Now that the comps process has been more or less completed for this year’s Religion majors, this is a great time to reflect on this huge undertaking and its challenges and rewards as well as recognize the seniors’ completed projects. Please read our reflections from both students and faculty!

Faculty Reflection on Comps:
Professor Louis Newman

I think most faculty believe that the comps process works pretty well, which is why we haven't changed it significantly in several years. We try to spread the work out over the year, with the proposal due in the fall and the comps talks wrapping things up in the spring. Still, the heaviest burden of work, for both students and faculty, falls in the winter. With each paper receiving a thorough reading by two faculty members, students generally get more feedback on this piece of writing than on anything else they write during their four years at Carleton. There is a lot of satisfaction for most of us in watching students launch, produce and then, typically, significantly revise a major piece of independent research. And because students frequently take on topics that are outside our specific areas of expertise, we often learn a lot by reading the comps papers. Most of the students invest a lot of themselves in this work, and we try to match that in the quality of attention that we give to their work, both in written comments and in one-on-one conversations. As with any teaching, here too there are sometimes frustrations, as well. Students who miss the deadlines, don't respond to constructive criticism, or who just burn out before the process has run its course can pose challenges for faculty. As always, we try to find a balance between "carrot" and "stick" in helping students move through the process and feel a sense of accomplishment at the end.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS BY RELIGION FACULTY


Roger Jackson, Tantric Treasures: Three Collections of Mystical Verse from Buddhist India (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

SUGGESTED SUMMER READING

Religion Faculty suggested the following books as great religion reading for the summer…


Professor Roger Jackson:

While working with comps students year in and year out has both its rewards and frustrations, the former far outweigh the latter. It’s extremely heartening to see how much initiative, depth of research, and intellectual sophistication most students are able to bring to their comps process. The best of them, in fact, are producing work that is of master’s level, or even beyond. When I write letters for students applying to grad school (whatever the area), it’s always helpful, I think, that I can attest to a student’s ability to conceive, draft, revise, and bring to completion a major independent piece of work – these often are the qualities that advanced degree programs are looking for in their applicants.

Also, while Louis is right that much about the comps process has remained unchanged for many years (especially in terms of the annual rhythms), there have been a number of changes in the format since I got here 15 years ago. In terms of the written essay, if I recall correctly, in my first few years here, there was a two-track system, where students with a high GPA in the major could write a long (40-50 page) paper on a topic of their choosing (subject to department approval, of course), while those with a slightly lower GPA wrote a 25-30 page paper that was either comparative or theoretical/methodological in focus. We were uncomfortable with the inequities implicit in this system, and so, early in the ’90s, leveled the playing field by requiring the same 25-30 page comparative or methodological paper of everyone. Eventually, we began to feel that the comparative or methodological restriction was both too confining and difficult to justify intellectually, so in the late ’90s we relaxed those restrictions, so that students could write a 25-30 page paper on any topic that interested them, provided it was approved by the department. What we’ve come around to, then, is the topical and methodological freedom that we granted higher GPA students when I arrived, with the somewhat smaller page (now word) limit that has been imposed on most comps for many years.

See Comps, pg. 3
In terms of the oral presentation of comps, the half-hour per student presentation time has only been in place for a decade or less. When the two-track system was in place, those who wrote longer comps had a half-hour, while those who did the mere (!) 30-pager presented them at a panel session, with as little as ten minutes apiece for presentation and discussion. Sometime after we abandoned the two-track system, we decided to give everyone a half-hour, as this seemed the minimum “day in the sun” one had earned for all the work put in over the course of the year.

Finally, the senior seminar, taught by the department chair, has been in place for less than a decade, too. Before that – as I told the participants in the very first seminar, in the winter of ’95 – the situation was such that you’re born alone, you die alone, and you do comps alone. Well, ultimately, you do do comps (like the other two) alone, but if the process can be eased by participation in a community of fellow scholars, one may feel a bit less isolated, and a bit more supported. I think that our hope for the seminar has in fact been borne out over the years.

Alumni News:

Rebecca Littlejohn ’98 received her M.Div. from Pacific School of Religion in 2001. She has been the pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Anniston, Alabama since October, 2001. She married Todd Lesh in 2003 in Anniston.

Michael Taylor ’66, a professor at Marietta College in Marietta, Ohio, has co-authored a second book, Spinning Wheels and Their Accessories (Schiffer Books). During fall 2004, he will be on sabbatical, investigating leadership transitions among German pietist communitarian societies in the United States during the 19th and early 20th centuries.
Senior Jeremy Lambshead:

Investigating the Compatibility of the Dalai Lama’s Mind & Life Conferences with Ian Barbour’s Fourfold Typology for Religion and Science

Abstract:

My paper analyzes whether Barbour’s typology for religion and science is applicable to the relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and neuroscience (in the Dalai Lama’s Mind & Life Conferences), or whether this relationship warrants a separate conceptual framework.

Reflection:

My comps experience has generally been quite positive. It was something of a challenge to refine a broad interest in the Mind and Life Conferences down to a narrow, contestable focus. Nevertheless, it has been rewarding (perhaps even somewhat exciting) to do an in-depth study on something so near and dear to my (intellectual) heart. At times it was tempting to think "what's the big deal? it's just a longer term paper," but we knew the standards were higher, given the amount of time and energy we were expected to put into our research and papers. After all, I've heard that in the academic world published articles can take a year or more to complete. It was neat to be given ample time and human resources (our comps advisors) to undertake a scholarly endeavor at least slightly reminiscent of those undertaken by professional academics (but perhaps our comps advisors will argue the converse). In many senses, the "comps experience" has been a "taste of academia" that fluctuated from bitter to salty to sweet to sour to spicy – an important taste test for those of us considering further pursuits within academia. It was satisfying to complete a project that was not the result of a weekend or two of research and a few days of caffeinated paper writing. The comps process (writing, receiving detailed faculty feedback, revising, receiving more feedback, and giving a public presentation) has given me at least one big lesson: writing and speaking rely at least as much on the presentation and organization of information as on a clear mastery of the material. Despite the pain and agony of endless comps minutiae, for me it has certainly been a worthwhile addition to the host of academic projects we undertake at Carleton.

Comps Abstracts

Violet Blosser:

How to be a Church in the Modern World: Gustavo Gutiérrez's "A Theology of Liberation" and the Vatican Conflict

Violet wrote about Gustavo Gutiérrez's vision of the church and the role it plays in the conflict between liberation theology and the Vatican.

Carrie Cox:

The Universities of Islam: The Religious Significance of Muslim Schools in the Nation of Islam during the Leadership of Elijah Muhammad

In her paper, Carrie analyzed the religious reasons, many of which are economic and/or political, for founding and maintaining the Universities of Islam during the leadership of Elijah Muhammad.

Amy Etzel:

The Ritual Process within ‘The Legend of Duluo’

John Gabrielson:

By Their Fruits

John’s comps was a study of Christian community formation within Latin American liberation and post-liberal theologies.

Mac Henry:


Mac’s paper centered on two of the many Native American prophets in the Ohio River Valley region in the mid-eighteenth century and the ways scholarly interpretations have ignored these movements' religious significance.

Cori Sparks:

Self-Representation in Hinduism: Two Gurus in America

Cori analyzed the differences between the autobiographies of Swamis Yogananda and Muktananda and the way their intended (western) audiences affected their self representation.

Gunnar Stapp:

Faith and Morality: The Suspension of Ethics within the Bhagavad-Gita and Genesis

Gunnar wrote his paper on the issues of "faith" and "morality" in the Abraham Story (Genesis 22) and The Bhagavad-Gita (a Hindu Epic), analyzing these works through the lenses of Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling" and Gandhi's interpretation of the Gita.