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Forum: Lessons Learned. Confessions of a Core War Bystander

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Forum

LESSONS LEARNED

CONFESSIONS OF A CORE WAR BYSTANDER

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Canisius College recently implemented a new core curriculum. For those of you who are about to embark on a core revision process I wish I could tell you that our new core emerged smoothly through an easy consensus on the part of a convivial and conciliatory faculty. I suppose it was a civil process, but only if you ignore the vicious name calling and backbiting that took place behind the scenes, or the barely controlled rage that lurked beneath the surface at heated senate sessions, faculty forums, group email interchanges, and numerous sub-committee meetings. This debate got personal.

There were many who chose not to get overly worked up or involved in the fray. I was one of them. But others entered it with great passion and there emerged a clear divide between mutually demonized parties that I will refer to in this essay as revisionists and traditionalists. The revisionist party believed the old core was overly large (twenty courses), that it lacked common learning goals (it did), and that it was difficult to assess (it was). Traditionalists, who uniformly ridiculed the assessment language of the revisionists, also argued that the revisionist enterprise would not only reduce the size of the core, but, by doing so, would also erode Canisius' commitment to the liberal arts and its Catholic and Jesuit identity.

In the end, a savvy slate of revisionist soldiers managed to get elected to the faculty senate and, as the loudly protesting remnant of traditionalist senators looked on in horror, they managed to carefully orchestrate the implementation of our new core, which took effect in the fall of 2009. Without a doubt, the new core is smaller and is more uniform. Instead of eight general studies courses, it contains only four foundational courses. Instead of twelve field studies courses scattered over vaguely defined area studies, it now contains seven "field of knowledge" courses with common learning goals. Instead of the vague hope that students will

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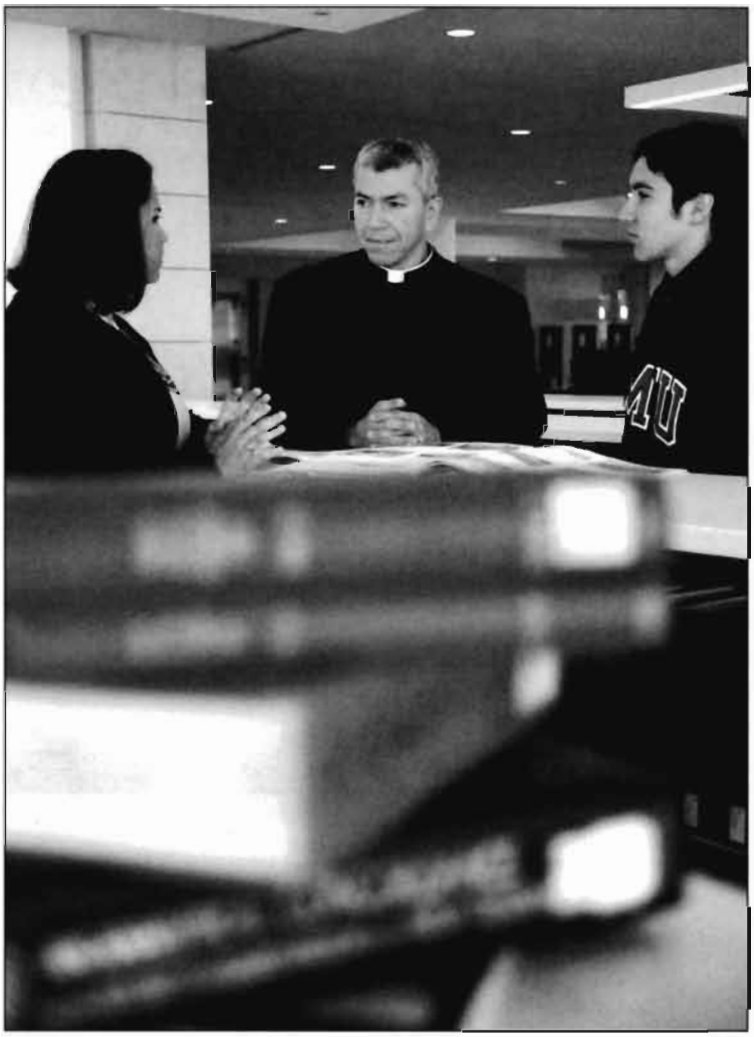
receive specific kinds of information or skills, the new core also requires six attributes attached to various courses with themes of justice, global awareness, diversity, ethics, oral communication and writing. Instead of six religious studies and philosophy courses, taught from various methodological perspectives, the new core reduces this requirement to four (two in each discipline) with common learning goals that emphasize the Jesuit and Catholic heritage of the college. And instead of a vague hope that our students will actually benefit from the core, its content is reemphasized again through an interdisciplinary capstone course taken toward the end of a student's college career.

The new core is still experiencing growing pains. Students are often confused when it comes to finding and counting up attributes, and the faculty are resistant to developing first year and capstone courses. Nevertheless, it is also showing signs of settling in and working. Beyond anything else, it is proving to be flexible and adaptable to a variety of majors. A student could conceivably take as few as twelve or as many as eighteen courses.

I did not exempt myself from this debate because of conflict aversion. In fact I believe that the conflict was overall productive. It revealed that, far from just research and publishing interests, most members of the faculty are deeply committed to teaching and learning and they offer diverse and very valuable opinions on the subject. This, of course, made the whole process that much more difficult and, obviously, not everyone was happy with the result. But despite the blood left on the battlefield, there was a very productive dialectic in this process and faculty and administrators, even those of us not directly involved, were forced to think carefully about what constitutes good teaching and learning at Jesuit institutions, and what our core says about our commitment to the liberal arts and our identity as a Catholic and Jesuit institution.

My concerns with the core revision process have to do with two fundamental questions that I came to ask repeatedly during our process. First, can any core curriculum, no matter how structurally perfect it is believed to be, fully achieve what core revisionists expect? Second, will the language and efforts to assess the core eventually re-fashion and erode what it means to be educated? I was often perplexed by a kind of core curriculum determinism that seemed to pervade our debates and that



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repeatedly reminded me that the no child left behind educational culture had fully entered higher education. This was particularly apparent when discussion turned to issues of so called graduation outcomes.

I came to believe that alongside the commendable effort to create a more manageable core was the desire to create a uniform and quantifiable body of knowledge and skills that over the course of four years would produce a crop of exceptional college graduates who, like products from the same mold, were measurably the same. These graduates would possess information literacy in a variety of disciplines, would have a common understanding of

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the Catholic and Jesuit heritage, and would be equally aware of global diversity and ethical imperatives that resonate with the best of the Catholic tradition. The new core at Canisius College is set up to produce and measure these and other learning goals and outcomes.

But I wonder about the extent to which revisionists actually believe that these outcomes are the substance of what it means to be educated? At some level do they believe if we just implement foundational courses, fields of knowledge courses, and attributes that, through informational acquisition and exams, the core will magically predestine our graduates toward qualitative excellence?

Try as we might the core is not and never will be like software. No matter how well we program it, there is no reason to believe that the graduates of 2012 will be quantitatively the same or qualitatively wiser than those who graduated in 2002. I can't help but think that this pedestalling of knowledge acquisition might be subtly substituting a part for the whole, an attempt to equate patterned, measurable informational outcomes with what it means to be educated. No revisionist I know actually said this. In fact they would typically respond to my concerns by assuring me that the core was not meant to be one-sided or deterministic and that measurable outcomes would never fully substitute for what it means to be educated. But I was troubled by the fact that this was articulated only when pressed. Measureable outcomes dominated this debate and any other notion of what it might mean to be educated ended up being conspicuous by its absence. Where will this lead? Our young children already attend schools that bow to the gods of assessment and teach for the test. Is this what is to come in higher education as well?

My reluctance to fully embrace our core revision process, however, was not grounded in a personal distaste for assessment. I believe we need to find ways to justify what we teach, how we teach it, and whether or not students get anything from it. But I strongly believe that education is also elusive—a complex and unpredictable process, and I think we need to emphasize and celebrate this. Students matriculate with different personalities, backgrounds, levels of curiosity, and aptitudes. Classroom experiences vary widely. They encounter professors who care about the core in greater or lesser degrees, and who in various ways are charismatic, opinionated, religiously oriented, agnostic, dull, and brilliant, along with many other human eccentricities.

No matter how hard we try to structure education along a uniform corpus of information, students take what they want and leave the rest. Beyond the details of any given subject, which they often forget after the exam, they learn just as much, and often more from experiences they have outside the classroom—with fellow students, at parties, through athletics, in campus ministry experiences, in international immersion opportunities, and through the various media of pop culture. When they graduate we hope we have helped them become better thinkers and writers, life- long learners, intensely interested in the ultimate questions about life and meaning, curious about the world, and committed to making it a better place. But we cannot accurately predict nor quantify this, no matter what we are obligated to provide for accreditation agencies. Wisdom, which I consider the mostly unseen, but hoped for outcome of a college education, is not reducible to a body of information. And we cannot presume that one particular core rather than another will produce such wisdom. Despite efforts to the contrary, I hope that this sort of education will always trump core determinism.

I emerged from our core wars believing that the new core amounted to a needed pragmatic adjustment. It will greatly help certain disciplines and majors meet their requirements without sacrificing the liberal arts curriculum. Its deliberate inclusion of Jesuit and Catholic learning goals probably made our commitment to the Mission and identity of the college more explicit. But this does not mean it is revolutionary. I suspect that in a decade or so, when my thoughts are turning to retirement, a younger generation of faculty will rise and insist on the need for another core revision that will better educate our students. This is the nature of higher education and its faculty who are constantly navigating the often turbulent waters between cultural expectations and the teaching and learning enterprise that constitutes actual education.

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Think Locally

James L. Wiser

Since the early 1970's I have either observed or participated in three attempts to revise the core curricula at two Jesuit universities. Two were implemented; one was not. What have I learned?

Lesson 1: Begin with the most difficult issues first.
In my view a successful core curriculum is one that fosters the learning, development, and transformational growth that we envision for our students. Given the ambitious nature of these goals, the difficulty of reaching a consensus regarding what it is that we actually wish for our students should not be surprising. In view of this the temptation might be to build incrementally by starting with those specifics about which there is agreement and save the big issues to the last; however that would be a mistake.

If the core is to cohere and be perceived by our students as more than a set of unrelated hurdles to be jumped, it must, in fact, build towards something. What that "something" is needs to be defined beforehand, provide discipline to the selection process, and establish the standards by which the results are assessed. Rather than reviewing specific courses and asking which are of such *intrinsic* value and canonical importance that they should be part of the shared learning experience of every student, one should instead require that the proposed courses be justified in essentially *instrumental* terms. How does the course achieve the ends we intend and how does it propose to demonstrate and assess those achievements? To do so, the ends or objectives of the curriculum must already be in place.

Lesson 2: Rely on the Mission
Efforts to revise the core are infamous undertakings in higher education. They are said to bring out the worst in the professoriate. Although one would be naïve to think that the protection of "turf" and petty institutional politics do not come into play, I believe that the difficult, time-consuming, and frustrating character of the process is due primarily to the serious, and in some sense fundamental, nature of the issues involved. For example, if one accepts that a Jesuit education seeks the betterment of the whole person, then our educational programs necessarily imply a certain understanding of the human good. The highly contested nature of our understanding of the human good — including debates as to whether such a reality even exists or, if it does, whether it can be known — all but guarantees a complicated discussion.

Inasmuch as the proper understanding of the human condition constitutes a perennial question of Western philosophy, it is unlikely that a compelling answer will be found within the context of an institution's curricular debate. How, then, can one achieve a working consensus about this and other issues of substance which will allow the process to continue? One way, I believe, is to move the conversation away from the realm of the metaphysical and towards the university's mission statement. These statements, if properly crafted, can provide direction and focus regarding how the traditions of a particular institution have elicited and sustained its understanding of the human good. In the end decisions regarding the core will be based upon assumptions – assumptions that can be justified pragmatically vis-à-vis the mission of the university rather than as hypotheses that are tested by an exercise in objective reasoning. Grounding "ultimate arguments" in the specifics of a particular mission statement may not satisfy the pure demands of the intellect, but it is sufficient for creating the core. These shared assumptions, informed by the mission statement can provide both the context and the discipline needed for a successful revision of the core.

Lesson 3: Think locally
The debate over the core is further complicated by the variety of attractive models available for our consideration. Included among these are:

1. Should the curriculum emphasize specific content,