Questions received re. the proposed PhD in Religious Studies after the 4/17/25 Academic Council Meeting

Sent: Monday, May 5, 2025 1:29 PM
To: acouncil@duke.edu
Subject: Proposal from Religious Studies for a new doctoral program: some questions

I have some questions about the projected application numbers, which seem distorted.

On p. 8, the proposal states:

> For each of the last several years, 150-165 applications to the Graduate Program of Religion have consistently demonstrated steady interest in doctoral study of religion at Duke. While many of these applicants were to fields dominated by faculty in the Divinity School, applications to tracks dominated by Department faculty have consistently numbered over 50, and applicants to other tracks who wish to study with faculty in the Department add another 25 to the total annual applicant pool that the Department expects would continue for the new program. Of those 75 applicants, the Department expects to accept between two and three each year, resulting in a six-year cohort of 12 to 18 doctoral students.

On p. 25, the proposal states:

> Over the last several years of admissions cycles, the Graduate Program in Religion has seen the following averages in applications by area of focus:
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> > Buddhism: 5 to 8 applications per year
> > Islamic Studies: 5 to 8 applications per year
> > New Testament: 30 to 40 applications per year
> > Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: 15 to 20 applications per year
> > Early Christianity: 20 to 25 applications per year
> > Religion, Aesthetics, Society: 15 to 20 applications per year
>
> Since prospective students in each of these areas are likely to be among those who apply for admission to the Department's doctoral program, it is reasonable to assume that the following projection for the total number of applicants is reasonable. We anticipate in the short term that the total number of applications will decline from the range of 90 to 120 per year to somewhere between 50 and 80.

The issue of current applications to the Graduate Program in Religion (GPR) doctoral program is important since the proposal is splitting a successful program in half. But there are some problems evident in these statements, and in their correlation. On what basis does the Dept of Religious Studies (RS) calculate that 25 applications to tracks currently dominated by Divinity School faculty are in fact applications to study with RS Department faculty? The claim on p. 8 is that this 25, plus 50 applications to RS tracks, suggests 75 RS applicants per year. So 33% of applicants to tracks dominated by the Divinity School are assumed to be RS applicants. On p. 25 the number of such applicants is assumed to range from 25 to 44 generating 50 to 80 applicants in total per year. Here 50% of future RS applicants are being projected from Divinity School dominated tracks. RS tracks in the proposal receive demonstrably 25-36 applications per year.

The application numbers to the GPR program this last year are a useful point of comparison.

Asian Religions 4
Christian Theological Studies 34
Early Christianity 12
Hebrew Bible/Old Testament 30
Islamic Studies 13
New Testament 29
Religion, Aesthetics, and Society 15
World Christianity 10

The total number of applications was 147. 105 applied to tracks dominated or run by Divinity School faculty. 42 applied to tracks run by RS faculty.
In view of this, it seems that a Religious Studies program could expect around, or slightly under, one-third the current number of applications to the GPR, or, half its stated projections in the proposal.
Does around 40-50 applications p.a. demonstrate the "steady interest" that the program needs? and/or warrant the creation of a separate, stand-alone, doctoral program?

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Sent: Sunday, April 27, 2025 5:47 PM
To: Academic Council <acouncil-prov@win.duke.edu>
Subject: questions about RS proposal

--In the 2025 QS university rankings, Duke is listed **5th in the world** for theology, divinity, and religious studies. Won't the Religious Studies proposal fracture and thereby diminish the strength of this internationally renowned program?

--If, after many decades of doing so, Trinity College is no longer willing to provide **financial** support for PhD students who work primarily with Divinity faculty, even though those Divinity faculty are members of the Graduate Faculty at Duke, how will the Divinity School be able to continue a PhD program on its own?

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Sent: Wednesday, April 30, 2025 4:36 PM
To: acouncil@duke.edu
Subject: Questions about the Religious Studies proposal for a new PhD program
Importance: High

Dear Academic Council:

1. How is it possible that I, a faculty member of the Graduate Program in Religion and, consequently, a faculty member of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, am effectively removed from doctoral education in both without getting a vote in the matter? How am I a

member of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences without being able to teach in a doctoral program housed there?

2. How is it possible that RS can effectively change the bylaws of the GPR without faculty vote?

3. How is it possible that a new doctoral program offered by RS gets funding for students that was, heretofore, designated for the GPR which was, heretofore, populated by RS and Div faculty?

4. Why is the dean of trinity college not considering Div faculty who have participated in doctoral training in religion since its inception at Duke as members who count or matter in deliberations about governance/programing and calculation of doctoral lines?

Thank you. I trust it is clear I am strongly opposed to the RS proposal.

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Sent: Thursday, May 1, 2025 2:08 PM
To: acouncil@duke.edu
Subject: Questions

Hello,

Below are some questions that I wanted to pose concerning the proposal for a new PhD program in religious studies. If you could please anonymize these, I would be most grateful.

If the GPR remains, will the Department's new program be in competition with the GPR for students? Will it be confusing to faculty colleagues, prospective students, and hiring committees if there are two PhD programs in religion and religious studies in the Graduate School?

Has the Department conducted surveys to receive feedback from current students in the GPR about this proposal? How do the students feel about (potentially) transferring to a new program and the termination of their current program? Alumni?

How exactly does the new program's structure around focus areas (or contact zones), coupled with other courses external to that focus, differ from the current configuration of the GPR? The proposal says that the new program's coursework will differ from the GPR's since the GPR has "no required coursework and allows students to do all their work in a single area" (p. 21). But on the GPR's website (https://graduateprograminreligion.duke.edu/research), the different tracks require coursework in a minor field (in addition to a major field); they also require minor area representation for the preliminary exams, with some tracks requiring both an internal minor and an external minor.

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