

January 18, 2008

Dear Majors and Minors,

Where did the Fall semester go and what happened to the winter break? Seems like it was all here just a minute ago and then, Poof!, it was gone. Well, like Steve Miller sang, way back in the mid-1970s, “time keeps on slippin’, slippin’, slippin, into the future...”

And with that future in mind, there’s some news to share with you about some coming attractions in the Department, and so my annual start-of-semester-letter to majors and minors seems like a good place to get the word out. First off, you may already know that Prof. **Jacobs** has the current semester off from teaching, having been granted a sabbatical. Professors at the University of Alabama are eligible to apply for one of these about every six years; Jacobs came on board in 2001, so this is his first chance, since he was hired, to devote all of his time to writing and research. (Some of you may recall that Prof. **Trost** was off for the entire year doing likewise, a couple years back.) Professors at our school who are granted a sabbatical by the Provost—it is a competitive application process—can request full salary for one semester off from teaching or a full academic year at half salary (the latter being an appealing option if you’re successful in applying for outside grants to make up the difference). So you may see Jacobs around Manly Hall periodically, checking his mail. Ask him what he’s up to, since he’s got a few book projects going this semester.

With time away from teaching in mind, the Dean has granted me a research leave this coming Fall semester; not sure of my plans yet (i.e., whether I’ll be here in town or elsewhere) but we at least know that Prof. **Trost** will be the Interim, or acting, Chair of our Department for that semester. Of course I’ll still be on email and, like Jacobs, around the Department periodically. I’ve got a few projects to work on, one of which being a new collection of essays I think I’ll pull together, so I’m looking forward to a productive Fall.

Thinking of the Fall, we’ll likely have a new colleague in the Department by then. Prof Trost is now chairing a search committee to find a full time Instructor (that is, someone employed year-to-year and therefore not tenure-track)—a new position that the Dean of Arts & Sciences just gave to REL. We’re optimistic that we can quickly find someone who complements our strengths and is able to be in Tuscaloosa in time for the start of the Fall semester. And as for the Fall, we have a class schedule, currently posted around the Department—watch for a copy of it as part of Prof. **Trost**’s advisor’s letter mailed just before each advising period. And don’t forget that REL always closes our upper level classes (i.e., 300 and 400 level) so that our own majors and minors can come by the main office, in Manly 212, to obtain a “Permit” from Ms. **Dickey** or Ms. **Martin**, so that they are guaranteed to get a seat. It’s sort of like the preferential treatment that the airlines extend to their frequent flyers; like the

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airlines, we eventually open seats for the general population, so be sure to act quickly at the start of each registration period, and get your “Permits” to enroll.

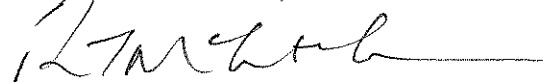
What other news is there? Well, did you know that Prof. **Ramey** and his wife **Terra** are soon off to China for a couple weeks, where they will pick up their newly adopted son, who will join them and their older son **Raj**. (He’s made arrangements for his students to work with online assignments and lectures while he’s away.) Wondering how to say “We live in Tuscaloosa” and “Cheerios are delicious” in Mandarin? See Prof. Ramey. And Prof. **Marouan** was in Chicago over the break, attending the annual conference of the Modern Language Association (MLA)—it’s likely one of the largest annual conferences of academics in the US. She has a couple of her essays forthcoming in scholarly journals and, during the break, Prof. **Ramey** also mailed off the completed manuscript for his first book. If you’ve been looking for new Recent Updates on our main web page then you’ll already know that Prof. **Murphy**, Prof. **Trost**, and I all have new books out. Watch the *New York Times* bestseller list just in case any of us crack the top 10.

Some of you may have heard that some REL Professors are developing new online courses. For example, Prof. **Ramey**’s online version of REL 220 Asian Religions has just been completed but likely won’t be offered until the summer. Prof. **Trost** is nearing completion of an online version of REL 112 Introduction to the New Testament, and this semester Prof. **Murphy** is beginning the development of a new online version of REL 100 Introduction to Religious Studies. As you may know, we already have distance education versions of some of our lower level courses (e.g., REL 100, 110, 112, and 228) but they’ve long needed an overhaul. We have always seen these courses as addressing the needs of off-campus students (these courses are currently graded by Dr. **Mark McCormick** of Stillman College, here in town) and we’ve yet to decide how the new online versions will or will not be integrated into our course offerings for on-campus students. So please don’t start thinking that the Department is going digital and that you’ll all have to be wired into the matrix in order to take your REL classes. But if none on our faculty regularly teaches, say, a course like REL 112, then perhaps that course’s online version can play an important role for on-campus students.

Before closing, I want to thank some of our students: **Chris Hurt** and **Sarah Kelly**, both of whom worked in the main office this past Fall, and who helped to keep the Department running. This semester you’ll see a new face in the main office: **Dan Mullins**, who joins **Jaci Gresham** and **Harrison Graydon**, both of whom worked in the Fall as well. Dan’s been pretty helpful in assisting Prof. **Marouan** to revive our local chapter of **Theta Alpha Kappa**, the national honors society in Religious Studies—if you think you might be eligible to join, please contact Prof. Marouan, the advisor to our student association, as soon as possible. More information is posted at: <http://tak.syr.edu/membership.htm>.

Well, I hope your semester has begun with few or no snags. Don’t forget to keep an eye on our website, especially for upcoming events, such as the January 30 lunchtime discussion with our campus’s new Director of African American Studies, another lunchtime discussion with a faculty member from History sometime in early February, and our sixth annual Aronov Lecture on the evening of March 11. And Freshmen and Sophomore REL majors and minors will soon be hearing from me in a separate mailing, to see if we can all have lunch sometime to talk about the Department and the academic study of religion.

Good luck this semester,



Russell T. McCutcheon
Professor and Chair