

Community College: Challenging Context for Teaching Religion

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*A power point presentation will outline the origins of the Consultation from a conversation at the 2003 APRRE meeting (and subsequent funding by the **Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion**.) the Consultation's process of invitation and participation, the composition of participants, and their preliminary recommendations (20 minutes, maximum.) Workshop attendees will be invited to respond in brief "card storm" format, comments and questions will be categorized (20 minutes maximum.) Discussion in small groups will focus on self-selected categories (20 minutes maximum.) Plenary discussion will follow as time permits (c. 15 minutes.) It is hoped that an REA working group might develop from the workshop.*

September 11, 2004 changed the context of teaching about the world's religions radically, giving it a sense of greater significance and urgency. Many changed the customary "historic" order of teaching comparative religion and plunged immediately into addressing Islamic teaching and culture. President Bush's use of the term "crusade" to describe U. S. response still provides a departure point for addressing the importance of understanding religious history and culture. Current debates over the role of faith-based organizations in federally funded services highlight the need to know U. S. religious history. Continued public discussion of Islamic theocracies without an awareness of Christendom's own theocratic history and current efforts to "reclaim" the United States as a "Christian nation" intensify the urgency. Insistence of Cardinals and Bishops that elected political authorities must follow Roman Catholic doctrine or be refused Mass mean discussion of the appropriate role of religion in personal and public life require understanding. Reactions to the role of religion in federal, state, and local elections of November 2 provide unequalled timeliness for religious educators.

Community colleges educate nearly half of U. S. undergrads. Open enrollment policies result in students' closely reflecting their community's ethos. Many have never (and will never) travel abroad, yet the world's diverse religions will increase in both metropolitan and rural areas. Teachers are often adjunct (frequently clergy) or full time faculty whose primary field is not religion. Faculty development in teaching religion in this context is limited. This workshop explores the contextual challenge and recommendations for developing collegial resources.

On June 18-19, 2004 a *Consultation on Meeting the Challenge of Teaching Religion in Community Colleges* involving religion teachers from diverse contexts such as Chicago and Boone, Iowa met in Dubuque, Iowa

Research in preparation for the *Consultation* and the *Consultation's* recommendations will be presented in this workshop. Religion courses are offered as historical studies, sociological surveys, and philosophy of religion. While centered on the context of community colleges the issues speak to the role of faith educators in preparing members of their own faith for deeper understanding of others' traditions. (The material following is provided as resource to supplement the workshop presentation.)

Consultation on Meeting the Challenge of Teaching Religion in Community Colleges

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATION: Follow-up is needed to develop the regional and a national group. The hunger is there, the issue is critical.

Why this consultation was needed.

Most community colleges, excluding technical colleges, offer at least one survey course about world religions. In most instances these courses are offered either by adjunct faculty who are often, but not always, clergy or by faculty whose primary discipline is not religion. Since community colleges educate roughly half of the undergraduates in the United States the impact of the teaching of religion is significant. While some funds are available for faculty development, participation in professional groups is left to the individual's own discovery and effort. Maintenance of certification does require a certain number of courses or cumulative attendance at professional conferences, which may be fulfilled by taking courses about community colleges or about teaching skills. Courses specific to the teaching of religion are not easily available, and opportunities for collegial discussion by community college teachers of religion are practically non-existent. My own experience of 3 years and two summers left me hungry for collegial conversation and clarity of purpose.

What this project sought to accomplish and what it achieved.

The *Consultation* sought: 1) to under gird the critical task of teaching about religion in community colleges. *It did!* 2) to share information about the courses being offered in community colleges: the course guidelines that establish course transferability to other institutions, the syllabi, and the texts currently in use. *Clearly the evaluations said this happened.* 3) to learn about the successes and the challenges the teachers and colleges encounter. *Evaluations affirmed this.* 4) through the process of the consultation to model adult teaching/learning modes and thereby enhance teaching skills. *Participants appreciated the open process.* 5) to develop a collegial network, with a listserv, a web presence, and, if desired, future conferences. *This will continue, but remains to be accomplished. People are working on the field trip and all have expressed interest in the AAR Regional.* 6) to link teachers to extant collegial resources such as the **American Academy of Religion** (both nationally and regionally) and to the **Religious Education Association** together with the **Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education**. *More needs to be done here, perhaps providing a year's membership in these two organizations as well as following up the AAR Midwest regional.*

The Consultation itself.

Participants:

Participants came from 12 colleges, from urban centers such as the Chicago and Des Moines areas and from rural or small town communities such as Ft. Dodge and Calmar in Iowa. More information about participants is available in the Registration and Survey Report. 18 faculty members and Dr. Thomas Pearson, representing the Wabash Center participated in the *Consultation*. Two faculty pre-registrants and two administrative pre-registrants canceled at the last minute. Participants registered through a web site.

Process:

Friday, June 18, 2004

- 10:30 Participants introduced themselves and shared one reason why they came.
- 12:00 Lunch at the Center
- 1:30 Sharing the Excitement (Participants share experiences of student growth in religious understanding.)
- 2:30 Break (Frequent breaks and time for meals permitted valuable informal discussions)
- 3:00 Sharing the Excitement continued
- 4:00 Highlighting the Challenges (“Brainboarding” the group listed challenges.
- 6:00 Supper
- 7:45 Optional Viewing and Discussion of *Chocolat* (As directed by Hallstrom)

Saturday, June 19, 2004

- 8:30 Gathering and viewing of displays (Coffee, hot chocolate, tea and other refreshments.)
- 9:00 Framing the Challenges (Clustered challenges were discussed by self-selected groups who noted resources--both available and needed.)
- 10:00 Break
- 10:30 Facing the Challenges (Small groups reported, and received suggestions from the whole group.)
- 12:00 Lunch at the Center
- 1:00 Beginning to Meet the Challenges (Small groups discussed how to help each other to meet the challenges.)
- 1:30 Building Structures of Support (Small groups reported; the large group envisioned structural development to follow through.)

Participants received a notebook with resources such as syllabi and text book information, and providing for notes for the process steps.

Project Evaluation:

At the *Consultation* participants were asked (their responses are summarized here as well):

1) What major learning are you taking from this consultation?

- There is a group that can work & devise a mediating structure for adjuncts.
- Religion teaching is alive and well
- Collegial relationships & discussions are important for the emerging discipline.
- Adjunct faculty play an important role, & structures & guidelines for identifying, evaluating & supporting adjunct faculty are needed.
- A greater awareness of the best resources available.
- How to challenge educators to teach diverse students theory and research.
- Most colleges have a concern about adjuncts.
- Limited writing skills of students is a major problem.
- Possible places for field trips.
- Support from other teachers & the frustrations & celebrations of learning.
- Growing concern that our nation needs to deliver quality religion classes.
- Pre-testing and post-testing.
- Journaling by students.

To ask for student expectations.
New internet resources.
New smart room possibilities.
Mind Mapping technique and tools.
Others face the same problems.
Students ill-prepared for college are a major challenge.
The Crusade promises of immediate entry into heaven.
“Schools are here to teach ethics, not practice it!”
Concrete ideas for teachings, challenges ahead.
Helpful ideas as I approach a PhD.
That it is possible to teach about religion at a state school as a living thing—a process--& not simply a set of beliefs held by a group of “others.”
That religion has a valid place in the community college curriculum.
That approaches vary.
That overcoming student learning problems starts with “know thyself.”
The drspock.com site “pathways of learning” self surveys of Gardner’s intelligences.
A better understanding of the variety of challenges.
A better sense of the practicability of collegial interaction to respond to challenges.
Seeing others’ variety of teaching and testing.
More about adjunct-specific difficulties.
Strategies & approaches to help facilitate student learning.
My struggles are also others’ struggles.
The wrestling of personal bias vs. objectivity vs beliefs of the students.
The value of interaction with persons of similar interests, vs. our individualism.
Variety of institutional & careet contexts for teachers of religion in cc’s.
The remarkable similarity of the challenges they face with each other & 4 year schools as well as some of the differences.
This is not a bitter or dejected group of people.
Religion classes are popular in community colleges.

2) What actions do you intend to take in your own setting?

Share the summary of this consultation with the adjunct religion teacher.
Develop 2 or 3 new courses.
To give my students the ability to learn about religions different than theirs.
To use new ideas for extra credit activities and some of the new resources.
To incorporate some new teaching tools and learning activities.
To share concerns surrounding the role of adjunct faculty religion teachers.
To encourage better support of teaching about religion in academia.
rethink an approach to teaching “Intro. to Religion” this fall.
To implement pretest and student expectation worksheets.
To incorporate some of the ideas in the 2nd edition of our textbook.
To be more proactive on issues regarding adjuncts’ needs.
To use some concrete ideas such as journals, drspock.com, etc.
To work on “humanizing” the religions component of my classes & to completely

- To finish my syllabus for an experimental course “RE” Jesus”
 - To share with colleagues unable to come.
 - To do more reading.
 - To try to arrange contacts for ideas on field trips.
 - To try out some of the things I have heard that others have used successfully.
 - To use Mind Mapping.
 - To use testing options such as students correcting failed tests for “c” credit.
 - To open my class with a “think laboratory” attitude.
 - To continue to revise evaluating the course and rethink & change the course.
- 3) What could have been (given the time) included in this consultation to improve it?
- Profiles of our colleges and programs for comparison and context for discussions.
 - More time for small groups to work together on specific topics.
 - A specific project for further development.
 - Speakers from various world religions.
 - Time for each person to tell about a specific A-V resource, as in “Master Teacher.”
 - Free or low-cost resources.
 - Still more specific methodologies.
 - Presentations about classes being taught.
 - News stories regarding our issues from beyond our geographic areas.
 - More of the learning activities from other instructors.
 - More structured discussion of specific teaching/learning issues & strategies— syllabus construction, assessment, text book decisions, etc.
- 4) What could have been left out?
- The movie.
 - Not everything was exciting, but nothing should have been excluded.
 - Not sure.
 - What was done laid the essential groundwork for, hopefully, future meetings.
 - Technology problems are more institution specific & hence might be left out.
 - Nothing to add, nothing to leave out, the process worked.
- 5) What future collegial activities would you welcome?
- Meetings on topics such as support of adjunct faculty, development of field experiences & the discipline of religious studies.
 - Some sort of exchange of field locations & faculty & students.
 - A short field experience (in place of movie.)
 - Field trip experience for ourselves. More conferences.
 - More meeting with other professionals such as at this conference, tours.
 - Group field trip.
 - Get together again & field trips.
 - Field trips, experience of other world religions.
 - A week-long seminar before school begins in the Chicago area, at a dormitory college to allow for daily field trips, perhaps through the **Parliament of World Religions**.
 - Annual gatherings, possibly regional gatherings.
 - Any kind of sharing gatherings.

More of the same as at this consultation.
One year follow-up, email, bulletin board.
Chicago gathering for field trip.
At least email, perhaps a virtual conference if no face-to-face can be arranged.
Ongoing contact. Field trip & meeting with people from other religious traditions. Further meetings. Sharing of resources.
Dovetailing with **AAR Regional** in Chicago.
Continuation and expansion of this group.
Sharing tips/strategies/methods/syllabi.

- 6) Would you be willing to help plan a faculty development event?
7 responded "Yes," and one wrote "If there's something I can do let me know."

Additional evaluation is implicit in the survey following the event. 100% participation displayed satisfaction with the **Consultation** itself and engagement for future possibilities. (Two of the computer-challenged participants did have to be called and their survey was done over the phone.)

Dissemination of the Project:

A news release was sent to *Chronicle*, to *Religious News Service* (which had listed the *Consultation* in its Calendar,) to the *American Association of Community Colleges*. In addition a modifiable release was sent to each participant for use in the community newspapers and community college publications. In at least one instance a newspaper used the news article. In another, the community college newsletter reported the event.

This report will be sent to all participants with a note encouraging them to share it with their presidents, deans, departments and colleagues.

The web site (pending the settling down of our new webmaster's situation and the invariable diffusion that occurs with a new president) will be structured and based at NICC.

The CD will hold much of the web site's information as well as photos and more information from the *Consultation*.

A workshop discussing the *Consultation* and employing the **ACE (Affirm, Challenge, Effect)** process will take place at the **REA/APRRE** 2004 annual meeting.

Learnings from the Project:

Positive: Events can be developed that do not need a "star" presenter.

Participants appreciate opportunity to share as equals (we did not list pedigree of the participants.)

Participants liked the opportunity to work together on issues of their choice.

Constructive: Be daring and get formal support from administrators.

Gather a few other planners from other areas.

Do not assume you will be able to draw from a small area.

Registration and Survey Addendum

The statistical report is drawn from the registration form and a survey, finally completed with 100% response on Monday, September 13.

Registration Data

Participants came from 12 community colleges in Iowa and Illinois representing 5 urban and 7 rural colleges. One, the College of Du Page (Illinois community colleges frequently do not include the term “community” in their names) is the largest community college housed on a single campus. Another, Joliet Junior College, is the oldest in the nation, co founded in 1902 by William Harper Rainey (then President of the University of Chicago) and J. Stanley Brown (then Superintendent of Joliet Township High School) to parallel the first two years of college or university. Joliet received its accreditation from the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools in 1917.

5 women took part (a sixth, though highly interested, declined due to an earlier commitment.) Only one participant was African American with the remainder Caucasian.

The percentage of women and people of color in the Consultation is higher than the percentage in the two states. It represents a conscious effort to provide some richness to the conversation.

10 participants were adjunct faculty, 8 teach full time.

11 participants earned a MDiv, 8 earned a MA, 1 earned a STM, 1 listed a PhD (abd), and 3 earned a PhD. The degrees overlap hence the total listed equals more than 18.

Since we did not inquire about the areas covered by the participants for their MA or PhD we do not know whether they were in the field of religion or a related field. This would need to be corrected in any further Consultation survey forms and in any wider research undertaken by the Wabash Center and/or AAR/APRRE. Further study might also inquire as to what courses in Comparative Religion were included in the DMin, MA, STM and PhD programs, and what courses in teaching skills were required (if any.)

LENGTH OF TEACHING

The “elder statesman” of the group had been teaching religion for 33 years *as an adjunct faculty member*. A parish pastor, he was asked by the college president to create a course in comparative religion in response to urgings from the state of Iowa. Several were entirely new to teaching religion and would be offering their first course in summer or fall.

7 faculty members have taught for more than 5 years, 6 have taught for 3 to 5 years, and the remaining 5 have taught for less than 3 years. Note that this statistic applies to teaching at community colleges. Many had taught at four year colleges, universities, and seminaries prior to (and in some instances simultaneous to) teaching at a community college.

Among these participants turn-over was relatively minimal, with 13 teaching more than 3 years. Nevertheless the 5 represent a challenge to develop a subject matter/teaching style mentoring program and perhaps a brief subject matter/teaching style workshop. Such a program could be offered regionally and would, in most cases, fulfill partial certification requirements.

SCOPE OF TEACHING

Participants also teach courses in Philosophy, Ethics, Business Ethics, General Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Social Psychology, Abnormal Psychology, Social Problems, Cultural Diversity, Sociology, Marriage and Family, Humanities (Western Civilization) I & II, Composition, Logic, Photography (!), Cultural Anthropology, and Asian History.

These participants are generally not specialists in the academic field of Religion. This represents a depth challenge, but also brings to the task rich perspectives from other fields: psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, the humanities, philosophy, ethics, and pastoral theology.

Average religion courses taught: 5 faculty teaching 1 course per year, 8 teaching 2 per year, 3 teaching 3 per year, 1 teaching 4 per year, and 1 teaching 6 per year.

Since the majority of participants teach no more than two courses per year the challenge of depth is heightened. Each time one teaches one learns more about the subject, but infrequency (especially when only one course is offered per year) limits that benefit since the learning can not be applied immediately in the following semester.

Post-Consultation Survey Data

ORDINATION

A total of 6 adjuncts are ordained with ordination current.

3 full time faculty members are ordained and their ordination is current.

Fairness is a significant concern regarding ordained teachers teaching about religion. To my knowledge at least one adjunct was removed several years ago from teaching religion at my college because he was evangelizing. Ordained participants in the Consultation sought to be academically responsible and to represent the religions studied accurately and fairly. At least one administrator where religion is not taught indicated that they “occasionally received offers, usually from conservative pastors, but declined to add a course. They (and others) could provide a resource for developing “Guidelines for teaching about Religion,” (beginning with research to determine whether such guidelines already exist in the colleges, AAR or APRRE.

HOW THEY HEARD ABOUT THEIR TEACHING OPPORTUNITY

Only one was placed by his university placement program. Several were teaching in other fields on campus and responded to memos or were requested by deans or department chairs to offer a religion course. Some inquired through people who were teaching, some over the internet. One read public advertisements in a newspaper and one in the Chronicle of Higher Education.

There appears to be no consistent attention given to recruitment of teachers of religion. This may be consistent with many community college methods of faculty recruitment.

TENURE SITUATIONS

5 were tenured, the remaining 13 were not. 3 indicated they are seeking tenure. In Illinois community colleges are required to offer tenure. In Iowa some colleges do offer it, and some do not. None of the adjuncts are seeking tenure.

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIPS, CONTINUING EDUCATION. AND PROFESSIONAL READING

Memberships:

10 participants belong to professional societies, although 6 of these ten did not note which societies. Societal memberships included the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education (and the Religious Education Association with which APRRE will merge this year,) the American Academy of Religion (3), Illinois sociological Association, Alpha Kappa Delta International Sociology Honor Society, American Philosophical Association (2), American Association of Philosophy Teachers (2), Midwest Sociological Association, Rural Sociological Association, and the Southwestern Community College Education Association.

Attendance at meetings, hindrances to participation, and suggestions for programs that would meet felt needs:

Members usually attended one meeting annually, but some listed “occasionally.”

Finances and time lost teaching led the drop-down choices of reasons for non-attendance (7 each). 4 noted *week-end conflicts* since professional meetings often include Sundays, limiting participation of clergy adjuncts. 4 found *prohibitive distance* stood in the way. Only 2 said that programs did not fit their needs was a major hindrance (although most made suggestions for ways conferences could meet their needs.

Continuing Education:

Timing of conferences was an issue, with suggestions that winter and summer and college break periods could supplement weekend offerings. *Focus on community college situations* was noted, along with *teaching techniques* and *opportunities to visit religious sites and to meet with publishers*. Mention was made of “*Great or Master*” *Teacher Seminar* formats. Conferences should offer both *deeper and newer knowledge of the subject matter* and *how to teach the same*. *Small group opportunities to discuss relevant topics* were desired. *Regionalized groups* were desirable.

13 respondents were aware that they were eligible to receive faculty development funds and 10 had received grants (but some of these did not note the purpose of the grant.) 1 was reimbursed for membership in professional societies, 4 for attendance at workshops, conferences, and training events. 2 studied overseas (one as a Fulbright Scholar.)

Professional Reading:

1 person candidly wrote “regret to report, very few journals, it’s “teach or perish” which means reading lots of student essays with not a lot of time for much else. Several indicated use of web sites and web searches and in particular the AAR website. *Religious Education, Semaia, Christian History, BAR, Biblical Archeology, the Sociological Quarterly, the Journal of Rural Sociology, Philosophy Now, and Parabola* were listed. Notable by its absence is the *Journal of the AAR*, although members would be receiving it.

Certification Requirements

10 participants, equally representing adjunct and full time faculty, did not know if their college had requirements for maintaining certification! Several others were unsure, while some listed only college required seminars or faculty development days. 3 respondents said they needed 2 semester hour credits, 2 every 3 years, and the third every 5 years.

Continuing Education activities including professional meetings:

The **American Academy of Religion** (1 occasional,) the **Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education** (1 annual,) the **Religious Education Association** (each year it is offered,) and the **American Academy of Pastoral Therapy** were professional meetings attended. Several listed conferences sponsored by their own colleges, including Great Teacher Seminars. Some attended Chautauqua and several graduate classes in psychology along with an ITOP (?) meeting. Creative responders listed the *Consultation* itself which for many was the only recent continuing education event they have attended.

Professional association and continuing education participation is, to say the least, spotty. Since the majority of the participants were unaware of any certification requirements this suggests that either they do not heed faculty announcements, mail, and email, or administrative communication is seriously lacking. Some participants at the Consultation indicated they experience benign neglect which permits them to ignore or to participate in professional growth. The fact that some have attended meetings or belong to associations in other professional areas such as sociology and psychology underlines the reality that many who teach religion are teaching outside their discipline and have little knowledge of scholarship and current information.

FACILITIES FOR WORKING: OFFICES, COMPUTERS, PHONES

11 respondents said they did not have their own office (even some full time faculty share offices in community colleges.) Of the 7 who did have office spaces one described it as “insufficient.” Of those with shared offices 4 said they were sufficient for working, 3 said they were insufficient. Access to telephones, personal or shared and to computers mirror office space accessibility.

VISIBILITY

All except two said they were listed in the school directories, with one listed in the web directory only. One was not listed at all (except in the course schedules.) All had email addresses. Only one indicated no web space was provided.

CLASSROOM SITUATIONS

12 colleges had at least some Smart Classrooms (web connections, projectors, computers, overheads), while all except one reported AV equipment was available on carts and easy to access for use in rooms.

PARTICIPATION IN ACADEMIC LIFE

All were invited to participate in faculty meetings (though adjuncts were advised of limitations in participation), could request library purchases of books and media materials, and all except one were encouraged to suggest new courses. 8 said their college had “helpful evaluation processes,” while one said the department head visited their classroom yearly and that student evaluation forms were optional.

WAYS STUDENTS HEAR ABOUT RELIGION COURSES, & CHOOSE THEM

The catalog, advisors, and word of mouth were selected by everyone. Only one indicated that religion was a Gen-Ed requirement, the rest describing it as an elective. 6 said students displayed interest in religion as a possible major (in their transfer plans.)

PRETESTING

Only two expressed no interest in sharing a common pretest which simply lists 10 of the religions most covered in religion courses and asks the students to list one thing they know about each of them.

Administration of a pretest, or, even better, of a general survey of entering college students, may be helpful in advocating for the need to provide education about the world's religions. This may suggest such education needs to occur in high schools and even in elementary schools.

Discussions about a larger survey with AAR and APRRE/REA should include all colleges. My own pretesting has revealed that private college and university students were as ignorant of the world's religions as were community college students. A national sampling of entering college students would seem to be in order.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

New facilities were expected by one respondent with hope for improvement in teaching situations and faculty space. One was content to function in classroom and from his church office. Two stressed again that periodic area opportunities to discuss their field would be most welcome. One was unhappy that the text books at his community college were decided by full time faculty and that all faculty taught out of the same text book.

In summary: participants universally expressed a desire for near-by continuing education, collegial opportunities to develop their teaching in both content and skills.