A. Executive Summary

The primary change since 2010 is the initiation by BU’s School of Theology of a range of PhD programs that allow a distinctive focus on theological approaches to scholarship. While there is still significant overlap in curriculum and faculty, our own program is now more clearly focused in Religious Studies and has been accordingly re-named. In this update, we identify the opportunity we now have to begin conversations that will restate some of our distinctive strengths around foci such as Ancient Mediterranean Religions, Global Christianity, and Religious Diversities and Conflicts. A distinctive new focus on research and teaching in Religion and Health is currently being pursued.

In addition, this plan highlights our aim to maintain high quality new PhD admissions of 6-8 per year, with enhanced professional development and placement efforts, increased offering of graduate-only seminars, and continued attention to monitoring progress and decreasing time to completion. It notes that we will undertake, in conjunction with our 2015-16 Academic Program Review, a systematic evaluation of the effectiveness and quality of our core seminars and the “track” system, along with an evaluation of the effectiveness of the current MA program. In addition, we are beginning development of new masters-level certificate programs.

B. Assessment of Progress and Changes

Mission. While our mission remains unchanged, it is being pursued in a new institutional ecology where BU’s School of Theology is now offering a range of PhD programs that allow a distinctive focus on theological approaches to the histories, communities, practices, beliefs, and ethical values of Christian institutions and traditions. As a consequence of this new set of offerings in the University, our Division was renamed, shifting from the Division of Religious and Theological Studies to the Graduate Division of Religious Studies.

Peers and Faculty Strengths. Our position in the field of graduate programs in Religious Studies has remained roughly steady, but our attractiveness has been enhanced by the availability of competitive student funding from GRS. Our program continues to be distinguished by our “core curriculum” of methods courses and required competency across traditions, by our multi-disciplinary and multi-tradition (comparative) approach to all our work, and by the resources available through the BTI and from across the University.

Most of our distinctive substantive strengths identified in the 2010 plan remain relevant: Ancient Christianity, History of Christianity, Philosophy of Religion, Comparative Religious Thought, Religion and Science, Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies, Religion and Health, Religion in South Asia. With significant faculty turnover in recent years, and with new thinking about how to maximize our strengths, however, we anticipate some shifts in these foci, detailed below.

Faculty Quality. The faculty of the Division continues to be drawn primarily from the College’s Religion Department and the School of Theology, but nearly a quarter of the core faculty have either primary or joint appointments in other Departments and units. We anticipate continuing to draw broadly on faculty from throughout the University, adding to the core faculty as appropriate. For updates on faculty metrics, please see the planning documents from our constituent units.

One reminder of the visibility and professional contributions of our faculty is the literally dozens of sessions at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature in which Boston University will be represented.

Grant activity and outside funding. Specifically important to us is grant activity that supports faculty and student research, including multiple grants since 2010 administered by Prof. Wildman through the ICBSR that have supported five-year fellowships for two current Religion and Science students, as well as summer research stipends and other support for them and about half a dozen others. Unfortunately, Prof. Wildman’s next round of funding will support post-doctoral, rather than pre-doctoral researchers. This is in part a decision precipitated by his uncertainty about his ability to promise the funder that there would indeed be admission slots for these fully-funded students. As we have access to
these sorts of training grants in the future, it is important to be able to work smoothly with GRS to assure admissions slots for funded students.

**Educational and Pedagogical contributions.** Our four core seminars in methodological “Approaches to the Study of Religion,” along with two “Texts and Motifs” seminars covering world religious traditions, establish a common foundation for students and are being taught by a broad range of our faculty. After several years in place, a systematic evaluation of the effectiveness and quality of these seminars and of the “track” system itself is now timely. Much of the remainder of the teaching in the program is in directed studies and in seminars (across a range of departments) that serve both graduate and non-graduate students. Beginning with the 2015-16 year, working with our partner units, we aim to increase the number of seminars primarily designed for graduate students to at least two per semester. Beginning with fall 2014, we have also begun to work with all our partner units to coordinate curricular offerings more systematically.

On-line learning has not yet been incorporated into our teaching and would not be appropriate as a primary mechanism for PhD seminars, but the introduction of masters-level certificates (see below) might make new delivery mechanisms for some courses a logical way to reach an expanded population of learners.

**Vitality & Quality of our Graduate Programs.**

**PhD recruitment & competitiveness.** We continue to attract a pool of 125-150 applicants. Those admitted have continued already-high standards, with our last four cohorts averaging just under the 90th percentile on the GRE verbal, just under the 80th percentile on the writing test, and roughly at the 65th percentile on the math portion. And in the two years since full funding packages have been offered, we have had even higher than expected yields, with 8 of 9 offers accepted in 2014.

**Size.** We have 61 current PhD and 2 MA students. Roughly 45 faculty will be counted among our “core” faculty in the fall of 2015, about 35 of whom are or have been first or second readers for at least one GDRS dissertation since 2009. While many of these faculty also serve the graduate programs in other units (making our effective advising capacity about that of a program with 35 fulltime faculty), we are still well within our capacity to maintain a graduate program of this size. With an average of 6-8 students completing the program each year, an admissions target in that range remains appropriate.

**Professional development.** Students in the second year and beyond are placed in mentored Teaching assistantships, with an associated teaching seminar required. Evaluation of their work has been sporadic to date, but new procedures have been put in place this fall, with formative evaluations expected for each teaching assignment. Over the coming years, we will assess and refine this formative evaluation process. We will also work with our affiliated units to place a few advanced students in Senior Teaching Fellowships. And we will continue to expand opportunities for student professional development, building on the prospectus development, dissertation writing, and conference presentation workshops now being offered.

**Time to completion.** We have yet to make measureable progress, with our average still just under nine years. We currently have 12 students who are beyond the 7-year limit, of whom we expect 7 to finish this year. However, about two dozen students will remain in the group who came in before we had full funding, and our time to completion numbers are likely to remain high for the rest of this planning period. A vigorous program of annual reviews is, however, making a significant difference in keeping students on track. We have especially targeted the transition to exams and the transition to prospectus as points at which vigilant advising can alleviate unnecessary delays.

**Outcomes: Placement.** Between 2006 and 2009, 21 (7 tenure-track) PhD graduates were working in academic institutions, and 5 were working in other professional capacities directly related to their degrees. We graduated a similar number between 2010 and 2014, with 17 (4 tenure track) working in academia and 9 in other professional capacities. Increased attention to professional development should increase the number of academic placements, but the nature of the current job market makes that a formidable challenge.

The Masters program. A small number of students have routinely been admitted, but the program has lacked focus and commitment. We anticipate a significant evaluation of the program as part of our Academic Program Review, with possible new initiatives in masters-level education (detailed below).

**Facilities and Infrastructure**
We continue to enjoy good classroom and office spaces for faculty and graduate students in 745 Commonwealth Ave and 145 Bay State Road. A full-time program coordinator for the GDRS and a small dedicated program budget have been recent significant enhancements.

**Special Concerns**

**Diversity**

Our current student body is 37% female, almost exactly mirroring the percentage in the core faculty, and slightly down from 2009. The student body includes 30% who identify as other than Euro-American, with 16% from outside the U.S. The faculty includes only one African American, two Latinos, and two other non-Euro-Americans. *Gender and ethnic diversity remains a significant challenge and priority.*

**Interdisciplinary and global initiatives**

We said in 2010 that we aspired to be the primary location in the University for scholarly conversations about religion, but we have realized that the interdisciplinary nature of our faculty and our work means that those conversations occur in many places in the University – and that is a good thing. *In coming years, we aim to use our website as a means to make those many intersections more visible.*

We are, in fact, inherently interdisciplinary and global in our entire program and faculty. We will continue giving attention in our core seminars to diverse sources and traditions, noting the ways in which even traditional notions of “eastern” and “western” religions no longer hold. Among the priorities for further development (detailed below) are enhanced connections to the Pardee School’s Regional Studies programs and to health-related units.

**C. New and Revised Goals and Initiatives**

- During 2015-16, we will complete a systematic evaluation of the effectiveness, global inclusiveness, and quality of our core seminars and of the “track” system itself.
- Work with our partner units to increase the number of seminars primarily designed for graduate students, with a goal of at least two per semester beginning with Fall 2015.
- Maintain and enhance the strength of our PhD program through admission of 6-8 new, high-quality students each year, enhanced professional development and placement efforts, and continued attention to monitoring progress and decreasing time to completion.
- Maintain active recruitment and support for women and under-represented minority students, but more importantly, encourage all our constituent units to place a high priority on faculty recruitment that will increase our diversity.
- In conjunction with our 2016 Academic Program Review, revise and restate the foci of some of our distinctive strengths to include: Ancient Mediterranean Religions, Global Christianity, Religion and Health, and Religious Diversities and Conflicts. These would join our traditional strengths in Religion and Science, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, East and South Asian Religions, and Philosophy of Religion. To pursue developing and enhancing these strengths will require close work with our constituent units on hiring priorities, as well as expanding conversations with units such as the Philosophy Department and the Regional Studies programs about how best to serve mutual needs.
- Develop a group of Certificates (beginning with one in Jewish Studies, the proposal for which is nearing completion) that would provide focused masters-level study in a single religious tradition. These could serve students in the School of Theology who are interested in inter-religious work, but could also serve students in Regional studies or Global Studies, among others. They might also attract adult learners who seek enrichment outside a traditional degree program. This initiative may also lend itself to the development of some courses or portions of courses that could be available through digital platforms.
- Work with the School of Public Health and the Medical Anthropology program (among others) to develop a distinctive BU approach to PhD education in Religion and Health. We have a broad range of multi-disciplinary strength in this area. While other units may engage in practice-based collaborations, we envision a research-based doctoral initiative that would draw on our strengths in Religion and Science, Ethics, and Anthropology. A task group is currently developing a BUCH proposal for a 2015 exploratory seminar to lay the groundwork for this effort.