

# PROPOSAL FOR CHANGE TO I-CORE CURRICULUM JESUIT HERITAGE REQUIREMENT IN THEOLOGY & RELIGIOUS STUDIES<sup>1</sup>

## Background

The original I-Core document, in the section about the “Jesuit Heritage” component of the curriculum, provides the following rationale for the Theology and Religious Studies requirement:

Courses in theology and religious studies provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary for the analysis of religion; for investigation of the historical development and contemporary practice of particular religious traditions; for critical reflection on personal faith as well as sympathetic appreciation of the beliefs of others; and for resources to understand and respond to the religious forces that shape our society and world. Because of its commitment to the Catholic and Jesuit heritage of the university, there is particular attention paid to the Roman Catholic tradition.<sup>2</sup>

This paragraph delineates the overall scope of the TRS curriculum, including the proportional emphasis of courses that address aspects of Roman Catholic (RC) tradition. The course offerings in this category include those specifically focused on RC theology (the TRS x3x offerings) as well as many others that focus on biblical studies, ethics, history, or other TRS sub-fields and which carry the Catholic Studies (CS) designation. CS courses typically comprise between 35–50% of the TRS offerings in a given semester.

The I-Core document goes on to stipulate the following parameters for the JH-TRS core:

### **Learning Outcomes Addressed:**

1. Demonstrate an integrative knowledge of human and natural worlds.
2. Develop habits of critical analysis and aesthetic appreciation.
5. Act competently in a global and diverse world.
6. Understand and promote social justice.
9. Understand the religious dimensions of human experience.

**Mode of Delivery:** Two 3-credit courses are required.

**Further Expectations:** Courses that fulfill either the philosophy or the theology and religious studies requirement will require and vigorously stress students’ abilities to articulate clearly both orally and in writing.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> APPROVED by the I-Core Committee on 05 December 2016. Revised for distribution to CAP and JCU faculty on 01 February 2017. Revised for I-Core Committee review on 13 February 2017. Again updated 27 February 2017 in light of open hearings. Updated again on 1 March 2017 after final CAP consultation.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://sites.jcu.edu/cas/pages/core-curriculum/new-core-fall-2015/jesuit-heritage/theology-and-religious-studies/>, which quotes the original APTF Core proposal (“Report of the Curriculum Working Group, Revised April 2013,” 19).

<sup>3</sup> “Report of the Curriculum Working Group, Revised April 2013,” 20. For more details on the specific aspects of the learning outcomes addressed, see pp. 23–25 of that report.

### The Status Quo: Structure & Content

The current TRS Core requirement comprises two courses, the TRS 101 and a 200- or 300-level elective. Expertise in some disciplines requires mastery of basically one methodology, whereas TRS is a broad field that involves a variety of methodologies that are used by the various sub-disciplines of TRS. Thus TRS 101 introduces students to the main sub-disciplines represented in the JCU department and the methods pertinent to those subfields.

**TRS 101 3cr.** Introduction to the academic study of theology and religion. Topics include the nature of religion; the human search for meaning; revelation; symbol, myth, and ritual; and faith as it relates to reason, experience, and morality. Introduction to the areas of scripture, theology, ethics, and non-Christian religious traditions. TRS 101 is designed to prepare students for courses at the 200 and 300 levels.

Note that the TRS 101 is not a world religions course, nor does it specifically introduce students to Christianity or Catholic theology. In addition, students presently are permitted to take any 200- or 300-level elective after the TRS 101. JCU academic learning outcome #9 is framed quite broadly: “Understand the religious dimensions of human experience.” The university has not specified any particular religious content for this goal, nor have the Core document or other legislative material pertinent to the core curriculum.

The second course can be taken either at the 200- or 300-level. The key difference between these two categories is that 200-level TRS courses survey the breadth of a religious tradition or field of religious/theological studies while 300-level seminars pursue a narrower religious or theological topic in greater depth. Class format and teaching strategies differ, while the level of difficulty remains relatively constant. Both 200- and 300-level courses focus students’ attention on the specific methods used in the particular sub-discipline of that course, give them repeated practice in critical analysis, and develop students’ understanding of the ways knowledge is constructed in that subfield.

### The Status Quo: TRS Learning Goals Alignment

Through ongoing assessment and review of programs and curricula, the I-Core Committee has approved a configuration of TRS Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) that simplifies the assessment process and compresses the outcomes to two. The I-Core Committee has approved these revised SLOs and the matrix showing which TRS core courses will meet each of the two JH-TRS SLOs. The appropriate academic officers (including the deans and university assessment officer) have been apprised of this modification.

The following TRS Core SLOs have been approved for inclusion in the *2017–2019 Undergraduate Bulletin*:

1. Critically analyze the culturally and globally diverse dimensions of religious experience as expressed in sacred texts, art, ritual practice, ethical commitments, and social structures.
2. Appreciate how culturally and globally diverse religious traditions provide resources for responding to injustice and living ethically.

The 100- or 200-level TRS courses must address both SLOs, while 300-level TRS courses must address one of the two SLOs. An effort has been made to strike a balance of the 300-level courses meeting each of the two outcomes.

### The Proposed Change

The I-Core document specifies the Jesuit Heritage TRS Core requirement as TRS 101 and one additional TRS course. We recommend the following emendations to that I-Core JH-TRS requirement:

1. Change the JH-TRS Core requirement to *one lower-division TRS course* (a 100- or 200-level elective) *and one 300-level TRS Core elective*.<sup>4</sup>
2. The two courses could be taken in either order.
3. TRS 101 would cease being a prerequisite for other JH-TRS Core courses.
4. This change would be effective backdated to Fall 2015, to the inception of the I-Core.<sup>5</sup>
5. Students in the I-Core who already will have taken the TRS 101 before Fall 2017 can take either a 200- or 300-level TRS Core course to complete their JH-TRS requirement.<sup>6</sup>

### Benefits of This Change

1. This change will benefit students.
  - a. This proposal involves opening the “introductory course” in TRS to any lower-division course. Allowing 200-level courses to count toward the introductory requirement gives students significantly more flexibility in constructing their overall academic programs. Students would be able to take TRS courses that relate to their majors or potential career interests and thus are more meaningful to them personally. Such connections across the curriculum also provide a more optimal learning environment, develop students’ ability to transfer knowledge across different domains, and increase the modes of integration which the I-Core was designed to produce.
  - b. The approach to TRS in this proposed core revision will be more effective in meeting the designated TRS core student learning outcomes. TRS 200-level courses introduce to a specific sub-discipline within the field. The more limited scope of the 200-level course (vs. the present 101) means the course content can be scaffolded, repeated, and drilled to a point where students really are able to *do* historical or ethical or exegetical analysis by the end of the course. Educationally, this is an improvement in contrast to the once-over on the subject in what has been the wide-ranging TRS 101 intro. Also, students who gain skill in one such analytical method can learn to transfer that critical-thinking skill to other contexts, thus the skill benefits them across the curriculum and life long.
  - c. Critical thinking and information literacy both are fundamental student learning outcomes for the I-Core. An expansive survey course (like 101) does not lend itself to that agenda, but more constrained introductions to the sub-fields of TRS certainly can.
  - d. The old-fashioned broad-survey-of-a-field intro does not fit the current styles of student learning, and does not address student needs in a highly “connected” world. They need to be able to research issues, evaluate evidence, and draw connections across knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> This language would allow TRS 101 to count toward core but would not require that specific course. Students who already completed their D-Core or I-Core TRS requirements will remain unaffected by this change.

<sup>5</sup> The University Registrar and other staff in that office recommend backdating this change to forestall a flood of petitions from I-Core students who would want to take advantage of the more flexible requirement.

<sup>6</sup> Note that some 300-level TRS courses have 200-level prerequisites and therefore do not count for the current Core. Those courses could count for the I-Core under this revised protocol.

domains, not memorize facts that they can look up on their phones. Such skills are best developed in a course that focuses on a particular topic and research process, not a broad survey course. In addition, students may be proud of their ability to "multi-task," but they have no training in focused work. A survey feeds this lack of durable attention; it does not provide students with the skills to overcome it and take a deep gaze into a subject or question. Even 10-15 years ago, students came to JCU with some of that ability to focus, but now the ability is rare indeed. Yet they cannot succeed in life without that skill and the concomitant dispositions of patience and endurance. The TRS101 does not fit these needs of our current students.

- e. The new Core is supposed to be pursued throughout the four years of a student's undergraduate career; it was designed to counter the common student attitude that the Core should be "gotten over with" early so one can focus narrowly on the "real" work of a major. Although this proposal eliminates the universal prerequisite, so theoretically one could take both TRS courses as a first-year student, the language of "lower-division plus a 300-level course" implies that students should spread their JH-TRS Core requirements across their academic career. Pursuing the TRS Core across a wider span of their academic career will provide students with the opportunity to think more deeply about the kinds of religious/theological issues addressed in these courses and consider how they apply to their own personal commitments and life goals.
- f. Students will be much more likely to be taught by FT faculty in the department, or by PT faculty with terminal degrees and long-standing relationships to the university. Statistically speaking, this provides an optimal learning environment in comparison to the current situation where PT faculty teaching the TRS 101 outnumber FT faculty at an average of 6:1 (83%).<sup>7</sup>
- g. Currently students object to TRS 101 simply because it is required and they want choices. This creates a relatively hostile pedagogical situation, which requires faculty to spend substantial time helping students get over this resentment concerning their lack of agency and choice. This curricular change will allow students to choose topics of interest in TRS to meet the JH-TRS Core requirement, rather than being required to take the 101 intro course, and will have positive effects on student satisfaction with their Core program.
- h. Elimination of the TRS 101 requirement will make the integrated sector of the Core more manageable and coherent from the student's point of view. Currently, if we have a EHE or ENW linked course or an EGC course cross-listed with TRS and another department, the students in the TRS section/course must have met the TRS 101 prerequisite while students in the other section/course need not have. Either we have to waive the prerequisite for whole groups of students or we end up with an inequitable arrangement for students in cross-listed courses. Retaining the TRS 101 prerequisite functionally imposes an additional core requirement on students in EHE or ENW links. Eliminating the TRS 101 prerequisite for the remaining TRS curriculum would resolve this anomalous situation.
- i. Allowing two TRS electives will provide more flexibility for students wishing to study abroad. They will be able to pursue a TRS equivalent regardless of whether they have taken a prior course, and they won't end up in the anomalous situation of petitioning to

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<sup>7</sup> In fall 2015, PT faculty taught 15 of the 20 sections of TRS 101. In fall 2016, PT faculty were responsible for 20 of the 24 sections. In fall 2017, PT faculty are assigned to 100% of the TRS 101 sections (8 of 8).

take an elective course while abroad and then taking the TRS 101 “prerequisite” after they return to campus.

2. The change will benefit the TRS department.

- a. It will allow FT faculty to continue to support the Core while simultaneously contributing to the TRS major, minor, and graduate programs at reasonable levels. TRS simply does not have sufficient FT faculty to deliver the curriculum as currently designed. Department “downsizing” in the last few years has forced us to “outsource” not only the TRS 101 but also 200- and 300-level courses, which is affecting our minor and majors programs as well. This is not good for the long-term health of the programs.
- b. FT faculty will be able to focus on courses that fit their areas of specialization.
- c. TRS faculty will have more opportunity to develop innovative courses in the new Core, including ones with topics of interest to various majors/programs (e.g., health, law).
- d. When it comes to supporting TRS PT faculty, the greatest time demands on the department chairperson and Administrative Assistant are attributable to the TRS 101 intro course. Eliminating the 101 will relieve some of the excessive demand placed on the department AA and the chairperson, who have been running twice-a-semester in-service workshops and other support activities specifically for PT faculty teaching TRS 101. These will no longer be necessary.
- e. In addition, fewer PT faculty will be needed to deliver the courses in this restructured TRS Core, and those PT faculty will be teaching in areas that relate to their terminal-degree specializations and research interests. The numerical reduction will have a proportionate effect in lightening the currently very heavy administrative burden, and the more focused courses in their respective fields will be easier for the PT faculty to organize and deliver without undue support from the department chair.

3. The change will benefit the College and University.

- a. This change will make the Core requirements more flexible for transfer students. Currently, few transfer petitions fit the topic and design of the TRS 101 course, so students either gain general education credit for a TRS1xx or might get credit for a 200- or 300-level TRS class. The latter creates the awkward situation of requiring the “prerequisite” TRS 101 to be taken after the upper-level transfer course. Under this proposal, a TRS1xx undefined transfer course still would count toward the Core requirement. Also, students would not need to “backtrack” to take the TRS 101 to complete the TRS Core; they would be able to choose an elective for their second course requirement.
- b. The number of TRS sections taught by PT faculty has more than trebled between fall 2012 and fall 2016.<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of those PT sections are TRS 101. Elimination of 101 will not eliminate PT faculty teaching TRS Core courses, but it will create a better balance between the number of sections offered by FT and PT faculty.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> PT faculty taught 9 sections in fall 2012; 8 of those were the 101. In fall 2016, PT faculty taught 31 sections; 22 of those were TRS 101.

<sup>9</sup> The schedule submitted for Fall 2017 includes 36 sections at the 100–300-levels (8 101s, 14 200-levels, 14 300-levels); only 15 of those will be taught by PT faculty, 8 of which are the FITW TRS 101 sections. These figures do not include courses in the Rome program or the Borromeo Seminary Institute.

- c. The change will eliminate a number of academic petitions each year. Frequently students ask that TRS 101 be waived as a prerequisite for courses they will take when studying abroad. Others have a transfer course come in as a 1xx because it is not equivalent to our 101, but then they have to petition to take a 200- or 300-level elective as their second TRS course.
- d. Because students will be required to take 300-level courses as part of the TRS Core, and because currently the 300-level courses (which are required for majors and minors) tend to have below-cap enrollments, we estimate that TRS will be able to offer 7–10 fewer Core courses each semester and still meet the academic needs of our students. This is estimated to save the university upwards of \$25,000/semester, depending upon the pay grade of the PT faculty who assist with the 200- and 300-level electives.

### Timing

If adopted, this change will be published in the *2017–2019 Undergraduate Bulletin* and be applied retroactively from the onset of the Integrated Core Curriculum. This timing will have immediate curricular (and cost) benefits for students, the department, and the university.

Students in the “First-in-the-World” grant intervention groups (in Fall 2017 and Fall 2018), will continue to be placed in TRS 101 “Gold” sections, to avoid serious interpretive problems for the FITW study data. As needed, trailer sections of TRS 101 will be provided online in the summer and in the spring semester of 2018 to allow D-Core students to complete this requirement.

After the “First-in-the-World” (FITW) Grant intervention period concludes (in Fall 2018), we anticipate that few if any sections of TRS 101 would be offered, at least for the immediate future. Functionally, the JH-TRS Core requirement would become a 200-level elective and a 300-level elective, except in the case of transfer credits.

Respectfully submitted,



Sheila M<sup>c</sup>Ginn, PhD  
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