

Religious studies department provides new major

By Dannielle Elms

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UNC Asheville welcomes the department of religious studies to its liberal arts roster. Experienced staff run the department which offers students a chance to major or minor in religious studies, according to the department's professors.

"Religion, whether you are religious or not, is something that has had a great influence on lots of people in the history of the world and has influence in the world today," said Grant Hardy, history professor and a part of the joint appointment for religious studies.

"By not having a department of religion, we had ignored a major part of human life," Hardy said.

The minor program in religious studies began in 1999, housed in the philosophy department.

However, it was a minor program lacking any religious studies courses.

The faculty senate decided to request funding for at least two and eventually five faculty members. Then they developed the religious studies department.

"There has been a real call or need from the students who are in the humanities courses or in other courses who come

across information on religion and want to learn more," said Katherine Zubko, a department specialist in the religions of South and East Asia.

This semester, the department of religious studies has officially opened and students are now able to declare a major in religious studies.

The minor has also been revamped, so now students can receive credit for the minor if they take religious studies courses.

Staff say the religious studies department was created to satisfy UNCA students' enthusiasm to study religion.

"My courses are full and Rodgers' courses are full, so I think that has definitely been proven even in our first semester," Zubko said.

Students say the study of religion is fascinating and adds to a well-rounded education.

"I study religion because it is, first and foremost, a breathtaking expression of humanity. One can learn so much about a culture or society and about people, generally, by looking at religious traditions," said Rachel Grossman, a senior majoring in religious studies.

"I am also attracted to religious studies because of the multifaceted nature of the discipline: we get to look at history, literature, politics, art, food, everything," Grossman said.

Faculty members said it's a common misconception that the study of religion only benefits those who want to become religious leaders. The new department staff

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— history professor Grant Hardy**

say they academically teach the subject, and the program doesn't train ministers but, rather, offers a very solid degree in the humanities.

"It's like any degree in the humanities or the liberal arts. It teaches you skills of how to think, how to view things from various perspectives and how to communicate clearly," said Rodger Payne, associate professor and chair of the religious studies department. "What religious studies would bring specifically is usually an acquaintance with other cultures of the world because you can't study religion without understanding their cultural setting. Another skill is empathy or the ability to see things from other perspectives."

This area of study translates into practical job skills, and a major in religious studies is useful to almost any field, Zubko

said.

"In the past people mostly thought of religious studies as people going into the ministry. In this case, because we are doing an academic study, people can use the skills they learn in the class as a background for international business, law, medicine, politics, economics, almost any discipline that you can think of," Zubko said.

Grossman said the merit of the subject is its investigation into world culture.

"Knowledge of other societies' religious traditions and heritage is an important factor in understanding people in today's global world. As the world gets smaller it is necessary that we acquaint ourselves with a wider variety of backgrounds," she said.

"You may well share an office with a Muslim or go on a date with a Buddhist or sit next to a Mormon in class, and it is a sign of both respect and intellectual vigor to be familiar with their religious traditions and backgrounds. Competing in the new global world means understanding the myriad expressions of religion throughout the globe," Grossman said.

The department does not offer just book-oriented courses, according to the new department staff. Zubko teaches dance as a part of culture and religion, she said.

"I was so excited by what Dr. Zubko had to offer when she was interviewed last spring. I vowed to bring her here to UNCA to teach some dance workshops, whether she was hired or not," said Connie Schradler, director of the dance program.

President Obama's school speech angers local parents

By Heather McGaha

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Buncombe County schools' central office reported 15 calls and e-mails from people who either did not want their own children to view President Obama's education speech or who did not want any children to view the speech, according to Jan Blunt, director of communications for BCS.

"I am writing in response to the president's address to America's students on closed-circuit TV on Tuesday. I'm completely against my child being subjected to

a speech by a previously avowed communist, as Barack Obama is. Now know this, I cannot trust him to speak to my children without my censorship. I hope you understand this view is presently shared by a majority of Americans, although the majority once stood with him. I hope Buncombe County will decide to opt out. Children should be directed by their parents after hearing a speech, not from him directly, bypassing the parents," said a concerned parent in an e-mail.

Many parents said they were outraged when Obama announced that he would be

giving his education speech to students at a school in Virginia this past Tuesday.

"I think the big factor was that parents thought President Obama was going to teach the kids his 'socialist' ideas. Many parents' personal opinions played a big role in that they also felt that the kids would learn the president was not the devil reincarnated," said chairman for the N.C. Democratic Party David Young.

Parents said they felt their censorship should be respected, and school systems should not let students view the speech during school hours.

Despite the letter and e-mails from angry parents, BCS chose to let students hear the speech.

As a reply from BCS, the school board stated, "We do understand that parents and students have differing views about President Obama. However, he is the elected president of our country, and it is our understanding that his address to students on Tuesday is a motivational speech designed to encourage students to do their best to succeed in school. This is not unprece-

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