

The University of Vermont

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION
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June 3, 2009

President Modesto Maidique
Florida International University
11200 SW 8th Street
Miami, FL 33199

Dear President Maidique:

I recently learned of plans to eliminate the Department of Religious Studies at Florida International University, a prospect that I find deeply troubling. As chair of the Department of Religion at the University of Vermont, a program that has, for more than fifty years, played an integral role in the College of Arts & Sciences at Vermont's flagship public university, I am puzzled and dismayed to learn that FIU's administration apparently regards its distinguished Religious Studies Department as expendable. I understand that FIU, like many universities across the country (including the University of Vermont), faces the need to make significant cuts because of reduced state support. But the strategy of eliminating a thriving program, one that clearly contributes in vital ways to the core mission of a public university, seems profoundly shortsighted and misguided.

While I think it is true that the great majority of students who come to a public university do not come with the study of religion foremost in their minds, this is because the subject of religion is seldom taught in public schools. Religion is, however, a profoundly powerful factor in public affairs, both nationally and globally. It is precisely the inadequate coverage of religion in American high school curricula, coupled with the influence that religion has in public affairs, that makes its place in a public university setting so essential. And it is the sort of inter-disciplinary approach to the study of religion, so effectively advanced in FIU's Department of Religious Studies, that offers the most effective means of preparing students to engage in an enlightened and productive manner with a world increasingly riven by religious differences. The fact that religion departments are inter-disciplinary should not be confused with the mistaken notion that other disciplines such as anthropology or history provide an adequate context for understanding the diversity of phenomena that are grounded in religious worldviews and behaviors. I myself approach the study of Buddhism historically, and our two most recent hires in the department are trained as anthropologists, but we understand the character of our research and teaching in a distinctive way because we conduct our work as colleagues in a department of religion. And that distinctive professional ethos is vital to the way we frame our questions, the way we conduct our research, and the kinds of courses that we teach.



I understand that that FIU, like many public universities, faces a daunting economic challenge, but these sorts of difficult circumstances are what determine the character of an institution of public learning. FIU's decision to establish its Department of Religious Studies in 1995 put it among the ranks of those public universities best prepared to address the challenges of the twenty-first century, including the prospect of increasing globalization and social conflict grounded in religious difference. I believe that a decision to eliminate the Department of Religious Studies would be a serious miscalculation, and I urge you to reconsider your course of action.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kevin Trainor". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial "K" and a long, sweeping tail.

Kevin Trainor
Religion Department Chair
Associate Professor of Religion