

# FINAL ASSESSMENT REPORT AND IMPLEMENTATION REPORT

## PROGRAM UNDER REVIEW

| PROGRAM                | SENATE APPROVAL DATE | PREPARED BY                |
|------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Religions and Cultures | July 14, 2023        | Provost and Vice-President |

## A. SUMMARY OF REVIEW PROCESS & LISTING OF PROGRAMS UNDER REVIEW

| SELF-STUDY REVIEW TIMELINE              | DATE                       |
|---|----------------------------|
| 1. Self-Study Presented to AQAPC        | Nov. 25, 2022              |
| 2. Site Visit Conducted                 | Sept. 13, 15, and 27, 2022 |
| 3. Reviewer's Report Received           | Feb. 1, 2023               |
| 4. Internal Reviewers Response Received | May 2023                   |
| 5. Dean's Response Received             | May 2023                   |

### The members of the review committee were:

- Dr. Linda Darwish, St. Francis Xavier University
- Dr. Cristina Vanin, St. Jerome's University

### The academic programs offered by the Department which were examined as part of the review included:

- **Bachelor of Arts**

This review was conducted under the terms and conditions of the IQAP re-ratified and approved by the Quality Council on April 26, 2019.

## B. PROGRAM STRENGTHS

Our review, and especially our conversations with the members of the department, confirm that the program more than meets the expectations of the institution's mission and academic plans. Department members have developed innovative inter-disciplinary programming and pedagogies in keeping with the current needs and interests of students, while maintaining the academic standards of a university-level degree program. We cannot overstate the department's strength and creativity in meeting the challenges of contemporary students' needs with programming that realizes the "full intellectual and personal potential [of students] to the benefit of [the] local, national, and international communities." The department has a clear commitment to helping students become global citizens who

possess substantial knowledge of the diversity of religious and cultural traditions. Department members are also exploring the creation of professional certificates that will make a valuable contribution to people employed in human health sciences. In all of these endeavours, faculty members demonstrate clear evidence of meeting the educational needs of contemporary students and professionals.

### C. OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT AND ENHANCEMENT

**External Reviewers Recommendation #1:** *We recommend that the Religions and Cultures faculty continue to participate in First Year Foundation courses, INTD courses, and dialogue courses. These contribute to Nipissing's strategic priorities. They also open up additional pathways for students to become interested in and to enrol in Religions and Cultures courses.*

**Unit's Response:** While this recommendation depends on the continued support of the Dean of Arts and Science for First Year Foundations (if these courses continue), INTD courses and Dialogue courses, we are enthusiastic to participate in them. Indeed, these courses have been a significant pathway for students into Religions and Cultures, since students coming from high school are often not familiar with the academic discipline of religious studies and its availability as a university program. These courses are also invigorating for faculty and their pedagogy and quite popular with students, they are also connected to and the subject of several of our department members' published research.

**Dean's Response:** I acknowledge that Religions and Cultures faculty members, as well as faculty members from the other Arts and Science programs have contributed to the design and delivery of the First Year Foundations pathway, and Interdisciplinary and Dialogue courses. These courses are intended to introduce students to the wide range of programs within Humanities, Social Sciences and Science programs. The Foundations Pathway, Interdisciplinary Studies and Dialogue courses are not associated with stand-alone degree programs. While these courses contribute to Nipissing's strategic priorities, there is no evidence that they recruit students to the Religions and Cultures program.

**Provost's Response:** As our Strategic priorities will be newly defined in the Spring of 2023, I encourage RCLT to work within their current degree requirements to ensure success in recruitment and retention.

**External Reviewers Recommendation #2:** *We recommend that the Religions and Cultures Department explore the idea of developing certificates in palliative/ end-of-life care and in Health, Healing and Religion. Such certificates open pathways for Nipissing University students to an important area of concern today. They can also bring people from the local community into the Religions and Cultures courses.*

**Unit's Response:** Susan Srigley has drafted a certificate in death studies, but this plan has been paused considering current restructuring and the possibility of making a major modification to Religions and Cultures that would re-focus its programming on interdisciplinary life and death studies. The same is true for a certificate in health, healing, and religion. Until the new programming has been worked out, we will wait on creating new certificates. Given the interest on the part of nursing students in both areas, another approach to this would be to create micro-credentials in these subjects.

The reviewers note the significance and innovation of RLCT faculty in both course content and delivery and the RLCT program notes this recognition as indicative of important niche markets for Nipissing.

**Dean's Response:** I agree with the External Reviewers' recommendation and IRC response. The department has recently introduced several courses in palliative / end of life care and healing, which align with their areas of research. I anticipate the department will introduce a certificate(s) in these areas of study. The certificates would be ideal for nurses, and health care professionals. We will work with the Pathway Development Coordinator to explore College Pathways for the new certificate and degree program.

**Provost's Response:** I support exploration of college pathways and of considering microcredential development outside of program offerings.

**External Reviewers Recommendation #3:** *We recommend that the Religions and Cultures Department explore potential synergies between the increasing Indigenous student demographic and the social justice lens that is core to the Religions and Cultures program.*

**Unit's Response:** This is something that the RLCT program and individual faculty members have been working on, both in terms of curriculum development but also in how we teach our courses. When the Chair of Indigenous Education was hired, our department set up a meeting with her to discuss how we might incorporate indigenous teachings/knowledge into our classrooms. A few faculty have taken the online course on "Indigenous Canada" offered through the University of Alberta.

The indigenous creation stories were integrated into the world religions course, with guest lectures. The faculty member has restructured the spiritual journeys course to feature the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer and indigenous spirituality, framing the course through indigenous teachings on kinship with nature. The death studies courses include teachings of indigenous authors and researchers, and in 2023 a indigenous death doula visit the class to talk about indigenous experiences of death and end-of-life care.

RLCT 2156 Religion, is framed around Justice, and Animals around an extended conversation between Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and North American Indigenous traditions. Highlighting the way Indigenous traditions position kinship with the natural world at the centre of an ethics that is shaped around relationality provides a dramatic contrast to the Christian notion of an exceptional humanity as the sole reflection and embodiment of the divine. The course also takes these more esoteric ideas and applies them to the contemporary land and wildlife management practices that flow from both the Christian/Colonial informed Western traditions as well as the relational/kinship focus of Indigenous traditions.

RLCT 2166 Issues in Religion and Law, was created, which addresses, among other things, the legal status of indigenous spiritual practices, and he has been adding indigenous content to his courses as he re-teaches them. A section was added in the evil course that addresses the symbol of the s-vage as a representation of evil and its social and cultural effects.

A new course was created, RLCT 2096 Religion, Colonialism and State Violence, which is taught regularly, and incorporates indigenous writers and teachings in a variety of courses.

The FYFE courses taught collaboratively by four faculty members, includes indigenous writers and topics, as well as guest class visits by indigenous knowledge keepers and elders, including Larry McLeod, Tanya Lukin-Linklater and others.

**Dean's Response:** I agree with the External Reviewers' recommendations. The Religions and Cultures should combine programming with Gender Equality and Social Justice. The lens of social justice encompasses both areas of study.

**Provost's Response:** I support RLCT considering combining programming with GESJ. There are many intersections, and a combined program could be very attractive to students.

**External Reviewer's Recommendation #4:** *We recommend that the Religions and Cultures Department explore the possibility of having an additional full-time member added to the department; in particular, that Nipissing consider moving the member who has taught for over a decade in a variety of part-time contracts into a full-time position. This would provide the department with stability that helps with long-term planning of courses and program delivery.*

**Unit's Response:** The department is quite aware that given the current fiscal restraints this recommendation is an unlikely possibility. However, continued part-time support, and in future an LTA is necessary for our program to offer enough courses for our students, especially with sabbaticals.

**Dean's Response:** I acknowledge receiving the request for a tenure-track position within Religions and Cultures. However, I note that requests for faculty positions are subject to budgetary processes and approvals within the Faculty and the University as a whole.

**Provost's Response:** Tenure track positions have been requested and considered within the institutional processes.

**External Reviewer's Recommendation #5:** *We recommend that the Religions and Cultures Department continue to find ways to develop a sense of community among the students who take Religions and Cultures courses, particularly for those seeking a minor or a major in Religions and Cultures.*

**Unit's Response:** Our student representative on the IRC was helpful in our discussions about fostering student engagement for students in RLCT. While faculty in RLCT are all committed to students and readily available to them, we recognize that social events are often appreciated by students studying in the same discipline. Despite our lack of majors, our students said that they would be interested in social events not just for majors but for any students interested in religion or those who have just taken a course or two. Suggestions were made for trivia nights, game nights and pizza dinners.

One idea that one faculty member will consider pursuing is starting a regular death café on campus for any of the death curious RLCT students to attend. Several faculty members have also supported and coached students to present at the Undergraduate Research Conference, this year two faculty members organized panel presentations with students in their classes. Students from RLCT courses have been included for the past 2 years in presentations at the International Death Festival Lifting the Lid.

**Dean's Response:** I agree with the External Reviewers' recommendation that building a sense of community through new certificate(s) and programming that integrates Religions and Cultures, and Social Justice Studies will help develop a broader cohort of students.

**Provost's Response:** Developing community among students is advantageous for all programs.

#### D. IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Below are the recommendations that require specific action resulting from the Review, along with the identification of the position or unit responsible for the action in question. Notwithstanding the position or unit identified as the being responsible for specific recommendations, the Dean of the Faculty has the overall responsibility for ensuring that the recommended actions are undertaken.

| RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE PROVOST   | RESPONSIBLE MEMBER/UNIT | PROJECTED COMPLETION |
|--|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Based on Recommendation #2, I support exploration of college pathways and of considering microcredential development outside of program offerings.                                 | Unit and Dean           | April 2024           |
| Based on Recommendation #3, I support RLCT considering combining programming with GESJ. There are many intersections, and a combined program could be very attractive to students. | Unit and Dean           | April 2024           |

