

# Memorandum

**To:** THRS Faculty  
**From:** Karen Teel, THRS Assessment Coordinator  
**Date:** September 28, 2011  
**Re:** Senior Seminar Paper Evaluation Report for 2011

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The 2010-2011 Senior Seminar resulted in eight papers by THRS majors. In September 2011, three teams of three faculty met to evaluate the papers according to 1) the rubric that has been used for the last few years, and 2) THRS program learning outcomes #1, 2, and 3 (“program” meaning the major, as distinct from the core). Each of the eight papers was read by three faculty members. Since the assessment coordinator received the student papers in hard copy and some students included their names on the header of every page, student names were not removed.

In the meetings, faculty discussed 1) their scoring of each paper according to the criteria on the rubric, and whether the paper met the program learning outcomes; 2) any overall trends among the papers; and 3) how the assessment process, including the rubric, could be improved. All faculty received a clean copy of each paper and a slightly updated copy of the rubric originally written by Dr. Pascuzzi in advance of the meeting. Scores are based on a five point scale and the averages are given here. The first page of the rubric (category “excellent”) is included at the end of this report; the rubric can be found in its entirety on the department assessment web pages.

## **Meeting 1: September 19, 2011** **Present: Team A**

Three faculty (plus Dr. Teel as secretary) met on 19 September for approximately one hour and forty-five minutes to assess the two longest papers produced in the 2010-2011 Senior Seminar. A summary of results for each paper follows along with some brief general observations and suggestions regarding the papers, seminar, and program.

### *Paper #1*

- Content 2.3
- Organization 2
- Sources 3
- Format 2.1
- Presentation 2.2
- Overall Score 2.3

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The evaluating faculty agreed that this paper was very weak: it rambled and lacked organization, was not argument-driven, and confused faith claims with facts. Two faculty could not clearly identify a thesis, and thought that if there was one, it was not borne out in the rest of the paper; the third faculty member believed the paper set out to be descriptive, as distinct from argumentative, and that in this it achieved a moderate degree of success. The paper included many sources but used them poorly and indiscriminately. At least one faculty member thought Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* informed much of the paper, and the group noted serious problems with the use of Turabian; for example, the relationship of notes to text was not always clear, and the name of the main source changed partway through the paper. Although the faculty commended the choice of topic and were pleased to see that the student's imagination had been captured, they ultimately judged that this paper failed to satisfy the relevant program learning outcomes (#1, 2, and 3).

#### *Paper #2*

- Content 5
- Organization 5
- Sources 4.3
- Format 3.7
- Presentation 3.8
- Overall Score 4.4

The evaluating faculty agreed that this paper was extremely strong; in fact, one member noted that this student has entered a leading graduate program, having been admitted (after the application deadline had passed) on the strength of this paper and the recommendation of one of our colleagues. The thesis statement, if a bit more ambitious than the paper actually delivered, was clear and strong. Faculty judged the paper to be "cutting edge," a "sophisticated analysis," and an "excellent accomplishment"; they described the organization as "very deft." A variety of sources was used very well, although there were some oddities in citation. The faculty agreed that the paper satisfied all three of the relevant program learning outcomes.

A question arose as to the page numbering of one of the sources; despite checking the source, we were unable to resolve it. This uncertainty (source or formatting issue?) led the faculty to propose that a system be developed for having a random selection of each paper's citations checked (without disclosing the authors' identities), perhaps by student workers.

#### *General Remarks from Team A*

The two papers were so different that the group observed no trends between them.

The faculty suggested that the weakness of the first paper indicated a need for 1) more structure within the senior seminar, for example having the paper due in sections and reserving a significant portion of the grade for incorporating instructor feedback, and possibly use of Turnitin.com; and 2) a significantly shorter paper requirement, as a student who was unable to formulate a clear thesis statement should not attempt such a long paper. In addition to having the paper due in sections, the group suggested that a full draft of the paper should be due before the final version, so that annoying typos, formatting issues, etc. could be resolved.

The faculty asked whether program learning outcome #1 intends student work to be judged according to the disciplines of *both* theology *and* religious studies, or whether we should read this as "theology *or* religious studies" (they thought the latter, but left the question open). One faculty member

suggested that instructors for the future capstone (450W and 451W) should have some awareness of the tools of both theology and religious studies, particularly if it will not be required that students work closely with a faculty member in their topic area.

This group suggested that the rubric be reorganized so that all descriptions of “content” appear on page 1, “organization” on page 2, and so on, to reduce page-flipping.

**Meeting 2: September 20, 2011**  
**Present: Team B**

Three faculty (plus Dr. Teel as secretary) met on 20 September for approximately one hour and forty-five minutes to assess three of the papers produced in the 2010-2011 Senior Seminar. A summary of results for each paper follows along with some brief general observations and suggestions regarding the papers, seminar, and program.

*Paper #3*

- Content 3
- Organization 2.5
- Sources 3
- Format 2.8
- Presentation 4
- Overall Score 3\*

\* Citing dissatisfaction with the rubric, this team decided to assign overall scores separately, rather than by adding up the individual category scores and averaging them. In this case, the category scores mathematically averaged 3.1.

The evaluating faculty agreed that this paper was neither argument-driven nor well-organized. The paper did not demonstrate critical thinking skills or complex thought. The paper addressed a large variety of conversations on the topic but did not pull them together into a coherent essay; moreover, the sources were mostly popular and not scholarly. The faculty suspected that the student had not had any prior exposure to the topic before writing the paper. The faculty judged that this paper did not meet the program learning outcomes.

*Paper #4*

- Content 3
- Organization 3
- Sources 3.7
- Format 3.7
- Presentation 3.5
- Overall Score 3\*

\* See above. In this case, the category scores mathematically averaged 3.4.

The faculty agreed that this paper approached a thesis that could have worked but in the end did not. The argument was superficial and showed little awareness of the historical methodology that was needed; also the student had a flawed understanding of a particular category of a major theologian, germane to the argument, that could have been corrected had appropriate faculty or more accessible sources been consulted. The table of contents and bibliography were judged to be well done, and the formatting was acceptable, although the student consistently repeated the entire source in every

footnote, contrary to Turabian. The faculty judged that this paper did not meet the program learning outcomes.

*Paper #5*

- Content 3.3
- Organization 3.5
- Sources 4
- Format 4
- Presentation 4.3
- Overall Score 3.3\*

\* See above. In this case, the category scores mathematically averaged 3.8.

The faculty could not agree on whether a satisfactory thesis for the paper appeared. They also found that the sources used were not sophisticated enough. Some key terms were not defined to the satisfaction of all faculty, and the selection criteria for the figures considered was not explained. While one faculty member thought that the paper was reasonably well-argued, overall the faculty judged that this paper did not satisfy the program learning outcomes.

*General Remarks from Team B*

As seen above, the faculty judged that none of the three papers satisfied the program learning outcomes. They thought that structuring the seminar differently could enable students to achieve greater success. For example, the papers should be shorter: the students seemed to get lost in the sheer volume of information that they must have felt they had to include in order to make the paper long enough. Faculty also suggested that students might be able to accomplish more by way of argument if they chose topics to which they already had some exposure in previous courses and/or worked closely with faculty in the topic's area. In fact, one of the evaluating faculty had previously taught all three of these students, and expressed the opinion that all three were capable of better work than they produced for the seminar. Finally, the faculty questioned how realistic it is to expect students to come into the capstone with—or even able to acquire quickly—the tools they need to do a major research paper in THRS when all their prior THRS courses are core courses.

Two of the faculty in this group found the rubric to be uneven and many descriptions in the categories not representative of how they themselves thought of the elements of the paper; these two hoped the rubric would be greatly simplified and cut down to one page. The third faculty member found the extensive elaboration of the rubric categories to be helpful.

**Meeting 3: September 21, 2011**  
**Present: Team C**

Three faculty (plus Dr. Teel as secretary) met on 21 September for approximately one hour and fifteen minutes to assess three of the papers produced in the 2010-2011 Senior Seminar. A summary of results for each paper follows along with some brief general observations and suggestions regarding the papers, seminar, and program.

*Paper #6*

- Content 4.7
- Organization 4.9

- Sources 4.6
- Format 4.2
- Presentation 4.8
- Overall Score 4.6

Overall, the faculty judged this paper to be excellent. It was thesis-driven and displayed a great facility in accurately interpreting, evaluating, and comparing sources. One faculty member found the methodology to be somewhat vague and would have liked to see more depth of comprehension of the theologians studied. Another thought that the student should have consulted sources other than white American males, or at least explicitly narrowed the topic to this group. The formatting was well done, except that the student used the European method in the text and the American method in the notes. The faculty judged that this paper satisfied the program learning outcomes.

*Paper #7*

- Content 3.5
- Organization 3.8
- Sources 3.2
- Format 3.3
- Presentation 4.1
- Overall Score 3.6

Faculty noted approvingly that the student had tackled a topic that was currently in the news and connected it to coursework. Overall, the paper seemed to attempt too much; one faculty member thought that the student could have succeeded very well at a fifteen-page paper, but felt including tons of material was necessary to fill up the pages. The sources used were polarizing rather than moderate and the perspective in the paper also did not achieve academic objectivity, for example utilizing the adjective “infamous” to describe a certain Supreme Court case. Some problems with Turabian were noted: missing page numbers, misplaced periods, sloppy italics. Faculty judged that this paper satisfied the program learning outcomes at the most minimal level.

*Paper #8*

- Content 4.1
- Organization 3.5
- Sources 3.5
- Format 3.8
- Presentation 4.1
- Overall Score 3.8

Faculty found that this paper was unevenly executed. Some parts of the argument and some of the sources were quite commendable, yet elsewhere the student displayed insufficient knowledge and used non-academic, even polarizing sources. The student used some church documents well but failed to attend to others that were equally relevant, and did not know how to cite these documents properly. The thesis and methodology were quite good, but new material was introduced in the conclusion. One faculty member noted that this was an ambitious project for a senior paper, one that could have been more successful if it had built on coursework and critical perspectives on the church documents. The faculty were divided over whether the paper satisfied the first program learning outcome, and agreed that it did satisfy the second and third.

### *General Remarks from Team C*

The faculty concluded that the papers were far too long and the students could have constructed much better arguments in 15-20 pages, certainly no more than 25. They also thought students would have better success if they had more interaction with faculty in the areas they chose for their papers. Further, the faculty were dismayed by the evidence in the papers that THRS majors are leaving USD without having overcome the idea that religion is whatever one thinks it is. In this vein, they suggested that THRS faculty might want to agree on certain issues or even learning outcomes that we would all consciously integrate into our courses, for example the understanding that the academic study of religion is not about personal feelings but is always a communal endeavor.

### **Summary and Recommendations**

The quality of the eight papers produced in the 2010-11 Senior Seminar was very uneven. Two papers were excellent, while four (that is, half of the papers) failed to satisfy the program learning outcomes even minimally; the remaining two fell in between. On the whole, the evaluating faculty believed that much of students' unpreparedness for and lack of success in the seminar could be traced to program deficiencies such as all courses being designed to fulfill core requirements, although solutions were not always obvious.

Faculty generally agreed on the following:

- The topics chosen by the students reflected imagination and creativity and had great potential.
- The papers contained very large amounts of information that, in most cases, was not effectively synthesized into arguments.
- None of the papers displayed a mastery of Turabian, though some utilized it fairly well.
- Most of the papers were tedious to read due to excessive length, pervasive formatting and stylistic errors, and, occasionally, tendentiousness.

To address the issues of concern, faculty suggested the following:

- THRS faculty should continue to consider how our courses and program can be structured to serve majors better, facilitating their learning and writing success.
- Papers should be no more than 25 pages long and topics narrowed accordingly.
- Students should be encouraged, perhaps even required, to choose topics to which they have at least some prior exposure in coursework.
- Students should work more closely with faculty who have expertise in the chosen topics.
- Papers should be written in stages, incorporating feedback from the instructor; in the final stage, the papers should be subject to very careful proofreading.

Additionally, the following was observed:

- It would be best for names and other identifying information to be removed from the papers before evaluating faculty receive them.
- Faculty need more time to read the papers.

To accomplish the last two goals, it is recommended that when the seminar papers are due, the students should be required to submit them electronically to the seminar instructor with copy to either the department chair or the coordinator of assessment. Then the assessment coordinator could easily and without wasting paper remove names from headers, etc., and could give evaluating faculty the entire summer to read the papers.

Rubric: Written Thesis

Grade	Content	Organization	Sources	Format	Presentation
	<b>Information and Comprehension</b>	<b>Coherence, Clarity, Transitions and Flow</b>	<b>Variety &amp; Credibility of Sources</b>	<b>Turabian</b>	<b>Syntax, Spelling, Punctuation, Vocabulary</b>
<b>Exceptional 5 points</b>	<p>Thesis clearly and concisely articulated at outset of paper and contextualized within framework of scholarly debate.</p> <p>Identifies sub-theses or issues embedded in thesis which will be treated.</p> <p>Informs the reader how the paper will unfold.</p> <p>Demonstrates comprehensive understanding of the topic in all its complexity.</p> <p>Employs technical language appropriate to the topic.</p> <p>Argument-driven paper.</p>	<p>Effective introduction and conclusion, each proportionate to paper length.</p> <p>Paper exhibits a logical progression of sophisticated ideas that cohere to support the paper’s purpose.</p> <p>Deftly incorporates relevant arguments and evidence to support the overall thesis and each of the sub-theses developed in the paper.</p> <p>Introduces, weighs and refutes counter-arguments and contrary evidence.</p> <p>Consistent argumentation throughout.</p> <p>Provides effective transitions between sections.</p> <p>Identifies, discusses and extends conclusions and implications, and/ or future areas of investigation opened up by this paper.</p>	<p>Variety of references used.</p> <p>Sources used are relevant, accurate, credible and advance the argument.</p> <p>Never cites a secondary source when the primary source is available.</p>	<p>Cites and formats sources accurately according to Turabian.</p> <p>Provides appropriate, complete and correctly formatted bibliography</p>	<p>Sophisticated sentence structure; elevated vocabulary; apt choice of words; observes conventions of written English.</p> <p>Paper is virtually free of mechanical errors. May have an occasional typo.</p> <p>Writes in the 1<sup>st</sup> person with sparing use of passive voice.</p> <p>Avoids colloquialisms.</p> <p>Deftly weaves in citations.</p>