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## ARTICLE

# Teaching Religion to Undergraduates in the 2020s: A Preliminary Reconnaissance

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## ABSTRACT

We survey the current landscape of teaching religion to undergraduates to imagine its contours over the next five to ten years. We follow Dee Fink's outline of backwards design for course development to consider outside factors, the nature of the subject matter, the characteristics of learners and teachers, and issues related to particular courses, focusing on introductory and general education courses. Such courses serve students best when they are designed with broad goals, often articulated in the institutional mission. This opens new ways of conceiving of the field from the student perspective while helping teachers to attract more students and to embrace a variety of pedagogies and curricula to better serve the students they teach.

## KEYWORDS

course design, curriculum design, institutional mission, teaching introductory courses, teaching general education courses, teaching religion

In *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses* (2003), L. Dee Fink provides a thorough guide to course, and, by extension, curriculum design. At its heart is the process of "backwards design," which starts with an articulation of what students are supposed to learn from a particular course or curriculum. Designers then work backwards towards formulating specific learning activities that will help students achieve the goals set out in the beginning, modes of feedback to students, and the connection and integration of all those considerations into a syllabus or program (Fink 2003, 63).

Fink's emphasis on the importance of careful design to promote learning has been an influential contribution to both the scholarship of teaching and learning and to the practice of teaching in colleges and universities. His highlighting of situational factors that shape the contexts for teaching and learning has been salutary, particularly as higher education has been going through a prolonged period of attack, transformation, and transition. In this essay we will use Fink's sketch of situational factors to chart some of the teaching challenges that lie ahead, particularly for teachers of the academic study of religion in undergraduate contexts.

Fink (2003) breaks situational factors down into several subcategories.

1. Outside factors can influence the design of learning experiences, factors such as the expectations of the general public, oversight agencies such as accrediting agencies or state legislatures, and institutional or system-wide administrators.
2. The nature of the subject matter, including the particular demands it makes on students and teachers, whether it works towards a single correct answer or entertains multiple interpretations, and its relative stability or volatility, also affects the design of teaching and learning experiences.
3. Teachers also need to take into account both the characteristics of the learners with whom they will be working (for example, their life situations, goals and expectations, relevant prior knowledge, and learning styles) and their own characteristics (for example, their familiarity with the material they will be teaching; their familiarity and level of comfort with various teaching strategies such as leading discussions, lecturing, or flipping the classroom; and their experiences with the processes of and scholarship on effective teaching).
4. Teachers should consider whether there might be any special pedagogical challenges involved in teaching particular courses. There are issues specific to individual courses, such as the number enrolled, the level of the course, the timing and frequency of class sessions, and the format of instruction (for example, online, hybrid, in-person). But there are also certain types of courses that present distinctive challenges. We think here of the issues posed by introductory and general education courses, particularly for a population of college and university students who typically have very little experience with the academic study of religion. We will focus on this fourth situational factor after considering the others in turn.

Our observations are not based on large-scale statistical studies but rather on our research and our combined experience in working with teachers of religious studies in undergraduate programs at scores of institutions. This includes visits to more than seventy-five campuses over the last two decades, largely under the auspices of the [Wabash Center](#) for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion (2020). There are many interesting questions we cannot pursue here, such as how religious studies curricula have changed over the last decade and how the shape of the field has changed over the same time. We do not aim to present an ideal classroom approach or path going forward, since we recognize the importance of differences in teaching contexts. We hope to draw together disparate indications of the current state of the teaching of religion in undergraduate programs and departments, and the opportunities, challenges, and dilemmas that will confront teachers and students of religion over the next five to ten years. Both of us teach on the “religious studies” side of the sometimes contentious distinction with “theology.” We would invite a companion essay could provide insights into the pedagogical challenges specific to a more theologically-focused curriculum and mission.

Our central argument is that by focusing on the broad importance of the study of religion to educated citizens, particularly in the design of introductory or general education courses, teachers can make the case to multiple audiences for the value of the study of religion, attract students to their courses, and, at least indirectly, attract more students to more courses and even to minor or major.

## External Factors

Here we focus on the expectations that members of the general public; local, state, and national governments; oversight and accrediting agencies; and parents and families have for higher education. In many instances those expectations have been expressed in public through the news media, as politicians, tech entrepreneurs, and others have questioned the value of a traditional four-year college education (see for example Gravett 2018, 1-7, 29-39). Expectations are frequently both filtered and communicated by institutional and system-wide administrators. Administrators can also exert pressures regarding the number of students enrolled in courses and programs, the timing and frequency of course offerings, the format of courses (face to face, online, hybrid, intensive, and so forth), and uses of technology (such as the mandated use of certain “learning management systems”).

Over the last several decades, colleges and universities have been challenged to demonstrate that they are delivering value commensurate with the prices they charge. In many instances, the challenge has taken the form of demanding that institutions demonstrate that they are contributing to the immediate employability of their graduates, providing a measurable return on investment. Students who have learned that lesson, from parents and the general social context, have accordingly voted with their feet and enrolled in majors that they think will help them get a job in their chosen field upon graduation (Donoghue 2018;

[National Council for Education Statistics](#) 2018). That does not [necessarily entail](#) lower enrollment in our courses (Hu 2018), but it should encourage a certain thoughtfulness about how those courses are designed.

These cultural shifts have led to changes in the allocation of resources on many campuses. But such redirections of curricular focus are often not fully aligned with either the mission statements or the programs of general education at those same institutions, which often still give prominent places to courses in the humanities, including those in the study of religion. One upshot of that situation is that while introductory courses in the study of religion may satisfy foundational general education or distribution requirements, such courses are increasingly populated with students who expect to derive from them some immediate practical benefits that will help them in their chosen careers. That poses an acute course and curriculum design challenge to which we will return.

Broader cultural attitudes also force many departments or programs to make a compelling case for the value of the academic study of religion. In doing so, departments need to keep multiple audiences in mind: from administrators; to colleagues who may often informally or formally dispense advice that leads students towards or away from the study of religion as part of their college careers; to students and their parents.

Making the case for the academic study of religion may involve not only adjusting the ways in which a program or department presents itself in brochures, on websites, and to admissions officers, and other potential stakeholders: It should also involve concrete changes to both curricula and individual courses. It is not sufficient to have courses that are representative of the best practices of the guild if they do not connect in a direct and substantial fashion to the types of education that institutions are promising students and to the perceived needs of educated individuals in the twenty-first century.

In some cases, programs or departments have responded to the challenge of demonstrating their practical relevance by forging strong relationships with disciplines or programs perceived to be more practical, such as offering cross-listed courses with medical humanities programs or others in the general field of health services. Such cooperative relationships can ensure an influx of students into some courses in the academic study of religion, even if highly prescribed curricula often curtail further opportunities for many students in those programs. Nonetheless, such partnerships have the potential to weave the academic study of religion more effectively into the fabric of an institution and to enlist allies who can help in the process of making the case for the study of religion. Two specific examples indicate the ways departments are doing just that. John Schmalzbauer and Stephen Berkwitz at Missouri State University received a [Wabash Center grant](#) on “Teaching Religious Studies to Undergraduate Students in Health-Related Fields” (Schmalzbauer and Berkwitz 2016) which has helped them in developing a new [curriculum](#) for undergraduates (Missouri State Religious Studies 2019). Michelle Desmarais, Curtis Hutt, and Paul Williams of University of Nebraska Omaha founded the [Spirituality, Public Health, Religious Studies](#) community engagement initiative, which includes a service learning component for students (University of Nebraska Omaha 2016). These initiatives are especially crucial as more than a few departments and programs have been confronted with the possibility of absorption into other academic units or being paired with other departments, such as philosophy.

Directing students towards disciplines that are perceived to have a more immediate connection to post-graduation employment can exert substantial pressure on an institution’s operating budget and even its endowment. The shifting of tenured faculty lines towards areas of greater perceived need within an institution is one way of responding to that pressure. But since humanities disciplines, such as the study of religion, frequently retain important roles in delivering general education courses, they are then pressed to teach more students with fewer tenured or tenure-stream faculty. One response has been to rely on contingent faculty, especially to teach at the introductory level. The escalating impacts of the “adjunctification” of the American professoriate have been [widely remarked](#) (see Kezar and Gherke 2014). Here, we emphasize that it is essential that contingent faculty hired to teach general education courses receive support to design courses that are appropriate for the institution and program or department (Burroughs 2019; Harrell 2019; Lee 2019; Schenkewitz 2019; Wirrig 2019).

More and more institutions are promoting service learning, internships, fieldwork assignments, problem-based learning, study away, and other “high impact” teaching and learning strategies. These can help move the study of religion outside the classroom and thereby show that the habits of mind; strategies of forming, asking, and seeking answers to questions; and knowledge that is cultivated in courses can have direct relevance in the world (see for example Seider 2011; DeTemple 2012; Seigler 2015; Long 2018; Gravett 2018, 67-71). Requiring such experiences of majors and/or minors has been one way of trying to establish the “practical” benefits of the study of religion and to satisfy student and employer expectations for collegiate internship experience. Other strategies are possible, too (see Gravett 2018, 130-141). Programs that have integrated applied or interfaith elements in their curricula are seeking the same sort of practical student engagement.

Several other trends that affect course and degree delivery, many of which arise from institutional and cultural pressures for expediency, are likely to grow in the coming years. Institutions as different as Utah State and Villanova University, as well as many community colleges, are establishing accelerated or short-term courses across disciplines, a move that caters to non-traditional students and to the need to move students quickly and steadily toward graduation. Institutions are also investing more in instructional design and technology, and the subsequent “deskilling” of the professoriate by this and other technologies (such as packaged assessments for particular textbooks) will need to be monitored carefully over the coming decade (see Poritz and Rees 2017). Finally, some colleges and universities are increasingly devising “stackable” programs that allow students to cobble together various types of credits and certificates from various sources into a full degree; others offer accelerated graduate programs to committed undergraduates. More and more institutions, such as Purdue University and the University of Michigan, are wading into competency-based education, which focuses on and assesses gained skills and knowledge instead of adding up time spent in the classroom. Religious studies may seem less amenable to credentialing its students for specific forms of post-graduation work than many undergraduate majors. But it would behoove religious studies faculty to think about how skills common to the field can be enumerated and assessed, in keeping with institutional mission statements, as explored below.

## Nature of the Subject Matter

Fink’s reminder (2003) to take situational factors into account in course and program design includes the nature of the field itself, although litigating the boundaries or approaches of the field is beyond the scope of this article. The margins and approaches of the field constantly shift as certain arguments take center stage and others fade. These disciplinary issues should be secondary in introductory and general education courses, as explored below.

There are several issues in the study of religion that do affect the classroom directly. Our field is not generally considered applied or pre-professional, but those of us who teach it believe that it is crucial to any undergraduate’s education. This is because we see religion as intimately entangled with the social, economic, and political issues students will have to struggle with in their lives. Courses in religious studies often wrestle in some way, if not centrally, with problems of racism, xenophobia, sexism, power, and violence. Courses focused on climate change, migration, and the socioeconomic disparities that continue to shape our world are considerably less common but perhaps growing in importance. Global conflicts and pressing questions about religious freedom serve to increase the importance of studying religion through the interdisciplinary lens so common to departments of religion.

One of the biggest pedagogical challenges for teaching religion is student expectations. The potential clash between how religion is treated in religious education as conducted by families and congregations and how it is treated in the academic study of religion in higher education, particularly since students typically have little, no, or misleading familiarity with it prior to enrollment, can present particular pedagogical challenges. Broad characterizations of contemporary college students, such as Barbara Walvoord’s assertion, based in part on the work of UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, argue that students enrolled in introductory college and university courses about religion want to pursue “big questions” and cultivate their own spiritual and religious lives (see Walvoord 2008; Astin et al. 2011). Many students consider themselves “spiritual but not religious” or “nones” and thus reject religion as a serious object of study. Students also tend to expect a “world religions” class to provide just the facts about a cafeteria selection of religious traditions, while more and more courses tend to be thematic, following the model of “Religion and Material Culture” or “Religion and Sexuality.” Overall, for students, wrestling with complexities seems less important than acquiring more straightforward, personally applicable knowledge.

We know of several innovative approaches to packaging religious studies in individual courses and in departments. Immersive technologies, gaming, and interactive fiction that appeal to many students are creative ways of approaching course design (Johnson 2018; Lester 2018; Zeller 2018). Some departments have turned toward interfaith education or interreligious studies, often on the model of Eboo Patel and the [Interfaith Youth Core](#) (2019). But whether such a focus simply supplements or can actually supplant the academic study of religion remains contentious. Other departments, such as Georgia State University, have adopted an “applied” (or clinical) religious studies model, but such approaches are generally still in their beginning stages. Efforts to develop curricula that support applied religious studies are now supported by a committee of the American Academy of Religion charged with supporting “alt-ac” careers and exploring competency-based career readiness options (for [key](#) competencies see National Association of Colleges and Employers 2019). These examples show how efforts to attract students, promote understanding and tolerance, and link the study of religion to identifiable career paths might help religious studies survive in the changing academy. As of now, however, the jury remains out on each of these initiatives.

## Characteristics of Teachers and Learners

Few teachers would succeed if they ignored the attributes, interests, and needs of their students. These elements are, for many teachers, the keys to crafting a meaningful, productive learning environment, however hard they might be to define. We suspect that most teachers who have been at it for a while have heard some variation of the question, “Are the students different today than when you started?” There is, in fact, a substantial body of literature that attempts to characterize the particular characteristics of contemporary students of traditional college age by generational cohort, even though such generations can be imprecisely defined and in some ways are moving targets. The task for teachers is what to make of such broad generalizations about college students, let alone how such generalizations are inflected by specific intersections with race, ethnicity, gender, social and economic background, prior educational experience, and many other characteristics (see for example Bauman et al. 2014).

Nonetheless, many seasoned teachers would say that students are coming to college with weaker skills in reading and writing but stronger interests in group work and relevant, practical skills they can bring to the workplace. Weaker skills are often blamed on the rise of standardized testing in K-12 schools, a result of the No Child Left Behind policies instituted in the early 2000s that built on widespread testing begun in the 1970s. Recent research has indicated that the situation does not improve greatly during college (Arum and Roksa 2011). The challenge for teachers in the next decade will be to design courses that strive to remedy perceived skills deficiencies, build up established skills, and demonstrate their relevance beyond their particular course or degree.

In part because faculty members have their own training, skills, and concerns, some are resistant, for example, to becoming “writing teachers.” Others are wedded to the coverage model they were trained to deliver. Having been trained a particular way, many do not understand how or why to incorporate more “real world” assignments in their classes. Many faculty members have known only the lecture or seminar models of learning, modalities that clearly worked for them but that might not serve their students well. Others feel compelled to initiate all students into the intricacies of the field. Whatever proclivities teachers might have, sustained and increased pedagogical innovation will be a key to making the case for the importance of the academic study of religion, particularly in introductory and general education courses.

## Pedagogical Challenges of Particular Courses: Introduction and General Education

The final element of Fink’s situational factors concerns elements of particular courses and particular types of courses. For instance, upper-level seminars require skills in generating and steering discussion and tradition-specific courses require attention to nuance and complexity (see DeRogatis et al. 2014; Holladay and Johnson 1998; Cornell and LeMon 2016). Yet perhaps the most difficult pedagogical challenge for teachers of religion will remain the conception and design of introductory courses (see McCutcheon et al. 2016). What students ostensibly want to find out may not be what teachers think that they need to learn. A push-and-pull dynamic, then, can develop between conceiving and designing courses for the students one actually has, and conceiving and designing courses for what those same students may not know that they need. Without dismissing the challenges of offering viable major and minor programs, we want to suggest that institutional structures that direct students toward introductory courses in religion pose the broader and more pressing set of opportunities and challenges for teachers of religion.

Although it is now nearly two decades old, the survey of undergraduate departments and programs in the study of religion undertaken by the American Academy of Religion from 2000 to 2001 still points to some essential characteristics of the undergraduate context. The [summary of the results](#) of data analysis presented to the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (2003) provides a list of courses taught at the surveyed institutions, ranked by frequency. If only the courses that have “Introduction” are counted, they account for some 26.7 percent of the courses offered. Including courses that can plausibly assumed to be introductory, such as “New Testament,” “Judaism,” or “Ethics,” the percentage of introductory courses increases to over two-thirds. Those percentages lend statistical heft to Jonathan Z. Smith’s comment that “As college teachers, our primary expertise is introducing” (1988, 727).

The AAR survey numbers (2003), which are unfortunately the only solid data that we have, accord well with our personal observations. Because the study of religion continues to play a sometimes outsized role in general education programs, departments and programs are frequently required to offer multiple large courses and sections at the introductory level that will satisfy the demand for general education courses. This is often to the good, as student credit hours support department needs.

Since the vast majority of students who take a course in the study of religion to fulfill a general education or distribution requirement will take only that one course, course design needs to focus relentlessly on asking what (very) few things such students need to learn about religion during their limited encounter with its academic study (see Gallagher 2009). That is, learning objectives of such

courses in the study of religion need to focus on the cultivation of the types of knowledge, skills, capacities, and abilities that will serve students well *outside of the academic study of religion*, both in their academic programs and for the rest of their lives. The design process must be animated by questions such as “What does a nurse, an accountant, an engineer, or civil servant need to know about religion?” and, perhaps most importantly, “What does a citizen who will likely live into the latter part of the twenty-first century need to know about religion?” Beyond religious literacy, much of which can be learned on legitimate websites, students should be expected to struggle with complexity, with their own biases and assumptions, and with broader issues of prejudice and what constitutes justice. Understanding and living in a pluralistic world requires perspective taking, intellectual humility, and an ability to appreciate multiple interpretations. Fostering those intellectual habits will require a move away from superficially reviewed content toward more depth of understanding through more active learning.

Some time ago, in an essay whose importance remains fully to be grasped and acted on, Jonathan Z. Smith (1988) adumbrated several issues related to our argument. He argued that particularly courses with such a broad purview as “Introduction to Religion” or “Introduction to World Religions” cannot – and should not – aspire to the illusory goal of coverage during a single college term. It is apparent from the [Open Syllabus Project](#) (2019) and the Wabash Center [Syllabus Collection](#) (2019) that many instructors aim precisely for this, as seven of the top ten assigned books in “religion” are textbooks. What, in fact, would it mean to “cover” the “world’s” religions or even “religion” over the course of twenty to thirty total hours of class time? In what ways would such coverage, even if attempted, respond to the educational goals articulated by institutions? Implicit in the goal of coverage is the perception that the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student is, somehow, in itself a worthy goal. At best, in such a model of education, the possession of knowledge – without consideration of how it is made or used – is viewed as valuable in itself. But it addresses only the lowest level of Benjamin Bloom’s well-known taxonomy of cognitive skills, “knowledge” in the original form of the taxonomy and “remembering” in the revised version (see Bloom et al. 1956; Anderson et al. 2001).

Instead of aiming for an unachievable coverage, Smith (1988) urges that introductory courses should focus on problems and particularly on the formation of arguments about those problems. Students should be encouraged to attempt the adjudication of various arguments about the same problem so that they may make informed choices about how to understand something and how to defend that understanding. A college education, therefore, helps students *learn why they think what they think* and to entertain the possibilities that there may well be equally persuasive alternative approaches to the same problem. There, in our understanding of Smith’s proposal, lies the link between what is taught in introductory courses about the academic study of religion and the broad goals of education sketched out in institutional mission statements. Introductory courses, from that perspective, are first of all introductions to the types of thinking, reading, speaking, and writing – the habits of mind – that are expected in college. Learning about any particular subject matter is therefore subordinate to learning how to think and express, defend, and critique one’s ideas. As Smith puts it, “a central goal of liberal learning is the acceptance of (and training in) *the requirement to bring private percept into public discourse and, therefore, the requirement to learn to negotiate difference with civility*” (Smith 1988, 733; italics in original).

We suggest further that introductory courses in the study of religion, particularly as they satisfy general education or distribution requirements, should not be solely, or even primarily, about inducting students into the discipline of the academic study of religion. Such an intention, at least at its worst, can focus on the creation of “mini-mes,” undergraduates being molded, explicitly and implicitly, in the image and likeness of their professors so that they, too, can enter graduate school, earn advanced degrees, become religion teachers, and replicate the cycle their teachers had already gone through.

Such a view is myopic for multiple reasons. First, it ignores the professed interests of the students in introductory courses. Since it begins the course with a likely misreading of what students are actually looking for, this view runs the risk of missing potential connections between teachers, students, and material that can reveal the intellectual power and potential of the study of religion for virtually any student. Second, it tends not to take account of the social and economic conditions that make it difficult not only for the few students who may consider it to pursue graduate education but also to complete it with any realistic hope of securing the type of employment that their teachers have. Third, it can contribute to the creation of a disruptive implicit hierarchy in any course that privileges those who “really get it” and those who are, supposedly, just putting in their time. Finally, teaching *to* a certain, imagined, group of students belies the promise of general education. Teaching an imagined audience of potential professors by designing courses with the purpose of beginning their induction into the discipline, with its dominant practices, questions, and conundrums, implicitly runs afoul of any institution’s articulated goals for a college education, which are often stated with sweeping breadth in an institutional mission statement.

It is easy to dismiss institutional mission statements as airy platitudes that are filed away virtually as soon as they are finished or that accord little with reality (after all, few institutions list athletics as a key part of their mission even as a large portion of their budget goes to athletic programs). For example, most college and university mission statements profess an interest in preparing students for



the globalized world of the twenty-first century. Yet such statements essentially constitute a *promise* to students and others about the broadest goals of their education. Those broad goals are to be reached through specific course work, most often those relatively few (types of) courses that all students are required to take. We propose, then, a simple thought experiment. What would introductory courses (and, by extension, programs) in the study of religion look like if they took institutional mission statements very seriously? What would introductory courses look like if they explicitly attempted to contribute to the formation of the types of individuals that institutions say that they are looking to produce? In other words, what if we take seriously Dee Fink's (2003) backward design on an institutional scale, with the mission statement constituting our learning goals?

Such a thought experiment, we suggest, entails a shift in the conception of the students as future professors of religious studies or even religious studies majors or minors. The shadow audience of one's colleagues in the guild and the always looming specter of one's doctoral advisor and committee accordingly fade into the deep background. Instead, an imagined audience of informed and incisive citizens who will face the changes and possibilities of living another fifty or more years of the twenty-first century comes to the fore. How can teaching about religion help such students equip themselves to face both pressing contemporary problems and ones yet to be identified?

Courses that are "mission-sensitive" or "mission-aware" will be inflected differently in different contexts. Public institutions, for example, can be expected to have at least slightly different articulations of their missions than religiously affiliated ones. The College of Charleston, for example, [claims that](#) "The College provides students a community in which to engage in original inquiry and creative expression in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom. This community, founded on the principles of the liberal arts tradition, provides students the opportunity to realize their intellectual and personal potential and to become responsible, productive members of society" (2019). La Salle University in Philadelphia, in contrast, [claims that](#) their "mission is to educate the whole person by fostering a rigorous free search for truth. La Salle, in affirming the value of both liberal arts and professional studies, prepares students for the lifelong pursuit and exploration of wisdom, knowledge, and faith that lead to engaged and fulfilling lives marked by a commitment to the common good" (2019).

The implications for teaching general education courses in each institution are clear, if very broadly indicated. At the public institution of the College of Charleston teachers are challenged to figure out how, through course design and execution, they can offer students opportunities to realize their intellectual and personal potential and to become responsible productive members of society. That, of course, does little to narrow things down. But it does lead to some potentially productive questions. What, for example, should a productive and responsible member of society know about religion and what should such a person be able to do with such knowledge? What topics in the study of religion might one choose to work on with students in order to practice demonstrating how a productive and responsible member of society might frame, investigate, analyze, and interpret such topics? What characteristic approaches to the academic study of religion might address such topics? Taking such questions seriously should lead directly to the articulation of learning goals for an introductory course that have a solid rationale behind them – one that speaks directly to the broadly articulated goals, what we've called the implicit promises, that the institution has indicated for students' education.

Designing general education courses at La Salle would involve similar challenges and opportunities, but there is another dimension there. La Salle explicitly aims to prepare students for the long-term pursuit of wisdom, knowledge, *and faith* (our emphasis). Implicit in that goal is the idea that course work will not only be personally relevant, (in the way that the College of Charleston focuses on "personal potential") but that course work will also, in some undefined way, be relevant to individual students' (presumed) faith. In important ways, however, the two formulations of the goals of education are not that far apart. What both Charleston and La Salle share is the desire that a college education will somehow shape who students are and will become. In current educational argot, they seek an educational experience that is "transformative." General education courses, because they are required of all students, play a crucial role in that quest for transformative learning.

In their mission statements, both the College of Charleston and La Salle University therefore focus on what Fink identifies as one of the six major categories in the taxonomy of significant learning. The "human dimension" of learning experiences comes into play when "students learn something important about themselves or about others, [which] enables them to function and interact more effectively. They discover the personal and social implications of what they have learned" (Fink 2003, 31). That helps move learning out of the realm of the abstract and into human contexts that are more recognizable and immediate to students, now and in the future.

La Salle's focus on education within a context shaped by the values of the Brothers of the Christian Schools explicitly expresses the hope that their education will have an impact on students' religious lives. Charleston also hopes to exercise a personal impact on its students, although it refrains from addressing directly their religious lives. But both institutions want to have an impact on what Fink (2003) calls the "caring" dimension of learning. That is, they seek to cultivate an experience of learning that "changes the degree to

which students care about something. This may be reflected in new feelings, interests, or values. Any of these changes means students now care about something to a greater degree than they did before, or in a different way” (Fink 2003, 32). Fink argues further that students who care about what they are learning can increase their energy for and commitment to the process of learning, attitudes that can benefit students and teachers by making for more lively and engaged courses. Both institutions explicitly seek an impact on both Fink’s human and caring dimensions of significant learning experiences. The devil, or the fulfillment of institutional mission, is, of course, in the details.

To broaden our scope and consider a relevant contemporary example, how can studying religion in an introductory course help students learn how to distinguish credible sources of information from suspect or distorted ones; how can the academic study of religion help students learn how to pierce the fog of obfuscating rhetoric to identify significant underlying issues; how can introductory religion courses help students learn how to dissect and assess competing arguments about what is ostensibly the same issue; how can they learn to spot “fake news” when they see it; how can they figure out how to identify and explain how and why certain statements or stories actually are fake and develop alternative sources that are more trustworthy?

This way of looking at introductory courses suggests that it is not specific material, such as the frequently critiqued survey of world religions, or even theories and methods specific to a discipline or subdiscipline, that need to constitute the focus and substance of an introductory course in the study of religion (see Locklin et al. 2012; Gray-Hildenbrand and King 2019). It is rather a set of problems and questions and a range of opportunities to practice posing and answering them that should constitute the topics focus for introductory courses. The choice of problems and questions should not be solely or primarily defined by whatever issues are perceived to be current in the academic guild but by a teacher’s estimation of how those problems and questions can be put in service to the broader goals of such introductory courses as articulated by the institution.

The mission-aware or mission-sensitive approach to course design encourages teachers to think beyond, or through, familiarizing beginning students with the characteristic problems and practices of the discipline and towards the uses to which such disciplinarily formed knowledge can be put in the lives of all their students.

Our emphasis in this section is that broad public statements about the aims of education, contained in institutional, general education, and program mission statements, can provide bridges between the goals which general education courses are purported to serve and the design of courses to fulfill such goals. General education programs drive students toward some courses and away from others. We suggest that when the design of such courses takes seriously the reasons why students might be enrolled, there is a greater possibility that such courses will contribute meaningfully to students’ educations. Such a fit between intention and design will help to produce greater student satisfaction – what Fink (2003) identifies as energy and commitment – and therefore can help to make the case for the value of the academic study of religion. But that value cannot simply be presented as inherent and self-evident. It needs to be demonstrated, on a daily basis, to students and other stakeholders. Such effective demonstration is more likely to happen when there is ample alignment between course topics, specific classroom assignments and practices, general course learning goals, and the implicit and explicit promises that institutions make about the contributions that collegiate study can make to the ongoing lives of their graduates.

## Conclusion

Dee Fink’s influential “backward design” approach to course and program design is also forward looking (2003). The end comes first: a teacher determines course goals in order to craft activities, assignments, and assessments that support those goals. In the context of an individual course, backward design asks us to think about what students should be able to do when they finish the course; in the context of an education, backward design asks us to think about what students should be able to do even after graduation. It is not much of a stretch to ask teachers to do some backward design for the next decade of their work. What do we want the field to look like from the student perspective over the next ten years? What skills will faculty be challenged to learn given the changing landscape of higher education?

Taking the broad aims of an undergraduate education, as indicated in institutional mission statements, carefully into account in the process of course design encourages teachers to take off, for a time, the blinders they appropriately and necessarily put on when participating in their disciplines and subdisciplines. It gives them incentives to consider the broader picture of how they and their discipline can contribute to the common good by offering resources that can support students’ ongoing efforts to make for themselves meaningful and satisfying lives.



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If we could choose three pedagogical outcomes to be realized in 2030, particularly in those introductory courses in which we encounter most of our students, what would those be?

As we argue above, one key to rethinking our courses can be found in our institutional missions. This will allow us to better serve the students we have in the contexts, both in school and more broadly, in which we find them. This is particularly true in general education and introductory courses, where we encounter the greatest number of students, most of whom will never take another religion (or even another humanities) course. It is here we will make our greatest contribution, and it is therefore imperative that we think carefully here about what, why, and how we teach. We have argued that the task for teachers of religious studies is not to induct students into the ins and outs of a discipline that very few of them will ever participate in at an advanced level but to show them and help them practice some of the characteristic modes of thought and analysis that the discipline of the academic study of religion can bring to bear on virtually any topic.

Mission statements can help us here, as can attention to the zeitgeist. Broad cultural movement away from attending to evidence and argument should encourage us to forefront these elements in our teaching. Weak student skills, particularly in basic communication, should encourage us to focus more on fostering them, since students will continue to use those skills long after they graduate. This will mean sacrificing some content coverage, a relatively small loss given the availability of information on the internet (see Junior and Edwards 2011). Our jobs will inevitably become, in part, about helping students weed through the surfeit of information to find good information and make good arguments based on that information.

A second outcome could be new ways of conceiving the field pedagogically (for example, applied religious studies, or data science, or digital media, or interfaith studies, or contemplative pedagogy that plays to the spiritually oriented). Issues that will dominate public consciousness, such as climate change, human rights, fake news, and an aging population, could become a focus of our work in the classroom. It is unlikely that any new focus in approach or content will fully replace the more traditional courses on theory and method or comparative, interdisciplinary courses. But we can leverage those established strengths of the field to make our work more relevant across campus and to potential employers. We can also find ways to make room for internship, study abroad, and other high-impact experiences that allow students to experience the many ways religion shapes culture. Perhaps it is time for the American Academy of Religion *Teaching Religious Studies series* (2019) to add volumes on, for instance, *Teaching Applied Religious Studies* or *Teaching Data Science and Religion*. The existing *Teaching Religion and Healing* might be complemented by a new *Teaching Religion for Healthcare Professions*.

The third outcome could be a change in the ways graduate students are trained. Dee Fink's (2003) model of backward design also helps us see that we need to foster an ongoing awareness in graduate education and beyond of the need to be more flexible and responsive to pressures from outside our classrooms. This does not entail compromising rigor or abandoning traditional areas of research, but it does, for instance, reward a focus on skills rather than content coverage. Flipping the classroom might need to be replaced by a focus on actively teaching skills through modeling, for instance, close reading and analysis of shorter texts. Learning facts about traditions might need to make way for more problem-based learning and applied religious studies. Above all, graduate students should be taught how to consider institutional context and limitations, broader cultural shifts and their effects on the classroom, and ways of teaching to promote learning well beyond traditional lecture and seminar.

Such shifts allow us to reconsider the goals for our work in light of institutional values, and they should happen irrespective of changes in technology or student choice of major. If we know that our goals for students are, above all, to teach them how to navigate a complex world as responsible citizens, then our focus in the classroom should be on fostering those skills involved in such navigation. This will require a shift for many teachers, who will have to revise their courses around skills rather than content and think deeply and carefully about the broader implications of what they are actually teaching.

In 2030, we hope to be able to look back and see multiple successful and compelling examples of how courses in the study of religion have earned their places in programs of general education, made clear to all stakeholders how they contribute to institutional missions, and, most importantly, helped to provide students with the skills, habits of mind, and attitudes that will support their efforts to pursue meaningful and satisfying lives in their chosen fields, as members of families and communities, and as citizens.

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