Justification and Petition Letter for STAT 200

GECAC is recommending that STAT 200 (Introduction to Statistics) be included in the mathematical sciences area of University Core B. The Mathematics and Statistics Department would like STAT 200 to be included in the mathematical sciences area of College Core B but not University Core B.

In all other areas, the menu of courses for University Core B and College Core B are identical with the addition of health and wellness and foreign languages in College Core B. Removing STAT 200 from University Core B would force departments to require a general mathematics course that may be less applicable than the study of statistics, a form of critical thinking and numerical literacy that allows students to gather, analyze, and evaluate data to form valid conclusions. The importance of STAT 200 to Radford University is demonstrated by the nearly 1300 students who take the course each year and the number programs that require it.
TO: General Education Curricular Advisory Committee  
   ATTN: Susan van Patten  

FROM: Department of Mathematics and Statistics  

RE: Review of Proposed Core Curriculum Courses  

Dear Committee Members,  

The Department of Mathematics and Statistics has carefully reviewed the list of proposed core curriculum courses for University Core B and College Core B in the area of mathematical sciences. We approve of the proposed list as it stands, with one important exception.  

As you will recall, our department petitioned GECAC during the summer to allow us to place STAT 200, Intro to Statistics, in the list for College Core B (CCB), but remove it from the list for University Core B (UCB). We were motivated to make this petition for several reasons.  

1. Given the configuration of the framework, having STAT 200 in UCB means that students may graduate from Radford University without ever having taken a course in general mathematics.  
2. Students in departments that currently require STAT 200, primarily in the social sciences, are students who will particularly benefit from additional exposure to general mathematics.  
3. In canvassing faculty and chairs across campus, we found nearly unanimous support for requiring a core curriculum course in general mathematics, even if (for some, especially if) the requirement was in addition to a requirement that many departments have for STAT 200 specifically.  
4. Removing STAT 200 entirely from the Core Curriculum would place an onerous burden on many departments, who would then have to require it as an add-on. Consequently, it makes sense to remove it from UCB, but leave it in CCB.  

Since GECAC voted to turn down our petition in August, we have considered the reasons given by GECAC and found them to be insufficient. Specifically,  

1. GECAC wants to “allow departments the flexibility to choose requirements that would best meet the needs of their students,” and since nearly 1300 students take STAT 200 each year, it is evidently an important course. However, as we have now amply demonstrated, all the departments that would be affected by our proposal, with one exception, are precisely the departments that have come out strongly in favor of our proposal.  
2. GECAC stated that there remained concerns about “students being adversely affected” by our proposal, despite the stated support of the various departments. To our knowledge, the only department whose program would be adversely affected (i.e., by an unwanted add-on) is ESHE. Our representative, Dr. Smith, has met with the chairperson of ESHE, Dr. Beverly Zeakes, to explore how we can best serve her department. As a result of these discussions we are proposing to modify an existing Core Math course, MATH 114, to meet ESHE’s needs. As a result, they will not need to require STAT 200, so our proposal no longer adversely affects their students. In this we have responded proactively to GECAC’s concern, and found a solution.
3. GECAC stated that it has a “philosophical objection” to boxes being filled with courses with only a single prefix, since various disciplines must be prepared to share the core curriculum to the benefit of all. However, despite the fact that MATH and STAT are distinct prefixes, mathematics and statistics courses are taught by the same faculty, all from a single department. Therefore, no issue of fairness arises in this instance.

In considering whether and how to respond to GECAC's denial of our petition, our faculty again debated the relative merits of permitting students to take a statistics course as their sole math sciences course in their baccalaureate. We also reviewed the revisions in the framework and learning outcomes that have been presented since the beginning of the semester. We are increasingly alarmed at the direction the Core Curriculum is taking with respect to quantitative sciences. In addition to our original reasons for making our petition we now find that,

1. In the proposal as it stands, the quantitative (mathematical and information sciences) requirement for Radford students is being reduced by half, from 6 credit hours to 3 credit hours. This is inconsistent with the needs of our students, as repeatedly emphasized by studies at the national and state level, and as commonly and forcefully reported by our colleagues across campus. As with writing, additional coursework in quantitative sciences makes it possible for students to accomplish more – not less – in their major programs. By reducing our students' exposure to mathematical training, we are reducing their opportunities for success in the natural and social sciences where the skills they acquire in general mathematics are an essential part of their competency as students. This damages student success rates across a very broad segment of our liberal arts curriculum.

2. In conversations with our colleagues within and outside of the College of Science and Technology, there is increasing alarm at the prospect of students graduating without a general math course. Many have expressed to members of our department individually that should this situation stand, Radford University will not be academically competitive with our peer institutions, to put it as politely as possible.

3. On careful reflection we affirm that, while STAT 200 is an excellent course and satisfies the proposed Core Curriculum Outcomes in every detail, for the social sciences students on whom alone this decision will have any impact, it simply is not enough. They need more math to succeed in their majors, and in their careers.

We respectfully request that GECAC carefully consider the points we have made, and vote to endorse our petition to list STAT 200 in CCB, but not in UCB.

Sincerely,

B. Sidney Smith
Gen-ed liaison for the Dept. of Mathematics and Statistics

Dr. M. Jill Stewart
Chairperson, Dept. of Mathematics and Statistics
ADDENDUM TO THE LETTER OF PETITION BY THE MATH DEPARTMENT

Since our letter above was composed, further consultation with the department of Exercise, Sport, and Health Education has resulted in a determination that their students need the full STAT 200 course. However, the Math Dept. will still be adding a statistics component to MATH 114 for the benefit of all students.

GECAC's reasoning in denying our petition is unsatisfactory. First, GECAC wishes to preserve a particular bureaucratic structure for the course lists. We believe that bureaucratic decisions should serve the needs of our students. GECAC is inverting this principle. Second, GECAC insists that a general math course is less applicable than statistics, so students shouldn't be required to take one. GECAC's position in this regard is in direct opposition to the unanimous conclusion of our mathematics faculty, to the findings of state and national studies on this issue, and to the broad consensus of the faculty on this campus. Finally, GECAC believes that it should be in the University Core B because so many students take it. However, the question is not whether students should take statistics, but whether they should be permitted to take nothing but statistics. Therefore, GECAC's final argument commits a non sequitur.

GECAC's real reason for denying the petition is to take pressure off of a very small number of programs in the Health Sciences College and the School of Education, such as RCPT and ESHE, that are having trouble meeting their accreditation requirements within a 120 credit-hour limit. We are sympathetic with the dilemma these departments face, and the math department will continue to work with each department to ensure that we are providing the best service to their programs possible. Nevertheless, we cannot countenance sacrificing the educational needs of all RU students, and the quantitative component of our Core Curriculum, as drastically as GECAC proposes for any of the actual or ostensible reasons offered. The Department of Mathematics and Statistics, in consultation with our colleagues in the College of Science and Technology and across campus, will continue to press for this necessary adjustment to the GECAC Core Curriculum Proposal.
Justification and Petition Letter for RELN 206

GECAC has not included RELN 206 (Survey of Religious Experiences) in the proposed core courses. The Philosophy and Religious Studies Department requests the inclusion of RELN 206 in the humanities area of University Core B.

While GECAC appreciates the relevance and importance of the course, it does not appear to share the same introductory qualities as others proposed for the core curriculum. Furthermore, we recommend that the department investigate adding a prerequisite such as RELN 111 (Introduction to Religion) so students can better appreciate the complexities of spiritual experiences within the context of the course.
To: The General Education Curriculum Advisory Committee  
From: Susan Kwilecki, Professor of Religious Studies  
Re: Justification for including RELN 206 in the General Education Humanities Area  
Date: October 1, 2008

For the following reasons, I ask that RELN 206 (Survey of Religious Experiences) be included as an option in the University Core B Humanities Area. (Let me apologize in advance for writing errors that may have escaped my notice, as I have had only two days to prepare this.)

1. **There is no compelling justification for removing RELN 206 from the Area 7 options.** In correspondence with the PHRE Department on this matter, GECAC, as far as I know, has not presented arguments for changing the status of RELN 206. We have heard—without full explanation—that the Committee intends to have a shorter list of courses, and therefore we must join other departments in reducing GE offerings. Also, it has been said that the course is too narrow in its focus.

With respect to the first reason, I note that GECAC has not, as far as I know, elaborated, formalized, and put before the Senate a recommendation for limited course menus. The approved “Characteristics” of the new program do not specify how many courses may be listed in each area. Thus the desire to shorten course lists has no official standing and, until it does, should not be used to eliminate particular courses from the program. Under these circumstances, the expectation that our department will relinquish courses because other departments have done so, is tantamount to advising herd behavior, and is not an academically defensible request.

Let me address the claim that RELN 206 is too narrow in its focus to be included as a Humanities General Education option.

2. **The new Humanities area does not differ significantly from the current one.** RELN 206 was approved for Humanities credit in the current GE program. Therefore, unless the new conceptualization of Humanities differs significantly from the old, RELN 206 should, like other GE courses such as RELN 111, simply be transferred from one system to the other. In fact, the old and new Humanities goals and learning objectives are quite similar. Hence, it is difficult to understand why the status of RELN 206 should be in jeopardy, since neither the area nor the course has changed with respect to breadth or anything else.

3. **RELN 206 meets the new Humanities Learning Objectives.** During my service on GECAC, the Committee judged the appropriateness of courses to General Education almost entirely in terms of their ability to meet learning objectives. On this basis, RELN 206 qualifies as a Humanities option in the new program. Let me illustrate how it meets the objectives, and in so doing address the Committee’s misgivings about course breadth.

   
   (A) **Explain the nature and methods of inquiry in the humanities.** No course I teach is as methodologically demanding as RELN 206. This is so because of its subject matter—reported direct encounters with supernatural powers. We read the testimonies of people who claim to have spoken with
God, toured heaven or hell, seen Christ, been rescued by an angel or possessed by a demon, and so on. The first impulse of students upon reading these accounts is not, as the course requires, to fathom the human causes and consequences of the experiences, but to try to determine their theological validity—did the subject really see an angel? With constant vigilance and practice, by the end of the semester, most students have mastered the humanistic approach and, told an experience, immediately read it for what it reveals about the subject. The course provides an excellent opportunity to realize the “methods” outcome with data that make it unusually challenging.

(B) Describe and explain differing views of the meaning, value, and purpose of life. Insofar as the origins of major religious traditions—the sources of “differing views of the meaning, value, and purpose of life”—can be known, they lie in the religious experiences of founders and their followers. The Koran, e.g., derives from possession-like episodes in which Muhammad spoke words putatively channeled from Allah. Without the Prophet’s religious experiences, there would be no Islam. Likewise, Buddhism originated in the enlightenment experience of Siddhartha Gautama, a yogic trance state from which he gleaned the causes of and a solution to human suffering. Christianity would not exist had not the early followers of Jesus encountered him after his death. Their interpretation of those experiences differentiated Christianity from Judaism. Conceptualizations of the meaning of life from the Hebrew prophets, early Christianity (as well as later variations, particularly Catholicism and Pentecostalism), Buddhism, Vedantic Hinduism, and the New Age movement are reviewed as we examine religious experiences and their place in religious life as a whole. Further, the course endlessly illustrates, with individual cases, the power of religious experiences to bolster in the face of doubt, or change entirely, personal convictions concerning the value and purpose of life.

(C) Explain historical, philosophical, religious, or literary sources according to societal or cultural perspectives. Again, course materials consist largely of firsthand reports of encounters with supernatural powers: “I was sitting at my desk when an angel appeared to my left and warned me to act busy, my boss was coming. . . .” One of the first lessons students learn, and repeatedly practice, is how to read these critically, as products of particular cultures and personalities. For example, Christian accounts of the risen Christ must be understood within the first century Jewish debate on the fate of the dead; contemporary American reports of delightful angels and benevolent ghosts must be interpreted in light of prevailing cultural values such as individualism and religious tolerance.

(D) Interpret and critically evaluate historical, philosophical, religious, or literary expressions of the human experience. An important course agenda is the consideration of the collective and personal effects of religious experiences. We observe, e.g., the violent outcomes of some prophetic experiences (such as those of David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidians), and, at the same time, the instant relief of debilitating grief or substance addiction following other types of religious experiences. Mystical experiences are compared to psychotic episodes; demon possession is found to have social advantages. In all, students learn, through the study of “reported direct encounters,” the general gifts and liabilities of religion, its power to both heal and destroy.

I believe that RELN 206 meets the old and the new Humanities Learning Objectives as thoroughly as RELN 111 (which, as I teach it, focuses on religious responses to suffering) and RELN 112 (which, as I
teach it, focuses on ideas in the earliest scriptures of seven traditions). It simply does so through a different lens.

4. RELN 206 explores a universal mode of addressing life’s “most fundamental and profound questions” that is otherwise neglected in Area 7 options. Humanities courses delineate the “search for answers to humankind’s most fundamental and profound questions” in its various forms—philosophical inquiry, literature, etc. RELN 206 frames an approach to the quest for meaning that is probably overlooked in other courses, viz., the exploitation of altered states of consciousness. Religious experiences reveal a species-wide potential to bypass completely the restrictions of the sensory world. RELN 206 presents the physiologically-rooted capacity for non-ordinary perception as a pathway to the meaning of life. Students learn that humans often grasp the largest and most influential truths in decidedly non-rational ways. Subjects of religious experiences see the goddess Isis arise from the ocean, become one with the cosmos, visit dead loved ones, and battle the devil hand to hand. It is exactly in these moments of expanded perception that they learn what is true and valuable. Such an approach might be considered aberrant except for the fact that it is precisely the one taken by religious founders and many of their followers, even today. As William James puts it, “our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. . . . No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded” (*Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 305). I think RELN 206 is not only suitable to the new Humanities area, but would enrich it.

5. Students report general insights into religion and the human condition. At the end of the semester, I routinely ask RELN 206 students what they have learned about the place of religious experiences in life. Many responses present broad humanistic realizations. For example, last spring, a student wrote:

“I have learned, rather reinforced my knowledge, that religious experiences are a complex facet of the complicated phenomenon known as the human experience. As scholars have studied these events in the past and will surely continue to study them, they will confound explanation and understanding. As one question may be answered, three more will surface. As one doorway in the human mind is opened, many more mysteries and doorways lie in wait. Scholars, observers, followers, skeptics, and even the experiencers themselves will always be confounded by religious experiences, no matter what their form. Their nature will always remain mysterious and intangible, and therefore always an indispensible facet of the ineffable human experience.”

This pupil is not unusual. Year after year, RELN 206 students report that they have gained a new appreciation of the complexity and mystery of the human mind. This, along with the preceding points, convinces me that despite the focus on religious experiences (again, all religious studies courses focus on particular aspects of religious life), the course is an appropriate and valuable Humanities option.
To: The Faculty Senate

From: Susan Kwilecki, Professor of Religious Studies

Re: RELN 206

Date: October 9, 2008

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The PHRE Department was notified that GECAC had decided, on the basis of the catalogue description, to delete RELN 206 “Survey of Religious Experiences” from the list of Humanities offerings in the new GE program. I petitioned against this. My request was denied. Yesterday the Committee’s justification (in a letter from Susan Van Patten to the PHRE Chair) was forwarded to me. It consisted of only one phrase, viz., RELN 206 “does not appear to share the same introductory qualities as other core courses.”

I understand that Susan Van Patten has forwarded my petition to the Senate. This addendum addresses GECAC’s claim that, compared to other courses in the new program, RELN 206 lacks appropriate introductory qualities.

1. RELN 206 was considered broad enough to serve as a Humanities option in the existing program.

2. As I observed in my petition to GECAC, its scope is sufficiently wide to meet the new Humanities Learning Objectives.

3. The list of approved courses includes many with titles other than “Introduction to ________,” such as:

   PHIL 111 Knowledge, Reality, and the Human Condition
   PHIL 112: Ethics and Society
   PHIL 114 Origins of Western Philosophy
   GEOG 203 Appalachian Geography (in U.S. Perspectives).
In my judgment, the Committee has rightly included these courses. A GE program consisting only of “Introduction to _________” offerings would be bland indeed.

However, it is unclear to me what “introductory qualities” these courses have that RELN 206 lacks. All introductory courses entail a selection of representative aspects of the subject matter, even, as I wrote in my petition, RELN 111 “Introduction to Religion.” In RELN 206, that feature is a critical universal element of religious traditions around the world and throughout history. Why religious experiences are unacceptably narrow as an introduction to the human quest for meaning, when, e.g., social ethics and the origins of Western philosophy are sufficiently general, escapes me.

For these reasons, and those I wrote in my original petition, I ask that the Senate reverse this apparently arbitrary and, I suspect, hasty decision.