

Sewanee Theology and Religious Studies [STARS]: Report on a Project Funded by an Information Fluency Grant from Associated Colleges of the South in 2002

In 2002 the University of the South was awarded funds as part of the Information Fluency Program of the Associated Colleges of the South. This grant was made in response to a proposal from James Dunkly (Librarian of the School of Theology) and Vicki Sells (Director of Academic Technology Services). The proposal asked for funds to pay for website development in aid of student learning in the undergraduate Department of Religion and the graduate School of Theology. The underlying principle was to be establishment of a common template for assignments in courses, so that students could access annotated bibliographies that were linked to specific tasks in each course, not simply lists of recommended readings for the course or standard reference works in the field. The outline of the project is as follows.

Purpose: Helping students (a) get started on initial assignments in basic courses so that (b) they will be more efficient in approaching later assignments

Strategy: Introducing students to the most useful and reliable resources by applying them to specific real tasks at the outset in beginning courses, and thereby introducing students to the library and to research methods in theology and religion

Stages: (1) what to do to complete initial assignments; (2) how the library and its resources are organized to do further assignments; (3) what additional resources are available, and how to evaluate them

Elements: Short guides for beginning seminary courses in each area, and for lower-level religion courses, focusing on specific assignments in each course rather than lists of resources useful for the overall subject of the course

Resources: (A) dictionaries and encyclopedias with brief articles offering overview of topic(s) covered in assignment; (B) specific tools needed for completing each assignment; (C) how to find those materials in the library; (D) how to find additional resources, either in the library or on line; (E) how to evaluate resources, in any format, for usefulness and reliability

Format: Web page listing each course to be handled, with links to relevant electronic resources and to GABRIEL record for items in library, plus explanatory material as needed; additional links to library home page for general information

During the summer of 2003, we hired a recent Sewanee College graduate to begin work on the project. He brought the project successfully to the point at which faculty input was needed to refine it. That refinement has not happened, largely for two reasons. First, the principal assistant to the Librarian of the School of Theology suffered a stroke in the spring of 2003, resulting in an extended absence and only a partial recovery, so that the

Librarian had to assume additional duties, eliminating time that might have been given to the STARS project. (The afflicted staff member has continued to experience grave physical difficulty and has been on sick leave or disability leave for much of the two-year period since the initial work was done.) Second, the faculty of the School of Theology have been greatly occupied by a very difficult transition in leadership, with the result that no one has had time or energy for anything extra, including STARS. That period is now ended with the appointment of a permanent dean in January 2005. Once the current self-study effort culminates in the visit of the accrediting agency in November, the faculty ought to be able to think afresh about pedagogical issues and projects such as STARS. By that time, of course, the product will need technological re-evaluation and upgrading as well as coordination with new instructional objectives and strategies in the School of Theology. Working with the Department of Religion in the interim might have been possible if the Librarian had had time, but such was not the case.

James Dunkly

1 July 2005