

FORUM RESPONSE

Jeffrey L. Rubenstein

These five fascinating descriptions of Jewish studies programs provide a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the nature of our enterprise. What strikes me most profoundly is that a number of factors constrain the way that a department “envision[s] its major” and the “competence” that it hopes that a “student would have when granting a degree” such that the ideal is somewhat removed from that which can be achieved in practice. Where Jewish studies has been constituted as a program that draws on faculty located in other departments, and presumably hired by those departments for their own needs and purposes, the possibilities of the program

will be a product of forces beyond the control of the program’s architects. At

Vassar, for example, Andrew

Bush observes that “due to contingencies of staffing, we offer no seminar on Talmud,” and that the “offerings of the Jewish Studies Program” are “heavily weighted toward twentieth-century topics” because they are “contingent on faculty availability.” The same is true of numerous small departments with limited faculty in colleges throughout the country: the courses that the department offers, hence the content of the major, will tend to depend on the expertise and competence of the one or two faculty members there. Larger departments too will be limited in these ways, albeit to a lesser extent. At Indiana, Steven Weitzman concedes, “there remain gaps in our curriculum—medieval Jewish thought, Israel studies,

German Jewish history.”

Other constraints may be a function of university policies. Nancy Sinkoff notes that “our one-year language requirement is not ideal, but the culture at Rutgers does not currently support foreign language acquisition to the extent that we would like.” At the University of Pennsylvania, where the depth and interest of faculty allows for multiple tracks, three of the four tracks are housed within other departments—history, religious studies, and Near Eastern languages and civilizations. Because requirements for the major are determined by those departments, and not by the Jewish studies program, some anomalies result. Thus proficiency in Hebrew is demanded of three tracks, which indicates that such training is a desideratum, but not by the track within the religious studies

the lack of requirements that teach students the “canon,” and that it might better prepare them for graduate study—a judgment not shared by all. Now one could argue that we have here a parallel between trends in scholarship that emphasize Judaism as a cultural phenomena and this construction of the major in Jewish studies. Nevertheless, this rationale for abandoning parts of the “canon” are surely influenced by the lack of sufficient faculty. Another important question is whether one goal of a Jewish studies major is to strengthen Jewish identity, and in this respect whether it differs from other majors in the university. Weitzman writes, “Many of our students are motivated by a desire to develop their own sense of identity. It would be disingenuous not to acknowledge the role that we play for that kind of student.” Thus there is something more at stake than providing students with a body

of knowledge, training them to think, or preparing them for a profession, as might be the case of other majors. At the same time, all

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department, due to the policies of that department. And financial constraints probably impact even the largest departments with the broadest spectrum of faculty.

Requirements for the major appear to be partly a function of such constraints, though partly determined by ideology. All five of these accounts exhibit tensions between breadth and depth; between introductory surveys designed to cover all of Jewish history vs. higher level, more specialized courses emphasizing political and methodological issues; between the classical tradition and aspects of Jewish culture. Yet Bush employs the “conception of Jewish studies as an area of cultural studies” as a type of justification for

would want to steer clear of any outright confessionalism. Sinkoff notes that at Rutgers many students arrive with strong “Jewish day school backgrounds.” The faculty, however, “strives to introduce them to the diversity and complexity of the field.”

Finally, it appears that, though largely unstated, certain political issues still leave their marks on the nature of Jewish studies programs. I have in mind the efforts to divorce Jewish studies from departments of religion/theology with a heavy Christian slant and the desire to separate Israel studies from departments of Near Eastern or Middle Eastern studies with an Arabist bias. In this respect there is great historical irony in Jonathan

Decter's note that courses in both Christianity and Islam at Brandeis fulfill distribution requirements for the Jewish studies major. Here too we find a significant connection between scholarship and the major. Scholars now understand Christianity as a development within the matrix of early Judaism, essentially as a form of Judaism, until it gradually separated as a distinct religion. And even that process of separation, the so-called parting of the ways, is now considered a messy and protracted process as both Judaism and Christianity struggled for centuries to clarify their porous boundaries. The boundaries of Jewish studies majors that count courses in Christianity, Islam, and suchlike have likewise become more porous.

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