Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 15 Article 4

4-1-1999

What We're Doing: A Survey of the Core Curricula of Jesuit Colleges and Universities

Richard H. Passon

What We're Doing

A Survey of the Core Curricula of Jesuit Colleges and Universities

RICHARD H. PASSON

In the summer of 1998, in response to a request from my friends on the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education, I put together a survey concerning the current state of the core curricula in the Jesuit colleges and universities. I sent the survey to the chief academic officers of the twenty-eight Jesuit institutions of higher education in the United States. My colleagues were remarkably cooperative: I had responses from twenty-seven of the twenty-eight colleges and universities, responses that included completed survey forms, catalogues, and, in a number of instances, special brochures on the core (or undergraduate general education requirement). What I learned was interesting and in many ways quite encouraging. I trust that the following summary will provide a useful context for the larger discussion that this issue of *Conversations* seeks to engage.

The survey form that I developed asked both quantitative questions about the general education requirements in the various schools and also some qualitative questions. I quizzed the respondents, for example, on unique features of their core, their rationale for the general-education requirements, and provisions that they had made to assess them. The statistical results were not very difficult to summarize (though I had to do some interpreting and adjusting of some of the survey answers), and they provide useful information. The qualitative results are somewhat more difficult to summarize, but they are in some ways more revealing. What follows, therefore, will have three major parts—a summary of the numbers, a summary of the answers to the qualitative questions, and then some general conclusions.

The Numbers

The core in the twenty-seven responding institutions is a significant part of the total undergraduate curriculum, both in terms of number of credits and number of courses. The mean for total credits was sixty; the mean

Richard H. Passon is provost and academic vice president at the University of Scranton, Scranton, Pennsylvania. He is a former member of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education.

for total courses was twenty. If one assumes that the entire baccalaureate curriculum is about 120 to 130 credits, and about forty courses, then the general education component of the undergraduate curriculum at most Jesuit schools represents about half of the total. This shows, at the very least, that most of our schools take the core pretty seriously.

The statistical breakdown of the core requirements is also interesting. The largest component by far is the humanities disciplines, and the most significant part of that component consists of the theology and philosophy requirements. Of the twenty courses in the average core curriculum, about half are in the humanities (ten), and about half of those (five) are in philosophy and theology.

The rest of the typical profile includes social science courses (two to three), natural science courses (two to three), mathematics courses (one to two), and skills courses, such as speaking and/or computing (two to three). Within the humanities, eighteen of the responding schools required either foreign language courses, or a competency in language. And about two thirds make some provision for the fine arts—usually one course.

It seems significant that the ranges of these various numbers across the twenty-seven responding institutions were pretty tight, both in the general totals and in the various areas.

The core curriculum in most of the Jesuit colleges, I have concluded, is usually some sort of modified distribution system, with a small number of specific courses required of all students, and a larger number required in various groupings from lists of approved courses. This seems to be particularly true in the social science and natural science groups. And in general terms the number of interdisciplinary patterns was relatively small.

About eighteen of the twenty-seven respondents had revised their general education system since 1990. Three or four schools are currently in the process of a core revision. More than half of the Jesuit universities have some form of a cultural diversity or global education requirement. This seems to be a common feature of the cores of those schools that have revised their curricula within the past few years. The second most common pattern of newer requirements would seem to be the addition of writing (or of writing-intensive) courses.

RATIONALE STATEMENTS ALMOST ALWAYS LINK THE CORE EXPLICITLY TO THE UNIVERSITY'S JESUIT IDENTITY AND TRADITION.

Qualitative Issues

On the qualitative side, it appears that most of the Jesuit universities have some kind of standing committee that is responsible for overseeing the core, for conducting periodic reviews, and for approving proposals for courses to satisfy various parts of the general education requirement. A fair number of the schools have faculty or staff members with the title of Director of the Core. Boston College, for example, has a faculty Director of the University Core Development Committee. Loyola University of Chicago has a Director of the Core Curriculum; Seattle University has a Director of the Core. In many of the other schools the core is directed by an associate or assistant dean.

At least two of the respondents report a good deal of specific attention paid to the appropriate characteristics of core courses. Boston College is one. The other is Marquette, which lists eighteen characteristics of a good core.

Practically all of the schools have written rationale statements for their general education requirements or cores. In some cases the statements are rather long, and incorporate specific statements of goals and objectives. Most significant, it seems to me, is that in just about all of these cases the rationale statement links the core explicitly to the university's mission statement and to its Jesuit identity and tradition. Marquette, for example, speaks of the core as a Jesuit legacy, and refers to it as "The Heritage."

While a majority of the responding institutions spoke of systems for assessing their core curricula, it is my observation that there were few universities with well-developed and elaborated schemes of assessment. Most talked about the task of assessment in rather general terms, a fair number spoke of just getting into the task of devising assessment plans. There were, however, notable exceptions. Boston College, for example, which revised its core in 1991, assesses its core at a number of different levels. And Detroit Mercy, as another example, seems to have a well detailed model. Regis, which is just beginning a core revision, has already begun to put together a plan for assessing student academic development.

What the previously cited survey of the numbers and their patterns did not reveal is that a small number of the Jesuit schools organize their general education requirements into thematic and topical patterns. Rockhurst, for example, speaks of three proficiency areas and seven "classical modes of inquiry", which include both "scientific causal" as well as "scientific relational." Seattle University divides its core into three "phases": Phase 1 is "Foundations of Wisdom"; Phase 2 is "Person in Society"; and Phase 3 is "Responsibility and Service." Santa Clara's core is organized around three themes, "Community," "Global Societies," and "Leadership."

Perhaps the most revelatory aspect of the survey was its identification of a number of innovative features embedded in the general-education requirements at many of the schools.

> Several of the schools have some variation of a senior capstone course. At Creighton, this interdisciplinary course is called "senior perspective." LeMoyne speaks of "senior seminars" in English or History, Philosophy or Religion; Seattle has a senior synthesis course; Fordham has a senior values seminar.
>
> A larger number of the colleges have some sort of freshman experience requirement—such as Scranton and Saint Joseph's —or option (Loyola, Maryland). Boston College has a freshman writing seminar; John Carroll puts a great deal of emphasis on the importance of its first year seminar, built around a common interdisciplinary theme. Both Scranton and Saint Louis created task forces to study the freshman year experience of their students.
>
> There are several interesting interdisciplinary approaches to philosophy and theology requirements. Xavier describes a program in Ethics, Religion, and Society, consisting of four integrated courses. Regis has core seminars organized around thematic courses linked to mission. I've already mentioned Fordham's senior values seminar. And Boston College's Perspectives and Pulse programs are pretty well known.
>
> Other interesting examples defy categorizing and grouping. Fairfield's diversity requirement features a "Diversity in American Society" course as well as one in non-western culture. Saint Joseph's mentions a service learning option. Santa Clara has a technology requirement. Detroit/Mercy has an ethics course designed specifically for engineers. Scranton has a computer and information literacy course which is offered by faculty librarians as well as computer sci-

ence and information systems faculty. Xavier calls its cultural diversity course, "E Pluribus Unum."

Conclusions

The following reflection on my own experiences with general education curriculum revision can provide some context for a few modest conclusions: In the early 1970s I was involved as a faculty chair of a curriculum committee in a rather radical revision of the core at the University of Scranton. The new general education curriculum then consisted of a very broad set of distribution areas; it was very flexible; it provided many options. Twenty years later I became involved as an administrator in another curriculum review and revision at Scranton. At this point we were concerned about the lack of coherence and integration, and we moved a few steps in the direction of a true core, with more specific course requirements and an attempt at a common experience, at least at the freshman level. In the 1970s we did what a lot of American colleges were doing by moving away from what we described then as a "lock step" core. In the 1990s, with most of the rest of the American colleges, we moved back.

In general terms, this seems to have been the case for most of the Jesuit colleges in the United States. The story for our schools for a long time, now, has been our desire to be part of the mainstream of American higher education. And we have followed this pattern in what we have done with our curricula as well. The frequency of cultural diversity requirements in the present set of Jesuit cores, as well as writing intensity requirements, supports this generalization.

That being said, there are some interesting differences which my amateur survey has uncovered. And those differences do serve to distinguish us in some ways from the rest of our American cousins.

For one thing, the general education curriculum among Jesuit colleges is a significant component of the entire undergraduate curriculum, on average occupying almost half of the courses. For another, the core in Jesuit colleges is based unequivocally on a heavy dose of the humanistic disciplines, and the clear signature part of the humanities component is the philosophy and theology piece.

Further, though on the whole there is not evidence in the Jesuit core curricula of a great deal of interdisciplinary work (with some exceptions), and though many of the folks responsible for the core curricula in Jesuit schools worry about insufficient integration and coherence, the work that has been done has focused heavily on Philosophy and Theology, especially on the area of values and moral choices. This is most often where the experimentation with new arrangements has taken place; this is the place in which coherence and integration has been thought most important.

Of course, what has been reported is rather modest, I will admit—no more than a good beginning. But it is a good beginning.

The most important conclusion I can make, and it is in many ways my reason for optimism, is that all of the Jesuit colleges and universities root their core curricula in their mission statements. All of the Jesuit schools see the core as an important reflection and affirmation of their Ignatian identity and heritage. And all seem to be working from that fundamental base. They all know that they have a long way to go to a full and complete curricular expression of their Jesuit mission, but none of them seems to have any doubt about the mission as the place to start.

This leaves some interesting questions for the future. For example, how will we assess our general education curricula to assure the kind of mission centeredness to which we all aspire? How will we connect our new cultural diversity interests to the Jesuit ideal of inculturation? How will we integrate the rich Jesuit pedagogical tradition into the ways in which core courses should be taught? How will we provide more complete patterns of coherence across the range of general education components? And how will we link the core to the major curricula, which are becoming increasingly professionalized and increasingly subject to external criteria and influence?