



University of Colorado **Boulder**

2025 Program Review

Department of Religious Studies

Academic Review and Planning

Advisory Committee Report

Approved

Signed by:
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Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs | Date

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Process Overview

The Academic Review and Planning Advisory Committee (ARPAC) review of the Department of Religious Studies (RLST) was conducted in accordance with the 2025 program review guidelines. The degree program report and goal setting exercise were prepared and submitted by the unit. An external review committee (ERC), consisting of two experts from outside of the University of Colorado Boulder, engaged in a virtual visit and submitted a report based upon review of relevant documents and interviews with faculty, staff, and student unit members and university administrators. ARPAC staff, employing web conferencing tools, facilitated the external review as a remote visit over March 3 and 4, 2025. The ARPAC unit liaisons submitted a summary of findings derived from the goal setting exercise. ARPAC reviewed and considered these materials, met with the chair, and wrote this report.

Past Reviews

The Department of Religious Studies last underwent review in 2016. The recommendations made at that time are noted below, along with the department's progress in addressing them.

1. *Improve the quality of MA [Master of Arts] student experiences through better course availability, funding, and community-building.*
Outcome: The MA program now offers consistent course rotations, strong faculty mentoring, and a close, supportive student community, though limited funding and course availability remain ongoing concerns.
2. *Work with the College and Graduate School to explore a doctoral program after resolving M.A. student concerns.*
Outcome: The department chose to focus on strengthening the terminal MA program rather than pursuing a doctoral program, directing its limited resources toward maintaining program quality and student success.
3. *Increase undergraduate enrollment and visibility through digital outreach and course promotion.*
Outcome: Undergraduate numbers remain small but steady, while visibility has grown through general education courses and the creation of new interdisciplinary certificates.
4. *Develop stronger interdisciplinary teaching ties, particularly around race and religion.*
Outcome: The department has developed ongoing collaborations with the Department of Ethnic Studies, the Department of Media Studies, the Program in Jewish Studies, and the Center for Asian Studies, integrating race and religion across its curriculum.
5. *Prioritize diverse faculty hiring in underrepresented areas such as race, gender, and Latino religions.*
Outcome: The department continues to prioritize diversity in both hiring proposals and curriculum development, though the absence of new faculty lines has limited progress in diversifying the faculty.

Unit Analysis

The campus' standardized description of the Department of Religious Studies is available on the website of the Office of Data & Analytics (D&A) at <https://www.colorado.edu/oda/institutional-research/institutional-level-data/information-department/academic-review-and-planning>. D&A updates the profile annually in the fall semester. This report

cites data posted in August 2024, reflecting the state of Religious Studies as of the academic year (AY) 2022-2023.

Since the 2016 review, RLST has made substantial and steady progress. ARPAC commends the chair and faculty for strong, consistent leadership that has maintained excellence despite limited resources. The external reviewers describe the department as vibrant, collegial, and highly productive, with national and international visibility and scholarly distinction. RLST plays a vital role across campus through its leadership in the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture; the Tibet-Himalaya Initiative; and the Mediterranean Studies Group and contributes broadly to general education and specifically to diversity-related curricula. The ERC notes that these collaborations are reciprocal and wide-reaching, reflecting the department's intellectual vitality and its importance to the University of Colorado Boulder's (CU Boulder) educational mission.

Teaching and Learning Excellence and Assessment

RLST offers a Bachelor of Arts (BA), a Master of Arts (MA), and an undergraduate minor. The undergraduate program is being updated with new areas of focus, and proposals for certificates in Contemplative Studies, Religion and Media, and Mediterranean Studies are in development with other departments and centers. RLST defines its teaching mission as the critical and comparative study of religion as a core part of human life and culture. Courses cover major world religious traditions and religion in relation to themes such as media, politics, environment, and wellness. Because most students are non-majors, the department plays a central role in CU Boulder's general education and diversity-related curricula and contributes broadly to interdisciplinary teaching.

The department assesses its programs through course-based assignments, reflective writing, and graduate progress reviews. Faculty meet annually to discuss learning outcomes and align courses with program goals. A new program learning outcomes assessment plan (to be implemented in 2025) will bring more consistency across the undergraduate and graduate programs. Recent changes include streamlined major requirements, expanded "Religion and..." courses, and more offerings that meet diversity designations. The MA program attracts strong students and provides close faculty mentoring and professional development.

RLST's main strengths are its innovative curriculum, dedicated faculty, and strong interdisciplinary connections. Faculty bring their research directly into teaching, and students report rigorous and supportive learning experiences. RLST's proposals in development for certificates in Contemplative Studies, Religion and Media, and Mediterranean Studies reflect the department's intention to offer students a variety of ways of engaging with RLST. Whether or not these efforts extend to become specific minors and/or tracks within the major, they further interdisciplinary efforts on campus. The department's major teaching challenges include a small faculty that limits course offerings and advising capacity, as well as national declines in humanities enrollments. Continued attention to faculty recruitment, degree program assessment, and outreach will help sustain RLST's strong educational mission and its central role in the College of Arts & Sciences.

Research, Scholarly, and/or Creative Work Excellence

RLST is recognized for its interdisciplinary, comparative approach to scholarship and for a strong national and international profile. The external reviewers call RLST "top-notch," with "nationally and internationally recognized" faculty and "the level of scholarly productivity... one would expect for a

top R1 [research 1] religion department,” noting a “high level of collegiality” and “excellent” leadership.

Faculty research areas include religion and media, politics, wellness and contemplative studies, Mediterranean and Asian traditions, and anthropology of religion. Since the last review, productivity has remained high with books and articles published in major presses and journals. Notable faculty achievements include a Guggenheim Fellowship and prestigious book prizes from the American Academy of Religion and the Middle East Studies Association. RLST’s long-standing leadership in the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture places CU Boulder as a hub in that field, and participation in the Tibet-Himalaya Initiative extends its international reach.

RLST’s research quality and influence are clear, but small faculty size makes sustaining output hard; heavy teaching and service loads constrain research time and sabbatical planning. Unit priorities are to protect research time and create faculty lines to maintain breadth. Targeted investment here would strengthen an already excellent, interdisciplinary research profile.

Hiring and Mentoring (Faculty, Staff, Postdoctoral Fellows)

According to the D&A profile for AY 2022-2023, faculty personnel in Religious Studies consisted of: 7 tenured and tenure-track (TTT) faculty and 2 non-TTT, non-teaching-track faculty (listed as other-hon/lec/visit/adj,) faculty. These numbers have not shifted in subsequent years according to the department’s official website in October 2025, which includes seven TTT faculty members (two full professors and five associate professors), one lecturer, and one visiting scholar. There are no research-track faculty or postdoctoral fellows. This small size has limited course offerings, especially in emerging areas. The department has identified its top hiring priority as adding a tenure-track scholar in African diasporic, East Asian, Latinx/e, or global Indigenous traditions to strengthen curricular diversity and succession planning.

Faculty salaries are below Arts and Humanities (AHUM) and Association of American Universities (AAU) averages, especially for associate professors. Despite this, retention is high, likely due to a collegial culture and strong mentoring. Senior faculty provide guidance on research, teaching, and promotion, complemented by annual review meetings with the chair. The department also uses campus mentoring programs such as the Faculty Leadership Institute (FLI) to support professional growth. RLST’s priorities include improving transparency in merit and salary review and maintaining a supportive, collaborative research environment.

RLST’s faculty achievements remain strong, but its size and lack of junior faculty threaten long-term sustainability. Renewing the faculty through planning for at least one new tenure-track hire and formalizing a teaching professor line for a long-serving lecturer are urgent needs. Modest salary adjustments and better access to research funds could enhance retention and productivity.

According to the Office of Data & Analytics (D&A) profile for AY 2022-2023, staff personnel in RLST consisted of: 1 exempt staff member, 1 classified staff member, and 2 student hourly employees. Comparatively, according to the official department website, the department’s staff team as of October 2025 includes one undergraduate advisor and one program assistant who manages business and operations. The department encourages participation in professional development workshops, though opportunities remain limited by workload and funding. Cross-training and sustained recognition of staff contributions would strengthen this small but capable team.

The department has no postdoctoral fellows, which is typical for AHUM units.

Student Success and Mentoring (Undergraduate and Graduate Students)

According to the degree program report (submitted November 2024), RLST awarded three BA degrees and four MA degrees in 2024, a sharp decline from 2020 that mirrors national downturns in humanities enrollments. The 2023-2024 Data & Analytics profile shows that RLST generated roughly 3,400 undergraduate student credit hours (roughly the same level as five years ago), 96% stemming from non-majors, underscoring its vital role in CU Boulder's general-education and diversity curricula. Roughly 80% of instruction is delivered by TTT faculty. RLST faculty regularly supervise individualized honors theses and independent study projects.

The department currently has 11 undergraduate majors and 18 minors. Undergraduates benefit from small classes, close faculty mentorship, and opportunities for research and internships through the Center for Media, Religion and Culture and interdisciplinary partnerships such as with the Program in Jewish Studies and the Center for Asian Studies. The curriculum develops writing, critical thinking, and cross-cultural literacy, preparing students for graduate study and careers in education, non-profits, and public service. Continued outreach and advising resources would help stabilize enrollment and visibility.

The terminal MA program maintains a steady cohort of about 15-19 students, with typically four degrees awarded annually. Students have traditionally received two years of funding through teaching assistantships and gain experience in classroom teaching, research, and professional development. However, changing models for funding graduate students in AHUM means that MA students can only be offered one year of funding at a time. RLST expects that this change will lead many of their top applicants to accept positions elsewhere, as Boulder is an expensive place to live on limited graduate funding. The department fears that only being able to offer one year of support will also be detrimental to their recruitment of international students, who are often interested in the MA program here. and declining stipend value amid rising living costs make it difficult for Religious Studies to recruit and retain MA students.

Despite these challenges, graduate mentoring remains a major strength of RLST. Students receive strong intellectual and personal support. The faculty provide intensive mentoring in publishing, conference presentations, and job preparation for their students. Graduates secure placements in competitive Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs and professional roles in education, museums, and community organizations.

Secure graduate funding would sustain program quality and maintain RLST's record of preparing students for advanced academic and professional careers. Restoring multi-year master's-level funding packages and raising stipend levels would significantly strengthen recruitment and program stability.

Inclusivity and Unit Culture

In February 2022, a collaborative group met and identified the following [five goals to advance diversity, equity and inclusion](#) at CU Boulder: (1) employee skills and development; (2) student achievement outcomes; (3) community building; (4) employee recruitment outcomes; and (5) preparing students to participate in a diverse democracy. RLST supports these goals through its teaching, mentoring, and service. The curriculum highlights underrepresented and global religious

traditions, and faculty consistently use inclusive pedagogies and foster respectful dialogue. Several courses now carry United States and global diversity designations within the College of Arts & Sciences Gen Ed curriculum. The department's planning documents also prioritize future hires in African diasporic, Latinx/e, East Asian, and global Indigenous religions to expand both curricular and faculty diversity. RLST evaluates progress through course design, student feedback, and recruitment data rather than numerical targets. Faculty and graduate mentors address access and belonging directly in advising and classroom settings, while staff maintain a welcoming, student-centered environment.

The department's culture is widely viewed as collegial, respectful, and inclusive. Internal reports and the ERC describe strong collaboration across ranks and a genuine sense of community among faculty, staff, and students. Students report feeling valued and intellectually supported. Although small size and heavy workloads limit capacity for new initiatives, the overall climate remains positive and cohesive. RLST has clear procedures for addressing concerns through the chair and campus offices and maintains an open, transparent environment. Continued attention to faculty recruitment, staff development, and workload balance will help sustain this strong, inclusive culture.

Unit Planning and Governance Structures and Processes

RLST envisions itself as a small but nationally visible humanities unit known for interdisciplinary and globally engaged scholarship. Its future goals center on sustaining excellence in teaching and research while expanding faculty expertise in emerging areas. The department plans to strengthen its identity through new certificates and specializations – such as Contemplative Studies, Religion and Media, and Mediterranean Studies – that link long-standing strengths to contemporary themes. RLST's long-term priorities include generating tenure-track lines in underrepresented and globally significant fields and supporting faculty development in teaching innovation and public engagement. The department emphasizes collaborative and transparent planning, with active participation from faculty, staff, and students.

This vision aligns well with the college's strategic priorities and reflects the unit's realistic self-assessment. RLST's planning processes are collective and forward-looking. The department's most pressing needs are sustained investment in faculty recruitment, competitive graduate funding, and staff support to maintain program quality. With targeted backing from the college and campus, RLST is well positioned to continue contributing to CU Boulder's educational mission.

RLST governs itself through shared faculty responsibility led by the department chair, with input from staff and graduate representatives as appropriate. The department's bylaws define voting rights, hiring procedures, merit review standards, and promotion and tenure criteria. They also outline mentoring systems and faculty and student grievance procedures consistent with campus policies. Decisions are made through open discussion and consensus, reflecting the unit's small scale and collegial culture. Conflicts are rare and typically resolved informally through the chair or college channels.

The department's governance model is effective and rooted in trust and transparency. Continued attention to workload balance, faculty recruitment, and clear evaluation procedures will sustain the unit's collaborative and well-functioning governance structure.

Support Needs

RLST identifies three main areas of unmet support. The most urgent is faculty recruitment. With seven tenured faculty and no untenured lines, sustaining curricular breadth and mentoring capacity is increasingly difficult. The department seeks a new tenure-track hire in an underrepresented and globally significant field – such as African diasporic, Latinx/e, or Indigenous religions – to maintain program vitality and advance campus diversity goals. Their recent applications for a new tenure-track professor have not been approved.

A second priority is graduate student funding. Changes to MA funding in AHUM mean that assistantships will offer limited stipends of one-year duration, constraining recruitment of strong MA candidates. Additional fellowships or teaching assistant support through the college or Graduate School would significantly improve program stability.

Recommendations

The members of the Academic Review and Planning Advisory Committee address the following recommendations to the Department of Religious Studies and to the offices of responsible administrators:

To the Unit:

1. Continue curricular reform and undergraduate engagement by offering more general education courses, creating or expanding large lower-division classes to attract non-majors, and developing programming that fosters community among undergraduates.
2. Continue to strengthen the MA program by maintaining high academic standards and mentoring practices while expanding professional development and funding opportunities to support student success and timely completion.
3. Build into curricular planning the workload taken on by faculty in offering multiple independent studies at the master's level.
4. Continue to develop undergraduate career pathways by creating internship opportunities or collaborating with Career Services to help students connect their Religious Studies degree with professional options.
5. Continue developing interdisciplinarity certificates with other units on campus. Explore developing the certificates into a minor or major within RLST if/when appropriate.
6. Continue to expand fundraising and outreach opportunities by engaging in public-facing events such as "CU on the Weekend" and other campus partnerships to raise the department's profile and attract donors.
7. Increase staff capacity to prevent overload by exploring the addition of part-time or student employees who can assist with administrative work, events, or communications tasks.

To the Dean of the Arts and Humanities:

8. Prioritize creating a teaching professor-track position for the department's longtime lecturer.
9. As part of a coordinated plan to ensure that all AHUM disciplines continue to house junior faculty over time, plan to authorize a new tenure-track hire to sustain curricular breadth and long-term viability, prioritizing underrepresented and globally significant fields such as African diasporic, Latinx/e, East Asian, or Indigenous religions.
10. Increase graduate funding through longer-term teaching assistantships and competitive fellowships. In particular, consider lifting one-year master's-level funding package limits for units such as RLST for whom the MA degree is the highest graduate degree.
11. Provide staff and operational support to ensure administrative stability in a unit that functions efficiently but with minimal redundancy.

12. Explore creating shared administrative support services for certain key functions for which individual units, especially smaller units, may not have staff personnel, e.g., graduate student administrative support, event support, budget and finance support, etc.

13. Consider alternative configurations of department and program structures, shared services, and administration to better support small disciplines and degree programs in AHUM.

14. Emphasize and support the important role that RLST—and the humanities disciplines as a whole—play in CU Boulder's mission when communicating and advocating to university administration, the local community, and the state of Colorado, including in central campus (SRC) communications and storytelling.

To the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences:

15. Prioritize investment in small, high-performing arts and humanities units like RLST that advance CU Boulder's national reputation for interdisciplinary scholarship.

To the Provost:

16. Address salary equity and workload balance for faculty to sustain retention and productivity.

17. Emphasize and support the important role that RLST—and the humanities disciplines as a whole—play in CU Boulder's mission when communicating and advocating to university administration, the local community, and the state of Colorado, including in central campus (SRC) communications and storytelling.

Required Follow-up

The chair of the Department of Religious Studies shall submit two follow-up reports—one due on the first of April 2027 and one due on the first of April 2029. The follow-up reports shall focus on the implementation of the recommendations from ARPAC detailed herein. The dean of Arts and Humanities and the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, as well as the provost and other relevant central campus leadership will also respond to all outstanding matters under their purview arising from this review year's recommendations. The dean of Arts and Humanities and the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences will submit one follow-up report due on May 1, 2028, while the provost and relevant central campus leaders will submit one follow-up report due on June 1, 2030.