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Math and Gospels

By Richard Escobales

As a longtime veteran of the Math Wars and as a member of the faculty at Canisius College for 37 years, I am concerned about core reductions that have taken place at Jesuit Colleges. I write as a graduate from the honors program of a Jesuit College, (St. Peter's College) in 1965 and as one who completed a Ph.D. in mathematics in August 1972 at the University of Notre Dame.

A traditional liberal arts core curriculum allows students who are often unsure about what major to pursue to encounter different disciplines at the college level. In that encounter they sometimes discover something totally alien to their previous experience, but something that they like and want to pursue for a lifetime. The remarkable upward mobility of so many graduates from Jesuit colleges and universities, including a former United States President, gives eloquent testimony to the effectiveness of the Jesuit education of forty years ago.

Although demands from accrediting bodies for some majors have forced some cutbacks in core courses, many of these cutbacks have been far too drastic. As a consequence, the emphasis on a broad educational experience has been dramatically diluted.

For example, some might argue that those education majors, not teaching mathematics or sciences that use mathematics extensively, should not be required to take two mathematics courses in college. Unhappily, these same education majors who received a reprieve from college level mathematics may later be making decisions as principals or as superintendents about what curriculum in school mathematics should be implemented. While their relative mathematical ignorance may not have adversely affected their own careers as administrators, inept curricular decisions following from that ignorance could hamstring generations of students and this nation's ability to compete in disciplines that use mathematics. This is one lesson that I learned from battles in the Math Wars.

Required study of a modern foreign or classical language was once a hallmark of Jesuit education. Unhappily, at many schools foreign or classical language study is no longer mandated. This requirement could work synergistically with study in other disciplines. The importance of language is especially apparent in biblical exegesis. For example, some familiarity with Greek would be important in doing some textual analysis of a Gospel.

Consider, for example, the Marcan redaction of Jesus walking

on water, Mark 6: 45-52. In Mark 6:50 Jesus utters the words "***I am***, be not afraid." The clueless disciples do not get the message. But later, when Jesus utters the identical words in Mark 14:62, "***I am***," their meaning is not lost on the high priest, who describes what Jesus says as "blasphemy (Mark 14:64)." In Genesis and Exodus the words "***I am***" express God's identity. And unless Jesus is God, this expression would be blasphemous.

The cutbacks in required courses in theology and philosophy are disservice to Catholic education, to the students who study at Jesuit Colleges, and to the nation. As a result many students who graduate from Jesuit Colleges will not have been forced to think about the meaning of the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures in a serious way. They will have been provided an education that leaves them intellectually and culturally deracinated from the rich Catholic intellectual tradition and as a result from the richness of western history. These graduates will be prime fodder for doctrines proposed by religious extremists.

I am desirous that students at Jesuit College learn something about other religions, but not at the expense of learning something about Scripture and something about Catholic teaching. To require three required courses in

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theology and religion is not excessive and could be structured to accomplish these ends.

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ne of the great joys of my life has been the contemplation of passages in the Gospels, especially

the Gospel of John. I view the canonical Gospels as four facets of a priceless jewel. Given the great accomplishments of biblical scholars of all faiths, it is heart-breaking to realize that students routinely graduate from Catholic colleges without that in-depth experience.

Clear thinking, once emphasized by a required course in logic is now history in some Jesuit schools, often replaced by some gentle genuflection to “critical thinking.”

One of the triumphs of the Catholic Church is its well-articulated positions on war and peace, social justice, and right-to-life issues

that might be addressed in a course in ethics. Unhappily, an ethics requirement is no longer mandatory in many Jesuit colleges and requirements in metaphysics have disappeared altogether.

I would also like some history requirements, some science requirements, a social science requirement, and a course in the arts. Happily, English requirements, writing and literature, are still preserved at most Jesuit colleges. ■

Richard Escobales teaches mathematics at Canisius College.



Students from Marquette University enjoy winter fun in the snow.