

Program-Level Assessment: Annual Report

Program: Undergraduate major

Department: Theological Studies

Degree or Certificate Level: B.A.

College/School: College of Arts & Sciences

Date (Month/Year): Dec 2020

Primary Assessment Contact: Daniel Smith; Lori Baron

In what year was the data upon which this report is based collected? 2019/2020

In what year was the program's assessment plan most recently reviewed/updated? 2018

1. Student Learning Outcomes

Which of the program's student learning outcomes were assessed in this annual assessment cycle?

Learning Outcome #2: Students will describe the significance of theological study for the life of faith.

2. Assessment Methods: Artifacts of Student Learning

Which artifacts of student learning were used to determine if students achieved the outcome(s)? Please identify the course(s) in which these artifacts were collected. Clarify if any such courses were offered a) online, b) at the Madrid campus, or c) at any other off-campus location.

Capstone projects from THEO 4965, as well as the Exit Interviews

3. Assessment Methods: Evaluation Process

What process was used to evaluate the artifacts of student learning, and by whom? Please identify the tools(s) (e.g., a rubric) used in the process and include them in/with this report.

The Capstone instructor, informed by input from each thesis director, evaluated the Capstone presentations and papers. The undergraduate coordinator conducted the exit interviews and assessed the learning outcomes.

4. Data/Results

What were the results of the assessment of the learning outcome(s)? Please be specific. Does achievement differ by teaching modality (e.g., online vs. face-to-face) or on-ground location (e.g., STL campus, Madrid campus, other off-campus site)?

Capstone:

In THEO 4965: Capstone II, readings and discussion centered around theology as a way of life, as a faith-filled habit in addition to an academic discipline, and as a living exercise at work within a community of the faithful and within a tradition. The main textbook of the semester was Andrew Louth's *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (1983; repr. 2007). All students read the book in its entirety and were responsible for responding to and opening up class discussion on one of the chapters. The book was written by an Eastern Orthodox theologian who questioned modern assumptions about the division of life and study into objective sciences and subjective humanities, including theology, and who highlighted the intensely personal yet deeply communal and richly historical enterprise that the work of theology is. Louth's book (like other readings in the fall and spring semester) stressed that humans

cannot ascend to Truth unless the Truth condescends to us, and such condescension operates, according to Christian theology, through a life of faith, and that faith also remains content, after much seeking and theological effort, to stand in awe of the Mystery of our faith that cannot be fully explained. All of this content led to discussions in every class about the significance of theology for the life of faith and the emptiness of theology if separated from it. Each of the 10 students (eight in Capstone II, and two in a joint independent study) wrestled with Louth's dense book but aptly expressed his main points and articulated orally and in written form the integral nature of faith and the pursuit of truth within theology. Every student was also responsible for writing a Methodology Statement. No student received less than an A- on the assignment. In that assignment, each student is asked to give a concise account (no more than 2 pages) of their views in answer to key questions of theological methodology and method. Without fail, after months of discussion connecting theology to a life of faith, each student included within their statements an expression of the spiritual and religious foundation of theological work and maintained that the theological enterprise is one that is unique for that reason among academic disciplines. In short, all ten students achieved the learning objective.

Exit interviews: Students noted the significance of theology both for the life of faith in general and for their own personal life of faith. In terms of theology and the life of faith in general, students stated that when theology is not done intentionally, parts of the tradition can be weaponized more easily. Students acquired a vocabulary for expressing theological thoughts and the importance of understanding the context of scripture and theological discourse. One student pointed out the theological underpinnings of Western culture which must be recognized in order to understand the interplay between faith and culture. In terms of individual faith, students noted having a deeper experience of the Mass in light of scripture courses and the impact their studies have had on their prayer lives. They also learned to appreciate the way others interpreted their faith in ways different from their own.

It's not clear whether or not achievement differed based upon teaching modality.

5. Findings: Interpretations & Conclusions

What have you learned from these results? What does the data tell you?

Learning Objective #2 was met successfully this year. In THEO 4965, each student successfully produced an artifact addressing the learning objective, which brought together the academic and methodological disciplines of theological work with its spiritual and religious foundations.

6. Closing the Loop: Dissemination and Use of Current Assessment Findings

A. When and how did your program faculty share and discuss these results and findings from this cycle of assessment?

After the conclusion of the Spring 2020 semester and the completion of the exit interviews, members of the Undergraduate Committee reviewed the Capstone presentations and the exit interview responses.

B. How specifically have you decided to use these findings to improve teaching and learning in your program? For example, perhaps you've initiated one or more of the following:

Changes to the Curriculum or Pedagogies

- Course content
- Teaching techniques
- Improvements in technology
- Prerequisites

- Course sequence
- New courses
- Deletion of courses
- Changes in frequency or scheduling of course offerings

Changes to the Assessment Plan

- Student learning outcomes
- Artifacts of student learning
- Evaluation process

- Evaluation tools (e.g., rubrics)
- Data collection methods
- Frequency of data collection

Please describe the actions you are taking as a result of these findings.

Changes in our Major were already planned before the findings of this report were compiled. The new Major and new Minors were implemented in Fall 2020. The learning objective used in this report will continue to be a key component of our Major going forward; it will be evaluated in the future based upon the 3400 courses and Capstone seminar.

If no changes are being made, please explain why.

7. Closing the Loop: Review of Previous Assessment Findings and Changes

A. What is at least one change your program has implemented in recent years as a result of assessment data?

Changes were made to the THEO major and minor and current students were given the opportunity to adhere to the old major/minor guidelines or switch to the new ones.

B. How has this change/have these changes been assessed?

The Undergraduate Committee reviewed previous assessment reports and exit interviews.

C. What were the findings of the assessment?

The main rationales for the changes to the major were:

1. Address common concerns/problems about our programs raised by seniors in Capstone and in their exit interviews and by other majors in advising sessions (see more detail below).
2. Account for the changing makeup of the department's faculty, including more faculty with expertise in religious studies and in religions other than Christianity.
3. Make course offerings more efficient in terms of faculty usage in a department that had radically shrunk in recent years. A two-semester Capstone plus numerous 4xxx-level courses was not sustainable given available faculty.
4. Address the complaint from Gary Barker/dean's office that our programming was more complex than most other CAS majors/minors, with far more strictures on the numbers of courses that had to be taken at a certain level (e.g. 4xxx-level), and this resulted in the administrative infelicity of the undergrad coordinator needing to fill out many course substitution forms since we couldn't end up offering the amount of courses at each level needed to make this work.
5. Open up the major and minor to make it more flexible and amenable to students who might be interested in religions other than Christianity. Even though we added some specific courses (e.g. the 3430 and 3435 sequence), the redesign as a whole created added flexibility and required only 2-3 required courses in Christian theology.
6. We felt that, given points 2 and 5 above, combined with the trend in theological education at other Catholic schools to require a World Religions course, we should make 2710 required for both the major and minor.
7. We still wanted to keep the major at 33 credit hours; this meant, given all the other considerations, that some things had to be set aside to make room for other requirements and added flexibility. One result was the change in Scripture requirements, with us settling on one Sacred Texts attribute requirement only.

On the specifics of point #1 above, students have routinely complained that:

1. they only got together with other majors (and/or minors) at the end of their career, and it would be nice to have a class with mostly or all majors/minors earlier in their college career. Capstone was great -

- why couldn't we build that in-the-class community earlier? And why did every other theology class each major took have to be classes where he/she was the only one majoring in theology? 3430/3435 is intended to help address this complaint.

2. they had numerous specialized courses on fascinating topics but no survey of the history and doctrines of Christian theology. For those going to graduate school or seminary in theology, they felt underprepared. For others, they just felt that they were missing out on some basic theological education (and, as Capstone professor for four years, I agreed from my vantage point). 3430/3435 is intended to address this lacuna in the program.
3. not everyone wants to continue at a Masters level in theology, and some of these students find a lengthy senior thesis to be unduly burdensome, especially when they may have senior projects/capstones/papers for a primary major. This and other related considerations (e.g., History and English have a research-intensive track) led us to think in terms of a regular major and a research-intensive track within it. Gary Barker said we could not make these have two different credit number requirements, so we had to fit both into the 33 credit hours. We felt that Capstone I was important for another common experience in the major and to continue to address issues of method/methodology. Nevertheless Capstone II and making *all* students write a lengthy research paper seemed problematic for this reason (plus the strain on faculty, noted above). We have thus reserved the senior thesis to the research-intensive track, where those students will still have the experience of working on a significant paper and developing research and writing skills under the mentorship of one of our faculty.

D. How do you plan to (continue to) use this information moving forward?

The Undergraduate Committee will be consistent and intentional about reviewing and revising assessment plans and reports based upon the new major and minor requirements. With the changes in the Capstone requirement, we will revise learning outcomes and look for specific ways to measure them across other required courses.

IMPORTANT: Please submit any assessment tools and/or revised/updated assessment plans along with this report.