Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Yeap: The Department of Religious Studies at Missouri State University turns 50 this year. Created in 1969, the department is the oldest and largest department of its kind in a public university in Missouri. I'm Emily Yeap.

Dr. Stephen Berkwitz, professor and department head of religious studies at MSU, joins me today to highlight the department, its achievements over the years, and plans for its 50th anniversary celebration.

Berkwitz: We have about 15 full-time faculty members that specialize in a wide variety of fields, from biblical studies to religion and culture and from the religious traditions found in Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Our department offers programs including a major, a minor and a master's degree. What distinguishes us in some ways is that we teach about religion respectfully, but also critically. And so, we do not try to make people religious nor do we try to make them give up religion. Instead, we want them to know about religion because it is an important thing for understanding our place in the world today and understanding past history.

Yeap: For the department, turning 50 is a momentous occasion.

Berkwitz: The 50-year anniversary for the department means that we have taught a lot of students over the years. Many students have gone on to successful careers in education, ministry, law, nonprofit work among other fields. Some of our graduates have become professors of religious studies themselves at other institutions. And so we have a lineage of students associated with the university now, over 50 years. It also means that Missouri State University has a long record of taking the study of religion seriously as a subject that students ought to learn about. The fact that we've existed for 50 years means that we've earned the respect and recognition of scholars across the country and even across the globe. I think we also help put Missouri State University on the map for that reason.

Yeap: The past five decades have seen the department grow and remain relevant in changing times.

Berkwitz: We have diversified our curriculum over the years. So now we cover most of the major religions of the world, as well as the religious literature of Judaism, Christianity and other traditions. In 1994, we developed a standalone master's of arts program in religious studies. This is one of only about a dozen of these kinds of programs across the United States. There's just not that many master's of arts programs that do not have a corresponding PhD program. So, we're kind of unique in that regard. Ten years later in 2004, we hired Dr. John Schmalzbauer as the Blanche Gorman Strong endowed chair of Protestant studies. We're very proud to have an endowed chair associated with our department. And I'd say just over the years, the faculty has published dozens of books, scores of articles to advance knowledge and religious studies. This is sort of an ongoing record of accomplishment that we're very proud of.

Yeap: Recently, the department launched two new undergraduate certificate programs.

Berkwitz: One is in interfaith engagement, the other is in the medical humanities. Both of these certificate programs are available to undergraduate students and even students who are coming back to the university after finishing a bachelor's degree. They're interdisciplinary and they are designed to assist in some career preparation for people who would like to pursue careers related to religious diversity as well as maybe a more holistic understanding of illness and wellness in the medical fields.

Yeap: Looking ahead, one of the department's focus is to expand its online offerings.

Berkwitz: We currently offer an online minor in religious studies. But we're taking steps towards being able to offer an online major in religious studies. And I expect that we'll be able to do that in the next couple of years. We're also making some progress towards offering at least part of our master's program online as well. So we think that there might be a real need and appreciation for that kind of flexibility in courses.

Yeap: To celebrate its 50th anniversary year, Berkwitz says the department has several plans in the works. They include a public reception and a religion-related panel session at the Library Center in Springfield. Details will be confirmed soon. To find out more about the upcoming events, as well as the Department of Religious Studies in general, visit missouristate.edu/relst. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

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