MEMORANDUM

TO: Dr. Daryle Williams, Dean, College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences

FROM: Melissa M. Wilcox, Chair, Department of Religious Studies

RE: Department Name Change Proposal

DATE: October 12, 2021

Dear Dean Williams:

The Department of Religious Studies at UC Riverside is proposing to change its name to the Department for the Study of Religion. While this may appear from the outside to be a negligible change, it is part of a broader, international movement to clarify the purpose and function of our field to our students and colleagues.

Religious Studies is the transdisciplinary study of phenomena that are variously known in English as religion, spirituality, faith, ritual, and the like. Our field also engages with phenomena that function or are treated like religion, such as profound commitments to scientific principles or to nationalism, and with such phenomena as atheism and secularism. In this, it is similar to many other interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary fields that bring a range of methodological tools to bear on a specific topic or question. We study religion as a human phenomenon, using the tools of the arts, the humanities, the social sciences, and in some cases even the natural sciences, for the purpose of the advancement of knowledge and understanding, not the advancement of particular forms of religious practice. Yet, like our colleagues across the US and internationally, we have noticed a persistent tendency among students and colleagues who are unfamiliar with our field to presume that its purpose is the practice of religion. Students often avoid (or select) our classes because they expect us to support, enrich, or challenge their faith; colleagues and administrators outside of our field often wonder whether we have anything of value to contribute to the academic enterprise, or even whether we have any place in a public institution. While such presumptions are part of a larger and increasingly transnational discourse on the place of religion in contemporary society, and therefore are topics that many of us in fact study, they nonetheless cause problems for a wider understanding of the academic study of religion and the singular importance of our work in a world where religion continues to play a prominent role in most human enterprises.

For decades or longer, most departments like ours have been named either “Department of Religion” or “Department of Religious Studies.” The former is often taken to imply that we “do” religion, despite the fact that this association does not always hold (one presumes, for instance, that the faculty members of the Department of Evolution, Ecology, and Organismal Biology “do” biology, but that is hardly relevant to their research). The latter name is often misread as
implying that we are religious, and are studying religiously. In an effort to address this challenge, good number of prominent departments and programs in our field have altered their names over the past few decades, and the number of renamings continues to grow. The following is a partial list:

- Arizona State University, The Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict
- Berkeley Center for the Study of Religion
- San Diego State University, Department for the Study of Religion
- Harvard Divinity School, Center for the Study of World Religions
- Leiden University, Centre for the Study of Religion
- Oxford University, MSt Programme in Study of Religions
- Princeton University, Center for Culture, Society and Religion
- The Ohio State University, Center for the Study of Religion
- UC Los Angeles, Center for the Study of Religion
- UC Davis, Graduate Program in the Study of Religion
- University of Notre Dame, Center for the Study of Religion and Society
- University of Sydney, Department of Studies in Religion
- University of Toronto, Department for the Study of Religion
- University of Victoria, Centre for the Study of Religion and Society
- University of Virginia, Virginia Center for the Study of Religion

Like our colleagues at these schools, we too believe a name change is necessary. We do think that some reference to the focus of our studies needs to remain in the name, both for recognizability and for the sake of graduate student degrees, but like other departments we are seeking a name that will more clearly suggest what we do and that will run less risk of implying that we do something else.

Therefore, the department members present at our opening meeting on September 20, 2021 voted unanimously to change the name of the department to the **Department for the Study of Religion**. We would suggest that courses be coded as REL or, if the code must have four letters, RELG. The sole member of the department who was unavailable to vote is on medical leave; however, he participated in the initial conversation about a possible name change last year and was supportive, so we believe that we have the full faculty behind this decision. The undersigned are all of the ladder-rank faculty members who were present for the vote, that is, seven out of our current contingent of eight.

Sincerely,

Professor Michael Alexander
Professor Muhamad Ali
Professor Ana Bajželj
Professor Matthew King
Professor Amanda Lucia
Professor Pashaura Singh
Professor Melissa M. Wilcox, Department Chair
June 09, 2022

TO: Daryle Williams, Dean
    College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences

FROM: John Kim, Chair
       CHASS Executive Committee

RE: Department of Religious Studies Name Change

The CHASS Executive Committee reviewed the request by the Department of Religious Studies to change its name to the “Department for the Study of Religion.” The CHASS EC has no objections to this name change and requests that the CHASS Dean approve this change.
May 31, 2022

Dear Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor Watkins:

I recommend approval of the Department of Religious Studies request to change its name to the Department for the Study of Religion. The departmental proposal presents clear and compelling rationale for the change, arguing that it better reflects the nature of the field and the teaching and research conducted by department faculty. The name change also participates and contributes to a broad international trend to change names of analogous departments to better communicate what scholars in those departments do – and do not – study. I do not know of any potential negative consequences of the proposed change and therefore support it without reservation.

Respectfully,

Daryle Williams, Dean
College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences
Cherysa P Cortez

From: Elizabeth Watkins
Sent: Friday, June 3, 2022 12:14 PM
To: Tracy S Avery
Cc: Erin Schuster; Daryle Williams
Subject: Re: Letter from Dean Williams re: RLST Dept. Name Change

I approve.
Liz

Elizabeth Watkins
Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor
Professor of History
University of California, Riverside
951.827.1129 | Elizabeth.Watkins@UCR.edu

Pronouns: she / her / hers

Executive Assistant:
Erin Schuster
Erin.Schuster@UCR.edu

From: Tracy S Avery <tracy.avery@ucr.edu>
Date: Thursday, June 2, 2022 at 4:34 PM
To: Elizabeth Watkins <elizabeth.watkins@ucr.edu>
Cc: Erin Schuster <erin.schuster@ucr.edu>, Daryle Williams <daryle.williams@ucr.edu>
Subject: Letter from Dean Williams re: RLST Dept. Name Change

Hello Provost and EVC Watkins,

Please see the attached letter from Dean Daryle Williams. Thank you.

Tracy Avery
Executive Assistant
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