

PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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My presentation today might appear to be an advertisement for the Bergen Community College ("BCC") philosophy and religion program, but it is not intended as such. I was invited to tell the BCC story as an example that might be (I hope will be) useful to others seeking to build strong community college programs in philosophy and religion.

BCC is located on a 167-acre suburban campus in Paramus, New Jersey, approximately ten miles from New York City. The college also maintains a learning center in Hackensack, the county seat of Bergen County. Almost 14,000 students are currently enrolled in Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, and Associate in Applied Science degree programs and in a variety of certificate programs. In addition, the college's Division of Continuing Education enrolls more than 10,000 students in non-credit, professional development courses.

The BCC philosophy and religion program today

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the BCC philosophy and religion program is the largest two-year college philosophy and religion program east of the Mississippi and, in fact, is larger than most philosophy and religion programs in two-year *and* four-year institutions of comparable size across the nation. The BCC program is staffed by eight full-time faculty and, in any given semester, ten to fifteen adjunct instructors. Five of the eight full-time faculty hold Ph.D. degrees. One of the eight full-time faculty works exclusively in religious studies; three work exclusively in philosophy; and four teach both philosophy and religion courses. Currently, the program offers the following fourteen courses: Introduction to Philosophy; Contemporary Moral Issues; Basic Logic; Intermediate Logic; Topics in Philosophy; Professional Ethics; Eastern Philosophy; Introduction to Ethical Theory; Introduction to Religion; Religions of the World; Women and Religion; The Hebrew Scriptures; The Christian Scriptures; and The Islamic Scriptures. Two additional courses – Critical Reasoning and Ethics and Contemporary Technologies – are currently under development. We run fifty-five or so classes each fall and each spring semester and approximately twenty classes during summer sessions. Yearly enrollments in these 130 classes amount to an approximate total of 5,000 students. Of the total of 130 classes, approximately eighty-five are philosophy courses, and approximately forty-five are religion courses.

Students can also major in either philosophy or religion. There is an AA degree program in philosophy and also an AA degree program in religion. Currently, we have approximately twenty-five philosophy majors and approximately fifteen religious studies majors. The program also sponsors an active student philosophy club known as "Logos" and a very successful community-outreach program of off-campus discussions on philosophical and religious topics known as "Friends of Socrates." "Friends of Socrates" is moderated by Professor Paul Eckstein, who also moderates an independent "Socrates Café" at a nearby retirement community. Through the philosophy club, supported by Student Activities funding, the philosophy and religion program has (since the early 1990s) sponsored a Speakers Series featuring such major philosophers as John Searle, Hilary Putnam, Rebecca Goldstein, Robert Solomon, James Rachels, Colin McGinn, Virginia Held, Ned Block, Rom Harré, Arthur Danto, Peter Singer, Philip Kitcher, and many others. As part of our efforts to advertise and publicize our existence, we have also developed an informative departmental website located at www.bergen.edu/phr.

The unusual vitality of the BCC program in philosophy and religion has attracted national attention. See "Can Philosophy Exist" by Jamilah Evelyn in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 21, 2004) and "Philosophy: Hot Major at Two-Year College" by Teresa Méndez in *The Christian Science Monitor* (August 31, 2004). Following those publications, I was interviewed for an hour on Wisconsin Public Radio on September 6, 2004. (To hear the interview, click on the "Interview on WPR" link on the departmental website, www.bergen.edu/phr).

By contrast, many community colleges offer no philosophy or religion courses whatever. Many others offer one or two sections per semester, taught either by a full-time faculty-member without a graduate degree in philosophy or religion (e.g., someone from the social sciences or from the English department) or by a duly-credentialed but part-time instructor. Since the average community college offers barely enough sections of philosophy and religion courses to allow for the presence of a full-time philosophy or religion instructor on its faculty, a full-time philosophy or religion instructor will often be asked and expected to teach subjects other than philosophy or religion (e.g., history, sociology, political science, economics). Should a section or two of philosophy or religion courses be cancelled because of insufficient enrollment (a not infrequent occurrence), a philosophy or religion instructor who is able to pick up a section of history or English Composition will be better able to justify her full-time status at the institution. There are some signs that this bleak picture is changing, at least to some extent. At a growing number of community colleges, instructors in philosophy and in religious studies are employed as members of the full-time faculty. In spite of this positive development, however, the employment of more than one full-timer in philosophy or religion at two-year colleges is rare. Community colleges with actual departments of philosophy and religion are few and far between, and it remains true that most philosophy and religion courses in community colleges are usually offered under the aegis of the social science or humanities departments.

As stated above, the BCC department of philosophy and religion runs a large number of courses each semester; enrollments are high in most classes; class cancellations are infrequent; members of the department are never compelled to pick up courses in other departments in order to maintain a full teaching load. In fact, in addition to the full-time and adjunct faculty in the philosophy and religion department who work in our religious studies program, we also employ a substantial number of full-time faculty from other departments who we have invited – and who themselves welcome the opportunity – to teach sections of several of our religious studies courses. We have done this because we are unable to find sufficient adjunct coverage for our religious studies program and also because, at BCC, there are faculty in other departments with strong interests and backgrounds in religious studies. Sections of our Introduction to Religion course have been very well covered by members of our full-time faculty in English, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and history; sections of our Religions of the World course have been capably taught by members of our English and anthropology departments; various sections of our Women and Religion course are covered by members of the college's Women's Studies Program; and our Hebrew Scriptures course is currently handled by a member of the BCC English department with a background in the study of the Hebrew Bible and Talmud. The diverse cultural, academic, and scholarly backgrounds of our "out-of-department" colleagues from other disciplines have brought a depth and wealth of experience that has enhanced the effectiveness and increased the popularity of our religious studies courses.

The BCC program in philosophy and religion, then, is doing very well. It has grown into a major and highly successful sector of the college. However, this has not always been so. How did it happen?

The American community college

The American community college is a public institution that offers a wide range of post-secondary educational opportunities to a number of different student populations. In addition to its continuation of the older junior college tradition of granting Associate in Arts and Associate in Science degrees to students who intend to transfer to four-year colleges and universities, the community college also provides one- and two-year career programs in a variety of vocational, technical, and middle-level professional fields (e.g., dental hygiene, laboratory technology, respiratory therapy, nursing, criminal justice, accounting, computer programming, hotel-restaurant management, veterinary technology, etc.) for those students who have no intention (at present) of seeking baccalaureate degrees.

Aside from its transfer and career programs, the community college also offers a large selection of educational services to members of the general public who may not be pursuing either bachelor's degrees or career training: college-level courses for self-enrichment, including "institutes for learning in retirement;" cultural events; athletic programs; high-school-diploma-equivalency courses; non-credit courses in real-estate, arts and crafts, current events; distance learning opportunities via television and the Internet; and so on. In serving these several purposes and constituencies, the community college makes various kinds of higher education available to large numbers of people who might not have otherwise "gone to college."

The origins of the BCC philosophy and religion program

BCC opened its doors to its first student class in the fall of 1968. At that time, the college offered just one course in philosophy and none in religious studies. The very few sections of the Introduction to Philosophy course that ran were offered through the department of social sciences and were taught by members of the history discipline. By the 1970-1971 academic year, several more sections of the philosophy course were running successfully, and the college hired an adjunct instructor – a Roman Catholic priest with some training in philosophy – to teach some of the classes. He was also asked to develop an additional course in philosophy and a course in "comparative religions."

Thus, by the fall of 1972, when I was hired as the college's first full-time, Ph.D.-holding faculty member in philosophy and religion, there were three course offerings in those areas: Introduction to Philosophy; Readings in Philosophy; and Comparative Religions. These were 100-level courses with no prerequisites. Students were able to take the courses either as social science electives or as free electives, depending on the requirements of their individual degree programs.

During the early- and mid-1970s, we were often successful in running a total of five, six, or seven sections of our philosophy and religion courses – just enough to give me a full-time schedule and to allow for some adjunct coverage. However, in some semesters, our philosophy and religion courses did not do so well, and it was then necessary for me to pick up a section of a history or sociology course in order to "make full load." (I have a master's degree in history and a general background in the social sciences, especially sociology.)

During the later 1970s, as the overall college population grew, so did enrollments, including enrollments in our philosophy and religion courses. I resolved to throw myself into the strengthening and building up of the BCC philosophy and religion "program." I continued to work hard on making my classes interesting and valuable to my students. I developed two new philosophy courses, one in ethics and another in logic. I researched what local four-year schools were doing in the kinds of courses we were offering, and I sought to make our courses closely comparable in quality, coverage, and depth to their four-year school parallels. I advertised and marketed our philosophy and religion courses, posting posters, distributing flyers, running ads in the school newspaper. The "program" gradually came to be widely known, to faculty as well as to students; and enrollments continued to rise – slowly but noticeably.

Working registration

Something that I think contributed much to increased enrollments in our philosophy and religion courses was my participation in the student-registration process. I learned the details of all curricula at the college and worked voluntarily at all in-person registration sessions, offering face-to-face assistance to students as they struggled to work out their schedules for upcoming semesters. Appreciating my help, students would often ask me what subjects I taught, at which point I would hand them and discuss with them the list of open courses in philosophy and religion that I had worked up for distribution at registration. Later, throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s, as the philosophy and religion program continued to expand and as we hired more adjunct faculty and several additional full-time faculty, I and my new colleagues continued this project of "working registration." Only when, in the late 1990s, BCC replaced the older, arena-style registration process with a more "high-tech" system of "rolling registration" over several months' time did the philosophy and religion faculty lose its opportunity to work directly with students in the registration process. However, by that time, the philosophy and religion program was well-established – indeed, thriving – at the college.

Institutional reorganization and general education reform

Two college-wide developments in the early 1980s gave a very significant boost to the growth of the philosophy and religion program: (1) the divisional and departmental structure of the college was reorganized and (2) the college's general education curriculum was redesigned and reconstructed. Philosophy and religion was moved from the social sciences area and became a "discipline" in its own right in the new Division of Humanities. This included a philosophy and religion seat in the BCC Faculty Senate, which in due course gave the discipline some "political" presence at the college. In a later institutional reorganization in the mid-1990s, the philosophy and religion program became a *de facto* department with its own departmental coordinator (yours truly) reporting directly to the Dean of the Division of Arts and Humanities. As part of the general

education reform of 1982-1984, philosophy and religion courses became humanities electives, along with courses in the arts, history, languages, and literature. Since every curriculum in the college came to contain humanities elective requirements, more and more students began to select philosophy and/or religion courses for that purpose.

A strong transfer-degree program

Another factor that supported the growth and development of the philosophy and religion program at BCC was the strong liberal arts and sciences orientation of the college. At many American community colleges, terminal career programs attract more students than do traditional general and liberal studies transfer curricula. However, such a pattern has never become established at BCC. Currently, more than 70% of BCC's matriculated students are enrolled in AA and AS – i.e., transfer-degree – programs and intend to pursue their bachelor's degrees at four-year colleges and universities. This transfer focus of so many BCC students has certainly resulted in increased enrollments in philosophy and religion as well as in many other humanities and social science courses.

An emphasis on effective teaching and learning

By the mid-1980s, there were two full-time members of the BCC philosophy and religion discipline, Michael Redmond, whose Ph.D. degree is in the philosophy of religion, and myself. Together, we continued the vigorous program-building activities that I had begun on my own. In addition, we developed a new business ethics course and three new religion courses: Introduction to Religion, The Bible and Christianity, and The Bible and Judaism. We also developed a set of policies and principles that have guided our program ever since:

1. All philosophy and religion courses will include an emphasis on the value of critical thought and the value of precision in the use of language and will help students develop the habit of thinking, speaking, and writing with logical rigor and clarity.
2. All philosophy and religion courses will be based on the reading and discussion of the writings of major philosophical and religious thinkers (i.e., on primary sources, either in anthology form or in the form of "great books" or "classic texts"), including, in the case of religion, the study of the sacred scriptures of the major religions of the world.
3. All philosophy and religion courses will incorporate the teaching of basic principles and methods of logical reasoning and/or critical thinking as well as techniques of academic research and writing.
4. All philosophy and religion courses will require students to do a substantial amount of expository and critical writing in response to the materials studied in said courses.
5. All philosophy and religion courses will utilize instructional methods calculated to meet the educational needs of all students, recognizing that there is a diversity of learning styles among students. Philosophy and religion faculty will organize the learning process through appropriate combinations of lectures, group discussions, collaborative learning processes and projects, audio-visual presentations, and carefully-designed reading and writing assignments (papers, tests, library research projects, etc.).

We developed these policies and principles in response to our understanding of the needs, interests, and aptitudes of our students. The student population at a large and comprehensive community college is very diverse, not only ethnically and racially, but also in age, gender, religious background, socio-economic status, and educational readiness. As an open-admissions institution, the community college enrolls many students whose basic reading, writing, mathematical, and thinking skills are weak and whose education in major subjects such as history, literature, the arts, the social sciences, and the natural sciences is very limited. Of course, there are also excellent and academically well-prepared students in any community college student body and thus in almost every community college class.

Most of the students who take philosophy or religion courses at BCC are transfer students in the liberal arts and sciences, but almost every class will include some students from career programs. Some of the transfer students will be philosophy or religious studies majors, but most students in our classes are there in order to fulfill the general education humanities elective requirements in their respective degree programs. Our classes also very commonly contain a few (usually "older") people who are seeking self-enrichment rather than a degree or certificate.

Since no student is specifically required to take philosophy or religion courses at BCC, most students who elect to do so will have at least some degree of authentic interest in the subject studied and will also be more learning-ready for it. Students for whom philosophy or religion is required are both less interested in the subject studied and more deficient in learning-readiness (e.g., in basic reading and writing skills) than are students who choose philosophy or religion as an elective. The reason for this difference is that when philosophy or religion courses are available as electives rather than imposed as requirements, those students who are weak in basic learning skills and those students lacking interest in philosophical or religious studies will shy away from them. This confirms my impression, based upon my many years of experience at BCC, that most students in our philosophy and religion classes are sincerely interested in learning something of the history of philosophy or religion, the nature of critical and correct reasoning, the major ideas that have emerged in the world's philosophical and religious traditions, the varieties of philosophical and religious experience, and the ways in which philosophical and religious thought might be employed in the discussion of current moral, religious, and political issues. However, students taking philosophy or religion courses on an elective basis are not interested in highly specialized discourse which goes "too deep." They seem to want survey courses which leave them with a general sense of the roles that philosophy and religion have played in the history of civilization and of the relevance of philosophy and religion to the problems and concerns of contemporary humanity.

Nonetheless, while most students taking philosophy or religion at BCC are sincerely interested in their studies and are able to read and write at a minimally adequate level, they are not highly skilled in the use of the basic tools of learning. They find both primary and secondary readings in philosophy and in religious studies difficult; their vocabularies are quite limited; they are not accustomed to rigorous conceptual analysis; and their written work (essays, papers, book-reviews, reports, etc.) leaves a great deal to be desired. We have had to face realistically – and we **have** faced realistically – the fact that most of our students have not been sufficiently prepared for – and thus are not ready for – "true" college-level academic work. We have also had to face the fact that **these are our students, our charges**, and we have had to commit ourselves to making every effort to work with them and to meet their educational needs as best we can.

Following the guidelines that Michael Redmond and I had formulated in the mid-1980s, all of us in the BCC department of philosophy and religion have sought to develop a set of pedagogical practices calculated to "meet our students where they are" and to empower them to move on from that initial position.

- We design high-quality and challenging courses that will appeal to and be educationally enriching for our students. (The official departmental syllabi for our current courses are online on our website, www.bergen.edu/phr. Click on the link for "Courses and Syllabi.")
- We make every effort to select reading materials that are at least close to our students' average reading comprehension level and to plan class sessions so that the required readings can be discussed at length and in some depth in class. In this way, we have found, students can be brought to understand and appreciate key philosophical and religious perspectives.
- We either avoid technical terminology and concepts or very carefully define and review such terminology and concepts.
- We strive to formulate writing assignments with the utmost simplicity, clarity, and specificity (since community college students – and perhaps all contemporary college students – seem to require a great deal of specific and detailed information concerning exactly what their instructors expect of them, with reference to both reading and writing assignments).

- Above all, we take nothing for granted concerning our students' vocabularies, their comprehension of concepts, or their readiness for serious and in-depth reading and writing. We concentrate on making ourselves ready and willing to get "back to basics" and to build from "Ground Zero."

Going on line

In the fall of 1998, the BCC department of philosophy and religion became one of two departments that began to offer courses online. Since then, in response to strong student demand, the department has expanded its online course offerings to include sections of Introduction to Philosophy, Contemporary Moral Issues, Basic Logic, Eastern Philosophy, Introduction to Religion, and Religions of the World. This semester (spring 2007), we are running seven sections of our courses online, and we are also running a partially online ("hybrid") section of Topics in Philosophy in which the current topic is "Art and Morality." The department's online offerings have further increased the visibility and status of both the philosophy and the religious studies programs. (See the "Online Courses" link on our website, www.bergen.edu/phr.)

The influence of and the educational opportunities offered by the Internet have penetrated beyond our department's online offerings into our on-campus classes. Many of our "regular" classes are now "web-enhanced" – i.e., classroom courses with associated websites that supplement instruction and the study process.

Political presence (We have unabashedly played the political game.)

Another factor that has intensified the campus-wide visibility (and perhaps also notoriety) of the BCC department of philosophy and religion is the very prominent roles played by department members in the overall life of the college. Years ago, I decided to do what I could to make myself and my disciplines well-known throughout the college. Later, other members of our department adopted the same attitude. All full-time members of the department are actively engaged in one way or another in the public life of the college.

I have been a very active member of the BCC Faculty Senate for more than twenty years, and I have served as Chair of the Senate for five years (2001-2005). I have also served four years as Secretary of the BCC Faculty Association (our "union"). I have been Chair of the BCC Committee on General Education from 1982 through 1987 and again from 1991 to the present.

Every ten years, BCC is subject to re-accreditation review by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and must, for that reason, conduct a systematic college-wide self-study. Thus far, there have been three Middle States self-studies done by BCC. I was asked to take charge of the 1985 self-study project; Michael Redmond directed the 1995 self-study; and Dr. Peter Dlugos, who joined the BCC department of philosophy and religion in the late 1990s, was the director of the 2005 self-study process. To date, then, every ten-year re-accreditation self-study by BCC has been directed and managed by a member of the department of philosophy and religion.

Michael Redmond has also played significant administrative roles at the college. He has served as Dean of the Division of Arts and Humanities (twice, for a total of about eight years), as Vice President of Technology and Information Services, and (currently) as Executive Vice President.

Most recently, our newest tenured department member, Professor Tobyn De Marco, was elected as Interim Vice President of the BCC Faculty Association. Perhaps Tobyn will be asked to head up the next Middle States self-study in 2015 <smile>.

These "political" and administrative roles filled by members of the philosophy and religion department have contributed significantly to the college administration's positive view of us and our program. Thus, when we have needed administrative support – e.g., for adding additional full-time positions to the philosophy and religion program, or for philosophy and religion projects requiring funding from the college – we have (frequently, at least) been able to count on our administration's "being there" for us.

Conclusion

Attention to excellent teaching, careful curriculum development, publicizing and promotion of the program, use of online technology, helping students develop the intellectual skills they need in philosophy and religion courses, and active involvement in college-wide issues and decisions – all have helped build a very small (not to say miniscule) philosophy and religion program into one that has thrived and that continues to play a growing role in the college at large and in the lives of our students.

The Way to Go:

Hustle

Bustle

Rustle

Tussle

Muscle