A Note from (the former) Chair:

Dear Friends:

This is the last letter I write as chair, and I would like to thank you all for all your help over the last four years. As I was getting ready to write this “rite of passage” letter, it was the trite phrases and words that came immediately to mind. But these words still ring true, so let me go ahead and say them: the last few years have been challenging but rewarding in many ways.

We all know about the challenges—the budget issues have been unimaginably severe. Our department, like many around the College and the University, has shrunk with attrition. The seven lean years seem to have given way to the starvation level.

I came in, as many of you know, with some hesitation and reluctance; I leave with a sense of appreciation and gratitude. I leave with appreciation for all that the students, faculty, staff, administrators, advisory committee, and friends of the department are doing to make this huge university work and make this a better place. I leave with gratitude for all that I learned over the last few years, and am particularly grateful to all of you who make the teaching and research missions here so exciting and rewarding.

Let me just give you one example. I knew that when I became chair, I would have to write several letters on behalf of various members of the department. I just did not know how many—I think I gave up counting after a hundred. Letters for some competitions such as travel stipends were brief and to the point. Others had to be very detailed and nuanced. These were the letters for awards such as the UFRF, named professorships, teaching recognitions, sabbaticals, or the FEOs; letters for grants for Humanities Enhancement or writing dissertations; and letters for job-placements for students and tenure or promotion.

It was here that the real rewards came—and at least in two areas. The first was the opportunity to learn from and enjoy your scholarship—the scholarship of one’s colleagues and students; the second, the joy of celebrating when we received the good news, and felt that at least in some ways, our work had been recognized. For each letter that was written, there was the opportunity to learn by reading your books, articles, and conference papers, and by hearing you tell me in your own words, about the impact of your research in your field, and in the larger area of the study of religion. When I listened to you, I could hear the excitement in your voices or emails; and this is why, I thought, this is why I am in the academic study of religion. To be paid to learn from one’s colleagues and have them educate me on Religion and Nature, Religion in the Americas, Theory and Method, Islam, East Asia, Indigenous Traditions—and more—is, indeed, a blessing. And knowing enough about your work, such that I could be comfortable doing a nuanced letter or give the proverbial elevator spiel, made my work that much easier.

We have, together, done a lot in the last few years. We have revised the undergraduate and graduate curricula, and, after much deliberation, consulting, and planning, started our own distance ed courses, consolidated courses to help enrollment, worked diligently in admitting a fine cohort of
graduate students, mentored and advised undergraduate and graduate students, and so much more. It is during one of our brainstorming sessions in a faculty meeting that one of you—Professor Wright—mentioned what another department was doing to help keep everyone on the same page, and we happily coopted that idea and transformed it into our weekly Friday Bulletin to help communications.

We have had many real successes, all of which we could communicate through our Friday Bulletins. There have been many external recognitions, fellowships, and grants—several very prestigious ones. Internally, there have been many, many honors, including three UFRF awards, two FEO awards, one Dunlevie teaching award, a CLAS teaching award, two named professorships, as well as several travel grants, sabbaticals, and Humanities Enhancement Grants, just to mention a few.

Our graduate students have presented and published papers in national and international forums, won very competitive external grants, and are teaching in excellent institutions. And yet, the moments I remember most are those when I sat in on “mock” job interviewing of students—students from all tracks--or heard them present papers in front of us, so we could grill them with questions, before they presented their research in national meetings. It was in these moments when faculty from diverse fields came together, and all that we were focused on was working with the student, that I felt we were literally participating in the mythic process of creation and renewal.

I also leave with a recognition of the many ways in which our dean’s office is working to help us. They have been very supportive, working hard with us to find funds for various enterprises, helping graduate students, and sharing resources to encourage our teaching and our research.

For all these reasons, and more, I think there is a sense of hope and happiness in fiscally depressing times.

Professor Vasquez comes in as chair with several decades of teaching, research, and administrative experience, much respected by faculty and students. Manuel—we are all here to work with you!

I would also like to thank one person by name. Annie Newman, our Senior Secretary, has kept our department together and functioning for the last several years. She has taken on more and more responsibilities and is always there to greet us and do all the work with a smile. Thank you, Annie!

With many thanks to all of you as I retire into my cave,

Vasu

Events

Terje Ostebo

Professor Terje Ostebo will present a paper “African Salafism: The Role of Actors, Localities, and Outside Connections” at the European Association for the Study of Religion’s Annual Conference, Sodertorn University, Stockholm, August 23rd -26th.
News

Terje Ostebo

Professor Terje Ostebo was invited to present the paper “Religion and Ethno-nationalism in the Horn of Africa: The Case of the Oromo Struggle in Bale, Ethiopia,” at a plenary session for the Oromo Studies Association Annual Meeting, University of Minnesota, June 14th. He was also interviewed by the Christian Science Monitor about the current religious tensions in Ethiopia on July 27th.

Mario Poceski

Professor Mario Poceski gave an invited lecture, “The Growth and Transformation of Christianity in Modern China,” in July at Nanzan University, in Nagoya, Japan.

Caleb Simmons

Caleb Simmons (PhD. Candidate) has been given the Dolores Auzenne Dissertation Award from the University of Florida Graduate School and the Office of Minority Graduate Programs. The award provides funding for the completion of dissertation research and writing. More information about the award and the application for the spring semester can be found at: [http://graduateschool.ufl.edu/finances-and-funding/delores-auzenne-dissertation-award](http://graduateschool.ufl.edu/finances-and-funding/delores-auzenne-dissertation-award). Congratulations, Caleb!

Bron Taylor

Professor Bron Taylor was one of the organizers of the fifth International Conference of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, with the theme “Nature and the Popular Imagination,” which was held at Pepperdine University, Malibu, California, August 8-11th. A number of former Religion Department students presented papers, including Drs. Gavin Van Horn, Joseph Witt, Lucas Johnston, and Bernard Zaleha (currently pursuing his Ph.D. at UC Santa Cruz). Carolyn Mullin, who earned her BA in our religion and nature program, and is now the curator of the animals and society museum in Los Angeles (and wanted our students to know about her internships, see [http://www.museumofanimals.org/internships](http://www.museumofanimals.org/internships)), also attended. Three UF faculty were also presenters. Taylor gave a talk titled "Surfing into Paradise and Catastrophe: Hollywood and Malibu in the construction of religious and parareligious surfing imaginaries" in the session, “Eden & Apocalypse: The Strange and Contradictory Nature of Nature in Malibu," and he was also co-Convener and presenter during "A Forum on the “Greening of Religion Hypothesis." Our own Whitney Sanford gave a talk titled "Reflections of Gandhi: Non-violence, Self-sufficiency and Food Democracy in Contemporary Intentional Communities." Professor J. Richard Stepp from Anthropology also attended and presented his work. The ISSRNC was initiated by faculty and students in the religion and anthropology departments at UF in 2005.
Upcoming Deadlines

Department of Religion schedules for Fall 2012 can be found here: http://www.religion.ufl.edu/courses.html

The applications for Fall 2012 Travel Support for Graduate Students, for the period September 1 – December 31, 2012, are due in the Dean’s office by 4:00 pm on Wednesday, September 5th. The application is available on the web at http://www.clas.ufl.edu/forms/travel_grad.pdf Since the graduate studies committee will have to evaluate and rank the applications before forwarding them to CLAS, please submit by email to Annie TWO COPIES of your application by 4:30 PM, Thursday, August 30th. The department also offers matching support. In order to apply for these funds, you will need to have applied for support from CLAS, International Studies, GSA, or any other external source. The application for departmental travel funds is forthcoming.