

Cherie Hughes, Tulsa Community College



Cherie Hughes directs the Religious Studies program at Tulsa Community College where she has been a professor of Humanities and Religious Studies since 1986. She previously taught at the University of Tulsa. She has Bachelor's and Master's degrees in History from Boston University and a Master's degree in Theology from the University of Dallas. Cherie Hughes is currently completing a dissertation on the life and spirituality of St. Katharine Drexel under the direction Prof. Ann Loades of Durham University. She has been awarded numerous scholar and program grants by the Oklahoma Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities, particularly for her first person portrayal of the nineteenth century feminist Lucy Stone. This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it

It has taken more than ten years to develop the Religious Studies program at Tulsa Community College. Some of the original difficulties were the result of the inertia of the new, unfamiliar nomenclature, and the need to actively market the program to prospective students. At all the steps along the way the administration was unfailingly supportive and flexible.

Tulsa Community College is an urban, multi-campus, two-year institution serving 20,000 students. The Religious Studies program is located on the Metro Campus, which serves approximately 6,500 students in downtown Tulsa. The program has one full-time faculty member and two crossover faculty members, one from History and one from Philosophy. It also employs a cadre of adjuncts.

In 1989-1990, the college developed a pattern of courses for students who wished to major in Religious Studies and printed it in the college catalogue. Semester after semester, we would put a course or two on the schedule, and semester after semester, no students would enroll. It took until the spring semester of 1991 for my first Religious Studies course "to make." Introduction to Religious Studies

finally made with four students. I called them "The Fab Four." Because the course was designed to be experiential and discussion based, we suffered mightily when a student or two was absent. The students were well aware of the dynamics and tried very hard not to miss class. Despite of the small number of students, or even perhaps because of it, the class was a very successful learning experience for both faculty and students.

The department began an active marketing campaign. It sent letters to all students who had declared a Religious Studies major to inform them of the program offerings. Oddly, the program had majors before long before any one enrolled in the first course. There were four majors in fall of 1990, three semesters before the first class of the discipline was taught. Faculty held open meetings during the fall semester where students could meet the faculty and discuss the Tulsa Community College Religious Studies program. The faculty was on hand to counsel students and to provide information about transfer to senior institutions in and around Oklahoma. The department provided refreshments, luring students with cookies and punch. The department held other meetings by invitation to targeted populations of students.

On the level of individual effort, faculty members designed fliers for specific courses to entice students. The college student newspaper was cooperative in printing articles about the courses and the program.

The following year saw a jump to 29 students in two courses. By the next year, 69 students were enrolled in one of four courses and ten students had declared Religious Studies as their major.

Encouraged by the success of the first classes to make in Religious Studies, we added two additional courses to the schedule for the spring semester, one at night and one during the day. We began to alternate day and night offerings of Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Scriptures during the fall and spring semesters. We offered Introduction to Religious Studies, the one absolutely required course for the major, during the day in the fall and during the night in the spring semester.

After several semesters of low enrollments in the scripture classes, we discovered that many students did not know to what the titles referred. Many expected that Hebrew Scriptures would be taught in Hebrew, not English; they did not recognize the title as referring to the Hebrew Bible, or that the Hebrew Bible was the same as the Old Testament for Christians. Many students did not recognize Christian Scriptures as referring to the New Testament. Obviously the nomenclature, though academically correct, was getting in the way of student enrollment. The courses were entitled with their more vernacular names: "Old Testament" and "New

Testament." Only one of these courses has had to be cancelled for low enrollment since the change of titles went into effect. Students know at a glance what course is being offered. Faculty members are still free to include non-canonical texts for study in these classes. By changing the names of two courses, both faculty and students benefited. The faculty has two more courses to teach regularly and students are comfortable signing up for courses where the titles describe to them at least the majority of the content.

The largest number of majors in the program has yet to exceed sixteen. Usually there are between ten and fifteen majors in any academic year. Most of these students wish to complete the Associate of Arts degree in Religious Studies at Tulsa Community College and then continue their studies in a senior institution. Many more have ministerial aspirations than academic ones, but there has been a noticeable shift towards academic goals in the last five years.

As the one full-time member of the Religious Studies faculty, I have done community outreach through letters and personal visits with local clergy. I regularly send notification of course offerings to the Christian and Jewish congregations that are proximate to our downtown Tulsa location. A few pastors have asked Tulsa Community College to provide credit courses off-campus at their churches. Their requests have been accommodated every time. The chairman of the Liberal Arts division and I take part in numerous local ecumenical and inter-collegiate scholarly groups. By doing so, TCC has been able to share resources with other entities. The Tulsa Jewish Federation has an Israeli scholar-in-residence program and it shares its scholars with us. Our participation in inter-collegiate groups has facilitated numerous articulation agreements through which to ensure the seamless transfer of our students to senior institutions. Additionally, these relationships have aided the success of student study abroad trips. Members of various faith communities have joined Tulsa Community College students, becoming students themselves, for trips to Israel and Greece.

The Religious Studies curriculum at Tulsa Community College includes the following courses: Introduction to Religious Studies; Religions of the World: The Eastern Traditions; Religions of the World: The Western Traditions; Old Testament; New Testament; Religion and Society; Religion in America; Christian Ethics and Social Thought; Religion in Film; Field Studies in Religion; and Selected Topics in Religious Studies. The International Language department offers Biblical Hebrew I and II, Biblical Greek I - IV, and Latin I - IV. The Philosophy Department offers Philosophy of Religion. In a semester there are usually 100 to 125 students enrolled in six to seven Religious Studies courses. In the summer semester the two Testament courses are offered, with an enrollment of around 35 students. Regular semester offerings are Introduction to Religious Studies; Religions of the World: Eastern and Western Traditions, alternating fall and spring; Old and New Testaments, alternating day and night, and fall and spring; Religion in America; Christian Ethics and Social Thought, fall; Religion in Film, spring. Religion and Society

and Philosophy of Religion are offered in the spring semester on alternating years. The language courses have small but steady enrollments. In the fall of 2001 there were 11 students in Advanced Biblical Greek and 6 students in Biblical Hebrew.

The experience at TCC has been that it was not until there were several course offerings per semester that students began to perceive of Religious Studies as an option. Obviously, most of the students who take Religious Studies courses are not majors, but simply fulfilling a general education distribution requirement. Somehow, a meager course offering, such as the case in the early years of our program, did not encourage students to enroll. But once there was a larger number of courses offered regularly and a certain critical mass of students who had successfully completed them, the numbers of enrollments began to grow. After all, the best marketing consists in courses well-taught and satisfied students. Many students who take one Religious Studies course will enroll in another Religious Studies course.

The Tulsa Community College Religious Studies program has hit a growth plateau over the last few years, so the present challenge is to reinvigorate the program and to stimulate its growth. The major difficulty the program faces is that Tulsa Community College is the only public institution of higher education in the state of Oklahoma that offers a Religious Studies degree. There is no public senior institution to which its majors can transfer and continue their Religious Studies interests through to a Bachelor of Arts degree. The state's major research institutions no longer have Religious Studies programs. There are some excellent denominational universities in the state, but they tend to be out of the price range of most community college graduates.

It has been a pleasure and a challenge to develop the Religious Studies program at Tulsa Community College over the last ten years. The initial inertia has been overcome and there are interesting courses and sufficient students to keep a modest program going. It is tempting to simply relax and enjoy the status quo. However, professional integrity demands that we push, prod, and pull an already good program to even higher levels of development. Perhaps that will be the story of the next ten years.