress

Progress:

Complete



A. Summary Assessment

This Program Goal expresses an important aspiration—successful post-graduate placement—but as written it is **not fully aligned with rubric expectations** for clarity, measurability, or integration into curricular planning. PGs should describe **what the program will achieve** (e.g., program performance, curriculum effectiveness, resource alignment), not what **students will do after graduation**. Career placement is meaningful, but it is typically considered an **indirect indicator**, not a program goal itself.

As written, the PG focuses entirely on student employment outcomes without specifying:

- how the program will influence placement,
- how the program will measure or support this goal, or
- how the goal connects to program mission or institutional planning.

B. Suggestions for Improvement

1. **Shift from student employment to program-level performance.**
PGs should describe what the program intends to accomplish or improve (e.g., advising, professionalization support, research training), not the future choices of graduates.
2. **Clarify what program practice or outcome is being assessed.**
For example, career preparation services, professional skills development, or placement support could be framed as assessable goals.
3. **Use measurable language tied to program activities.**
Instead of “graduates will find a position,” identify what the program will provide (e.g., mentoring, workshops, networking opportunities) and how the program will evaluate its effectiveness.
4. **Align with the mission and academic focus of Religious Studies.**
You might emphasize scholarly preparation, academic and professional readiness, disciplinary competencies, or community partnerships.
5. **Ensure the goal can be supported with direct or indirect measures.**
Placement data can be an **assessment measure**, but not the **goal** itself.

C. Suggested Revision(s)

Below are two possible directions depending on your intent:

Option 1: Focus on Academic/Professional Preparation

Suggested Revision:

“The Graduate Program in Religious Studies will equip students with the academic, research, and professional skills needed to pursue advanced scholarship and related career pathways, as demonstrated through annual evaluations of advising, mentoring, and professional-development support.”

Option 2: Focus on Program Support for Career Placement

Suggested Revision:

“The program will provide structured professional-development and career-preparation resources to support graduates pursuing academic and non-academic careers in religious studies, evaluated annually through alumni surveys and program-level review of professionalization activities.”

Option 3: If the goal must explicitly reference placement (still program-focused)

Suggested Revision:

“The program will maintain a robust professional-preparation process that supports graduates in securing academic or field-related positions, assessed annually through alumni placement data and evaluation of program professionalization activities.”