

**Graduate Program Review Appeals Committee
Informational Session: June 26, 2006**

Comparative Religion Ph.D.

Program representatives: David Ede (associate professor), Thomas Kent (dean)

Program's Appeal Summary

The Department of Comparative Religion asks that its Ph.D. program not be closed but remain suspended (as it has been) until such time that it may be revised and strengthened as an interdisciplinary program in Comparative Religion (see Dr. M. Gray's letter) involving other programs and departments. The previous provost's deliberations provide no rationale for its closure; on the contrary, the only comments that address the fate of the Ph.D. program support its continuation! ["We have to find a way to get the really strong anthropologists involved in a doctoral program" and "reconfigure [the Ph.D. in Comparative Religion] to keep faculty in doctoral education".] Given the central role of religion in world cultures today, the importance of interdisciplinary studies at WMU (as highlighted in the Graduate Program Review) and the fact that WMU provides the *only* graduate program in the academic study of religion in Michigan, it is much more reasonable to keep the program on the shelf for implementation in the future than to close it. To cut the program now saves nothing. If closed, the Ph.D. in Comparative Religion is gone forever.

Committee's Questions *

1. You have voluntarily shelved your program until sufficient resources or new faculty hires become available. Without any of that, why would the program be likely to start up again?
What the future holds, we don't know. But no matter how long the program stays shelved, it's not costing anything. One danger of closing the program, on the other hand, is that outside observers will assume that WMU has done away with its only graduate program in Comparative Religion—forgetting that we still have a good M.A. program. We're in dire need of replacements just to keep our undergraduate and master's degrees going.
2. Given the topicality of religious issues, what are your chances of securing external funding?
We're working on that. We now have an expert in grant-writing, and we're exploring every opportunity for external funding.
3. Once the last two Ph.D. students graduate, will the teaching of undergraduates be affected?
A little, but not much. Our M.A. students do a great job of teaching an introductory course on the religions of the world.
4. If you reconfigure it dramatically, mightn't the Ph.D. no longer count as a Comparative Religion program? Hypothetically speaking, couldn't WMU do away with the Ph.D. and develop an interdisciplinary program in its place?
Once it's gone, we wouldn't be able to go back and rejuvenate it. Cultural anthropology, history, and other disciplines are closely tied to Comparative Religion, but we're committed to its remaining a religion program. Even though our discipline is recent, the academic study of religion is forty years old. It is its own discipline; it is not a subsection of History. Comparative Religion is a growing field with a defined nature and methodological sophistication.
5. If the program is on the shelf, isn't it effectively terminated anyway?
It's on the books—it's there and we can easily revise it.

6. What do you see as the difficulties of reinstating a terminated program?
When this degree went forward, both WMU's administration and the state of Michigan were very enthusiastic about Ph.D programs. That's no longer the case. The Ph.D. should have been enhanced, but there was actually a hiring elimination last year. So do we wield a machete or a scalpel? Do we follow every whim of the legislature? In Comparative Religion, we have an established program with a long pedagogical tradition. Are we going to get rid of a program that's in suspended animation and lose a curricular possibility that we may want to reinvent later? Our position is: give us a couple of years to work through these issues, because once the program is cut, it's gone forever.
7. Back to the interdisciplinary question—your lifeline because the prospect of new hires is so unlikely. What is your faculty's commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration? Also, wouldn't the fact that different groups were working together necessitate the creation of a new degree?
Interdisciplinary programs are difficult to make work. It might be possible, however, to have a very strong Comparative Religion component within, say, a History degree. We don't know how practicable that would be, but there is some interest in such an option.
8. What is needed in order for the program to be taken off the shelf?
An increase in faculty, revision of the program, and the addition of folk from other disciplines (history, anthropology, etc.). We would not need millions of dollars and lots of new faculty. You could even recommend that the program remain shelved for five to seven years, after which it would be terminated if sufficient resources were still not available.

* *Q&A text is not verbatim*