

Annual Assessment Report — AY 21-22

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

Program Assessed: Overall THRS Curriculum ('Year of Reflection' report)

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Date: Nov. 13, 2022

Overture. For this year's assessment exercise the Department of Theology & Religious Studies (THRS) is opting to take a *year of reflection*, to do some assessment work that might surface some strategic responses to challenges our department faces — especially with respect to our desire to grow our population of Majors.

On one level, THRS is like other departments whose programs have struggled under the whipsawing economic conditions of the last 14 years — from the Crash of 2008 through the emergency economics of the COVID pandemic. These economic challenges have compelled the university — ever squeezed for physical space — to demand larger and larger class sizes. Beside those factors, there are also the ideological headwinds that are undoing historic Catholic-Christian faith institutions in favor of New Age religiosities, secularized/ethical spiritualities, agnosticism, and/or atheism. These ideological trends have tended to marginalize theology and religious studies in recent years as major focal points for undergraduate education, especially in a culturally left institution such as ours. While the university does support programs and initiatives toward USF's Jesuit-Catholic identity, the ideological and cultural conditions we face on our campus show a declining buy-in from the student body both to Catholicism and to religion in general. Altogether these factors have challenged the development of our Major, and limited the impact of our department — certainly below the level that a faculty with such outstanding accomplishments might otherwise be able to boast.

One result is that THRS has increasingly settled into an identity as an academic unit whose principal role in the university is to service the Core curriculum.¹ The economic considerations undoubtedly have played a role in constraining development of our Major. Programs like ours, with a low base of Majors, often must beg the College for exceptions to minimum-enrollment policies so we can offer even one or two authentic cohort experiences for Majors and Minors in THRS. The result is that our Majors/Minors fulfill almost all their studies in large classes geared to the Core curriculum. Such large Core classes sometimes level or lower the common-denominator of discourse in a way that squelches the more specialized instruction that would better service dedicated THRS students, giving them a more integrated program with better academic and social cohorting.

In citing these challenges we do not consider ourselves at any sort of dead-end; there are *challenges* and *responses to challenges*. The motive of this assessment study is to sharpen our thinking toward long-term strategies to integrate our curriculum better and draw more students into our fold.

1. THRS has sole responsibility for USF's D2 curriculum, as well as part of the D3 curriculum, which is shared with the Philosophy department; THRS offers D3 courses under the rubric of "religious ethics" or "theological ethics." Students are required to take only one D2 and one D3 course during their undergraduate careers, meaning that THRS will service the entire undergraduate population for D2, and perhaps half or less of the D3 demand.

Procedure. This report represents a first-step toward comprehending the total deployment of our curriculum, by way of assessing the way syllabi seem to key course activities to Core LOs. I undertook a review of 53 syllabi of classes THRS conducted during AY 2021-2022 that we and the Dean’s office had in hand. I scanned them searching for disclosures of Core outcomes, and for statements relating those to course content, exercises and gradable assignments. I mapped those to a scale, as represented below:

Scale:	
3	Core outcomes stated, related to course themes and content, and clearly keyed to assignments
2	Core outcomes stated, related to course themes and content, but not well keyed to assignments
1	Core outcomes stated, but with little relation to course activities
0	Core outcomes statement missing or minimalist

I arrayed the findings on a spreadsheet (appended) and created a “MEAN” and “MEDIAN” index for the overall scores, summed up the Core targets of particular courses, and broke those out by percentage of all the Core certifications in the mix. I also totaled up courses by the major religions our department follows, along with a category for courses in religious studies, ethics or social justice that were not tied to a particular religion.

One important caveat: This assessment is covering work in an academic year overshadowed by the COVID pandemic. It is not clear this should have had much impact on the work of crafting a marriage between coursework and Core outcomes. But it is important to state nonetheless, particularly as review of individual syllabi disclose substantial attention to the challenge of eliciting student participation and commitment in their coursework.

Findings. The survey considered 53 courses total in the four terms spanning from Fall 2021 through Summer 2022. All of them carried a Core designation — D2, D3, or some variation of CEL/SL. Overall, 32 were Core D2 (58%), 18 were Core D3 (33%), and 5 were CEL/SL (9%).²

Total Courses:	53	
Mean Score >>	1.7	
Median Score >>	2.0	
D2 >>	32	58%
D3 >>	18	33%
CEL >>	5	9%

With respect to the way syllabi tied courses learning to Core outcomes, the overall mean score was 1.7 out of 3, and the median was 2.0. I read this as supporting a conclusion that courses tended to state outcomes, related them somewhat to course themes and content, but often did not key class exercises to outcomes. It is clear we can do more to encourage colleagues in the department to make more explicit statements of Core outcomes for their courses.

The syllabi with the highest scores tended to be those that were very explicit in (a) stating the boilerplate university outcome; (b) relating how course themes and content are oriented to the Core; and (c) relating class activities and assignments to the Core outcomes in an explicit way. Many of those courses did so with very detailed grids, or long outline statements of those relations. My observation of the lower scoring syllabi suggest that many of them either (a) were longstanding courses that had been taught over many years, and inattention had frittered away statements of outcomes; (b) were courses taught by adjuncts, sponsored by FTF, in which the

2. The discrepancy between the 53 courses and the 55 Core certs has to do with a couple of courses that served multiple Core outcomes.

process of gaining Core approvals evidently did not end with the outcome language being ported into syllabi. syllabi sometimes were very explicit about relating Core outcomes, course material, and assignment-assessment. Some were only moderately so. Others neglected this task altogether. It seems likely — especially in the courses that have been taught regularly over many years — that syllabi go through a “spin cycle.” That is, amid a thousand other plateaus calling out for our time, we in the faculty sometimes do not do a very thorough updating of outcomes statements, even in cases where course materials and assignments are being updated or adjusted.

I should say that none of my observations should be read as criticism of anyone.³ I chalk this up to a complex concatenation of issues around departmental culture — our oversized Core service mission; management issues related to a large pool of adjuncts, often teaching with great autonomy; and perhaps also a need for a more developed departmental apparatus for vetting the curriculum, semester-by-semester. Indeed, our department probably needs its own curriculum committee.

It was interesting to observe that only a negligible number of the syllabi I reviewed made mention of THRS PLOs. Most instead orient their course outcome statements to the Core (D2, D3, or CEL). I suspect this has to do with the fact that very few non-core courses offered in our department can survive minimum-enrollment thresholds. The ticket to survival for anyone sponsoring new THRS curricula is to have their course registered as a Core offering. Our department’s PLOs are very tightly tailored to Core D2 outcomes. But the real gravitational pull of our curriculum is toward the Core.

Finally I found it interesting to see the hard numbers on how our program covers different religious traditions. Just over a third (34%) of the courses covered Christianities or Catholicism; almost a quarter (23%) covered Judaism. We offered 4 courses on Buddhism, two on Hinduism, and 1 on Islam. The remainder (30%) were courses in religious studies, ethics, or social justice themes that were not tied to a particular religion.

Buddhism	4	8%
Catholic / Christian	18	34%
Hinduism	2	4%
Islam	1	2%
Judaism	12	23%
Religious Studies / Ethics / Social Justice	16	30%

Conclusions. It is not easy to draw any other than broad conclusions from this survey, which in many ways confirms impressions we have had — especially around our mission to the Core. The scaling and scoring methodology used here is itself impressionistic. However, having reviewed departmental syllabi for the last academic year, I realize that I am probably the only person in the department who has done this: that is, read over all THRS syllabi for a given academic year. This would be a good practice to institute on a regular basis — perhaps by the aforementioned THRS Curriculum Committee, which could also take up a role mediating new courses, as well as overseeing assessment exercises. Such a committee could also play an important role semester-by-semester, encouraging colleagues to concentrate on adjusting and updating outcomes and

3. I’d be first in line to be charged: my personal practice has been uneven, as you see comparing scores for my Spring 22 offerings of Liberation Theology (3.0 score) versus my Race & Religion class (score of 0), where it appears my outcomes statement fell away at some point.

relating them to course work. This might be meaningfully accomplished if faculty were, for future courses, to add a separate page devoted solely to the question of course outcomes, as a syllabus addendum. That way it would be (a) available to students as a document demanding its own special attention; (b) presentable as a separate document to the department to monitor future attention and refinement to outcomes.

Below is appended the survey data spreadsheet. This report also includes attachments:

- maps.zip contains THRS curriculum maps
- THRS_Syllabi_2021-2022.zip contains the syllabi surveyed in this report.

- Jorge Aquino

Chair, Dept of Theology and Religious Studies

THRS Assessment Spreadsheet | Stating / Clarifying Core Outcomes

Prepared by: Jorge Aquino, Chair THRS

Date: Nov. 13, 2022

Scale:

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Fall 2021						
#	Course #	Sec	Title	Core?	Instructor	Score
1	THRS 106	1	Intro to Sacred Scripture: Portraits of Christ	D2	Pizzuto	0.0
2	THRS 106	2	Intro to Sacred Scripture	D2	Ajer	2.5
3	THRS 125	1	Soc. Justice, Activism & Jews	D3	Hahn Tapper	3.0
4	THRS 130	1	Jews, Judaisms & Jewish Identities	D2	Kroll-Zeldin	1.0
5	THRS 136	1	The Holocaust & Genocide	D3	Herr	0.0
6	THRS 195	1	Transcendence in Film and Fiction	D2	Miller	1.0
7	THRS 195	2	FYS: Voice, Memory, and Landscape: Spiritual Autobiographies of Place	D2	Nagarajan	3.0
8	THRS 195	3	Transcendence in Film and Fiction: Catholic Realism	D2	Doherty	2.5
9	THRS 200	1	Christian Feminist Theology (CEL)	CD/CEL/SL	Carfore	3.0
10	THRS 201	1	Catholic Thought	D2	Nguyen	2.0
11	THRS 201	2	Catholic Thought	D2	Doherty	1.0
12	THRS 237	1	Social Justice and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict	D3	Kroll-Zeldin	1.5
13	THRS 281	1	Islam in America	D2	Hidayatullah	3.0
14	THRS 306	1	Theology in HIV/AIDS Contexts	D2	Dube	3.0
15	THRS 308	1	Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology	D2	Nguyen	1.0

16	THRS 315	1	Greek and Roman Religion(s)	D2	Black	0.0
17	THRS 321	1	Grace: Christian Transcendence	D2	Doherty	2.5
18	THRS 325	1	MJT: Jewish Graphic Novels	D2	Bar-Gabai	0.0
19	THRS 361	1	Religion and the Environment	D2	Mickey	1.0
20	THRS 367		Introduction to Buddhism: The Dalai Lama	D2	Wangchuk	0.0
21	THRS 388	1	Religion, Psychology, and Modern Literature	D2	Hinerman	1.0
22	THRS 390	3	Human Rights Ethics	D3	Ajer	3.0
23	THRS 390	5	Refugees: Justice and Ethics	D3	Bar-Gabai	3.0
24	THRS 391	1	Buddhist Ethics	D3	Wangchuk	0.0
25	THRS 470	1	Contemporary Moral Issues: Climate Change	D3	Mickey	2.0

Intersession 2022						
#	Course #	Sec	Title	Core?	Instructor	Score
26	THRS 202	1	Portraits of Christ	D2	Antokhin	0.0
27	THRS 404	1	Environmental Ethics	D3	Mickey	2.5

Spring 2022						
#	Course #	Sec	Title	Core?	Instructor	Score
28	THRS 100	1	Christian Village	D2	Antokhin	0.0
29	THRS 104	1	Mystery of God / Human Person	D2	Nguyen	2.0
30	THRS 106	1	Intro to Sacred Scripture	D2	Ajer	2.0
31	THRS 130	1	Jews, Judaisms, Jewish Identities	D2	Kleinberg	2.0
32	THRS 131	1	Queering Religion	D2	Angel	2.0
33	THRS 132	1	Forgiving the Unforgivable: Ethics of Apologies	D3	Hahn Tapper	3.0
34	THRS 200	1	Christian Feminist Theology (CEL)	CEL	Carfore	3.0
35	THRS 201	1	Catholic Thought	D2	Nguyen	2.0
36	THRS 230	1	Jewish-Christian Relationship	D2	Latteri	1.0

37	THRS 236	1	Refugees: Justice and Ethics	D3	Bar-Gabai	3.0
38	THRS 238	1	Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: Lit/Film	D3	Kroll-Zeldin	1.0
39	THRS 310		Christian Sacraments	D2	Doherty	1.0
40	THRS 322	1	Liberation Theology	D2	Aquino	3.0
41	THRS 363	1	Religion in Latin America	D2	Titizano	3.0
42	THRS 367	1	Introduction to Buddhism	D2	Wangchuk	1.0
43	THRS 371	1	Hinduism: Climate	D2	Nagarajan	3.0
44	THRS 381	1	Himalayan Religions and Cultures	D2	Wangchuk	1.0
45	THRS 388	1	Religion, Psychology, and Modern Literature	D2	Hinerman	1.0
46	THRS 390	1	Ethics: Race & Religion	D3	Aquino	0.0
47	THRS 390	2	Ethics: Friendship	D3	Antokhin	0.0
48	THRS 390	3	Ethics: Human Rights	D3	Ajer	3.0
49	THRS 397	1	Community Internship	SL	Nagarajan	3.0
50	THRS 404	1	Environmental Ethics	D3	Mickey	1.0
51	THRS 470	1	Contemporary Moral Issues: Climate Change	D3 CEL	Mickey	1.0

Summer 2022						
#	Course #	Sec	Title	Core?	Instructor	Score
52	THRS 470	1	Contemporary Moral Issues: Climate Change	D3 CEL	Mickey	1.0
53	THRS 390	1	Ethics: Human Rights	D3	Ajer	3.0

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