At the beginning of this academic year (2020-2021), we formed a committee (Seales, Freiberger, and Coleman Taylor) to work with Kevin Pluta, who is undergraduate advisor to RS, Classic, and Philosophy, to assess the current state of the RS Undergrad major and make proposed changes to increase the overall number of majors. Kevin's assessment is copied below. The committee also received input from Lisa Vera and John St. Lawrence.

**Current Major Status and Trends**

The overall number of RS majors has declined in the last ten years, from around 80 students to currently around 40 students. The RS minor has gained more students recently, now around 70 plus students.

One trend is that students are interested in combining RS with practical degrees, and many RS majors (50% in 2019) are double-majors.

Of these majors, many students express that they didn't realize they could relate the study of religion to their professional interests, until they took a particular course with an RS faculty. A common theme among these comments is that based on the name and description of the current RS major, they would not have chosen to major in RS. Many also do not discover RS until later in their time at UT. By the point, some are unable to double-major, even if they want to do that. Thus, they often add the RS minor to their studies.

Another trend is that the current RS major has particular bottlenecks in the way the Areas are structured in relation to the courses offered. Based on past offerings, there have not been enough courses to support Area I: Religions of Asia, for example. This contributes to a time to degree challenge for some students, who are unable to pursue the major because courses are not available to complete the requirements in order to graduate on schedule.

**Proposed Changes**

Based on these trends, the committee proposes to revise the current structure of the RS major, while adding two additional tracks within the Religious Studies department. These additional tracks will signal to students the range of approaches to the study of religion that may directly apply to their professional goals and overall interests. Note that all three tracks will be variations of the "Religious Studies" undergraduate degree. Religious Studies will remain the official degree designation that will be conferred to students on their transcripts. And they can designate the track of study on their resume, CV, or other materials they use to apply for jobs or graduate programs.

**Description of Changes**

All three tracks will include RS 310 Intro to Study of Religion, as well as a new course, RS 320 Intro to Research Methods, and the RS 375S Capstone course.

The current major will retain the same name, Religious Studies, as Track 1. It will be structured around two geographical area groups, combining Religions of Asia, since it can't survive by
itself, with Europe and the Middle East. And the second area will include Religions of Africa, African Diaspora, and the Americas to emphasize trans-Atlantic connections. It also will include a "Tools Course," from an approved list (This is a type of course that teaches students how to apply a research method for a course paper or project.) This track is designed to give students a comprehensive training in the discipline of Religious Studies. It is intended for students who would plan to pursue career options in Religious Studies, including graduate programs in the study of religion and/or in a theological or seminary setting.

Track 2, Global Interreligious Dynamics will build on the minor that Oliver Freiberger developed. It will include RS 307 Intro to Interreligious Dynamics, and be organized around two course lists for "Contemporary Interreligious Dynamics" and "Historical Interreligious Dynamics." This track is designed for students interested in the human encounters and exchanges across global religious traditions. It is intended for students who wish to develop skills applicable to careers that address conflict resolution, cultural and religious diversity, and civic life.

Track 3, Religion, Ethics, and Social Justice will also include a "Tools Course" and be organized around two course lists for "Religious Ethics and Moral Traditions" and "Human Rights and Social Justice." This track is designed to train students in applied methods in order to relate the study of religion to everyday concerns of ethics and justice in society. It is intended for pre-professional students interested in careers in medicine, law, social work, non-profits, community engagement, workplace equity, human rights, and democratic engagement.

Timeline

The deadline to submit major changes to the catalog is February 1, 2021. This process is open only every two years. The next opportunity to make changes will be in 2023.

For now, the primary goal it to set the base structure for the three tracks, in order to (1) signal to students the overall relevance of the Religious Studies undergraduate major to their intellectual interests and professional development; (2) make the major more feasible for undergraduates and more flexible for their program goals; and (3) give them more agency in developing their own coursework in the study of religion, which will be based in the RS department.

After this proposal is approved, we will return as a department to the details of the course lists for each track. These will need to be updated annually, and a committee will need to be established to maintain and update those lists.
KEVIN PLUTA ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT MAJOR
Undergraduate approach to the Religious Studies major

• We have four areas that a student must address:
  o Area I: Religions of Asia
  o Area II: Religions of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa
  o Area III: Religions of the Americas
  o Area IV: Approaches to the study of religion and comparative studies of religion

  o Students need at least one class in each area. One area is considered their primary area, and they need three classes in that area. Primary area is not noted on the transcript; it is just an administrative requirement.

• Nearly all of our majors focus on Area II (Europe, the Middle East, and Africa), with the other three areas treated as checkboxes on the degree plan
  o Religions of Asia has the lowest number of offerings (I think there is one course being offered in Spring 2021), so we are not going to win over any students who are primarily interested in Asian religions.
  o Religions of the Americas has a few offerings that overlap with the Core (History of Islam in the US, African American Religion, Native American Religions), so those will always be the primary focus of our majors. They also carry a CD flag, so that’s a triple-dip on a single class. Every other class in this area is going to have trouble with enrollments as a result. Our majors knock out their one Area III class and then head back over to Area II for the rest. So we need crosslistings and enticing flags to make these classes work.
  o Area IV (Approaches to the study of religion and comparative studies of religion) is normally filled up accidentally. If a major takes Intro to the Study of Religion, they fulfill Area IV as well as Core Social Science. Plus there are a few classes in Area IV that are consistent draws (most courses with the RS 373 number).

• Many of our majors are double majors, over 50% in Fall 2019. We have one of the highest percentages of double majors outside of the language departments. Anecdotally, it seems that a lot of these students have their ‘practical’ major, and want to tie in the sociological approaches that the RS major affords. A handful of these students are in CNS and crave some humanities to integrate with their other course of study (like Nishita).