



TO: Higher Education Committee
FROM: John L. D'Agati *John L. D'Agati*
SUBJECT: Academy for Jewish Religion: Application for degree authority: Master of Arts (M.A.) in Jewish Studies

DATE: November 8, 2013

AUTHORIZATION(S):

John L. D'Agati
SUMMARY

Issue for Decision

Should the Board of Regents approve a master plan amendment for the Academy for Jewish Religion to award the Master of Arts (M.A.) degree and to offer a program in Jewish Studies leading to that degree title?

Reason(s) for Consideration

Required by State statute and State regulation.

Proposed Handling

The question will come before the Higher Education Committee at its November 2013 meeting, where it will be voted on and action taken. It will then come before the full Board at its November 2013 meeting for final action.

Procedural History

The Academy for Jewish Religion has submitted a proposal for a Master of Arts (M.A.) degree program in Jewish Studies. Master plan amendment is needed because the Academy is not currently authorized to offer a program leading to a degree.

Background Information

The Academy for Jewish Religion, a Regents chartered institution established in 1956, and located in Yonkers (Westchester County), is currently a non-degree institution. The Academy is seeking authorization from the Board of Regents to offer a Master of Arts (M.A.) degree in Jewish Studies.

The Academy for Jewish Religion offers a curriculum leading to Rabbinic Ordination and a curriculum leading to Cantorial Ordination. It has been offering Rabbinic Ordination since 1956 and Cantorial Ordination since 1992. The Academy's rabbinical and cantorial students are required to complete an M.A. degree in Jewish Studies as part of their Ordination curriculum, and currently that M.A. degree is granted by Gratz College in Philadelphia.

Purpose and Goals: The current proposal, if approved, will allow the Academy to offer the M.A. curriculum and grant the degree on its own. The curriculum will afford students a solid academic grounding in graduate level studies of Jewish religion. It would be open to Academy rabbinical and cantorial students and others as well, including professionals involved in Jewish communal service, Jewish education, and laypeople interested in enriching their knowledge of the Jewish religion.

Curriculum: The emphasis of the master's program is to engage students with Jewish sacred text and with issues of the contemporary Jewish community. The master's degree would require successful completion of 30 credits plus a master's project. The project, which must have an academic research component as well as be reflective of imagination and creativity, will consist of the development of an academic idea or project related to Jewish sacred text or to issues of the contemporary Jewish community.

The required courses that will make up the 30-credit master's program include a range of graduate-level courses in Sacred Literature, Jewish Liturgy, Pluralism, Philosophy, and Spirituality, as well as supervised collective study known in the Jewish tradition as Havruta.

Faculty: Faculty credentials and competence align with the academic and professional elements of the proposed program. Nearly every member of the faculty holds a doctorate, rabbinic Ordination, or cantorial Ordination. Many hold more than one of these degrees.

Admissions: The Academy states that it will uniformly apply published criteria for admissions to the proposed M.A. program. The Academy will require undergraduate transcripts, recommendations, educational and professional resumes, a sample of the applicant's writing, and may request an interview as part of the admissions process.

In addition, students entering with limited Hebrew language facility should plan on taking additional time to complete the program since the coursework for the degree assumes familiarity with basic grammar, the ability to read unvocalized Hebrew texts, and the ability to understand basic spoken Hebrew.

Students: The Academy anticipates that enrollment in the M.A. program, especially at the beginning, primarily will reflect the current enrollment of its existing rabbinic and cantorial programs. Therefore, enrollment in the M.A. program is expected to be 8-12 students per year, plus perhaps another one to five students per year who will want to enroll in the M.A. program on its own.

Resources: The Academy rents space in a well-maintained building on Wells Avenue in Yonkers, New York. The facility is approximately 8,000 square feet, and includes sufficient classroom space, offices, a meditation room, lounge, and study area in addition to a large library. The Academy maintains a computer network with one server and twelve workstations. The data stored on the server is backed up nightly and the academic database is stored offsite. In addition, there is Wi-Fi available throughout the space for student and faculty use.

The Academy would provide support for students in many areas. The library, which contains almost 10,000 books and is directed by a professionally trained librarian, provides adequate support for the proposed curriculum. The institution indicates that students in the proposed curriculum would enjoy a favorable student to full-time faculty ratio of 15:1 and a very favorable overall faculty to student ratio of less than 4:1.

Finances: The Department's Office of Audit Services has reviewed the Academy's last five audited financial statements and has determined that the institution has been financially healthy during the time period covered.

Need: The addition of the academic M.A. in Jewish Studies to the portfolio of ordained individuals will improve employment opportunities by adding a layer of professional accomplishment and prestige above that of others who have been ordained but without attaining an M.A. degree. It will also be of value to those in Jewish communal service, Jewish education, and laypeople interested in enriching and enhancing their Jewish knowledge base and providing further opportunities to expand their educational possibilities.

There are other institutions offering an M.A. program in Jewish Studies in the Hudson Valley region. However, there are no other schools in the region that offer such a program in the kind of pluralistic atmosphere that the Academy offers. All other regional institutions that offer an M.A. program in Jewish Studies are either aligned with a specific movement within Judaism or are not under the auspices of the Jewish religion.

Planning Review: Following its standard protocol, the Department conducted a canvass of all degree-granting institutions in the Hudson Valley region. There were two responses, both of which wished the Academy success in its endeavor.

Department Review: The Department has determined that the proposed program would meet registration standards.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board of Regents approve a master plan amendment for the Academy for Jewish Religion, Yonkers, NY for initial authorization to award a degree, in support of the institution's application to offer an M.A. degree program in Jewish Studies.

Timetable for Implementation

The master plan amendment will be effective until November 30, 2014, unless the Department registers the program prior to that date, in which case master plan amendment shall be without term.