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The Dishonesty of “Cores Lite”

The Battle for a Truly Common Core

By D. R. Koukal

As a scarred veteran of a five year attempt to revise the core curriculum at the University of Detroit Mercy, I found the Fall 2010 “Core Wars” issue of *Conversations* a very worthwhile read. However, I was surprised at the omission of one major field of battle that centers around the following question: how to balance the programmatic requirements of professional schools with a robust core in the arts and sciences?

In my view, this question has bedeviled our efforts to revise the core at UDM, and I can’t imagine that it has not also challenged other Jesuit universities — especially since a good many of these universities have at least one (and often many) professional schools. In what follows, I want to explore the contours of this conflict, lay out exactly what is at stake for Jesuit education in this struggle, and to conclude with some suggestions that might ease these tensions in the service of retrieving a truly common core while still respecting the various constraints under which many professional schools must labor.

If Jesuit education was strictly about narrow vocational training, peace would reign over the land. However, the vast literature on Jesuit education makes it crystal clear that any undergraduate who attends a

Jesuit university has every right to expect that his or her “whole person” will be educated.

I understand this to mean that no matter the major chosen by any undergraduate, his or her horizons will be broadened by a core curriculum which brings students into meaningful contact with scholars from the humanities as well as from the natural and human sciences, so that these students may have a fuller sense of the intellectual, social, ethical and spiritual complexities of the world.

On the other hand, the moment a Jesuit undergraduate chooses a major, the “broadening” function of the core comes into conflict with the “narrowing” function demanded by specialization, which is required so the student may achieve competence in a specific field.

This conflict is intensified by professional programs that must meet stringent accreditation requirements, and is exacerbated further by programs that are credit hour-inten-

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sive. This, in turn, puts pressure on the number of credit hours required for graduation, as well as the number

of electives allowed by various programs. Professional schools have to put much effort into navigating these various demands, and so their administrators are understandably reluctant to make programmatic adjustments that could accommodate a stronger

A “dishonest practice”

core. Furthermore, in an increasingly corporatized academia, the relatively major-poor humanities are perceived as “getting in the way” of the “revenue-producing” professional schools. The net result of all this is that great pressure is put on the core to shrink, or to at least not grow in size.

A good number of Jesuit schools have dealt with this pressure by embracing multiple core curricula. As part of our committee’s work at UDM, we surveyed the cores of the Jesuit institutions most similar to us in size and programming. What we found is that all of these schools — including UDM — have a definitive “university core” that is front-and-center and loudly touted as being central to each institution’s mission. But upon digging just a little deeper into these school’s websites, we discovered that each professional school within these institutions has its own “derivative” core tailored to their own programmatic needs. This dishonest practice severely

Talking Back

undermines any claim that a common general education is fundamental to any of these institutions.

The picture grows even more disturbing when one delves into the details of these various “cores lite.” One strategy employed by some

These practices subvert the purpose of Jesuit education.

schools is to simply waive university core requirements for their majors. For example, at one university, engineering, biology, chemistry and biochemistry students are simply exempted from the social science requirement in the university core. Another strategy is to “flood” a distributive part of the university core with a programmatic requirement that squeezes out other core options. For instance, at one school, business students are required to take three economics courses at the expense of possible core courses in psychology, sociology or political science. A third strategy is to waive disciplinary competencies. This is seen most often in the way many professional programs satisfy an institution’s ethics requirement. Here, as often as not, courses narrowly concerned with professional standards are passed off as courses in general ethics, and are taught not by ethicists, but by practitioners with at best a layperson’s grasp of ethical theory.

Yet another strategy is to compel students to fulfill core requirements by taking courses relating only to their major field of study. For example, at another school, under a university core element titled “Contemporary Social Problems,” where one might expect all students to engage encompassing matters of

social justice like poverty and racism, I found that some undergraduates are instead required to take classes like “Recent Advances in Biochemistry Related to Social Issues” and “The Professional World of Work.” Finally, and closer to home, one of my professional colleagues cavalierly told me that in her college, if a core-required course stood between a student and graduation, it was not unusual for the course to be waived.

This is a far from exhaustive list of examples, but it is sufficient to make this general point: all of these practices subvert the broadening function of the general education promised by the Jesuits, and as a consequence turn out students who are less “well rounded” than others — in some cases, considerably less so. If Jesuit education is truly about educating not only professionals but also persons, these practices raise at least two uncomfortable questions. First, why are some students at Jesuit universities regarded as less worthy of having their *whole* person educated? And second, if these are standard practices at our universities, then why should our parents pay significantly more for their children’s college education when virtually the same education can be had at a considerably lower cost at the local technical school? These questions cut to the very essence of the Jesuit educational tradition.

The first step in attempting to remedy this situation is to reaffirm that *both* professional *and* general education are equally important in Jesuit universities, and that on the grounds of academic excellence the integrity of each must be respected. What follows from this is that the requirements of professional programs do not automatically trump the requirements of a strong core for every undergraduate. Indeed, since professional accreditation is tied to curricular content rather than the number of credit hours in a program, there is potentially more “wiggle room” within professional programs to accommodate a strong and truly common core than is typically admitted. This, in turn, would require the chief academic officers of our universities to bring the deans of every academic unit to the table in order to facilitate the implementation of a common core, once the faculty responsible for teaching the core have created it.

I suspect that many will consider a common core to be impossible to achieve in our now Balkanized institutions, but my scrutiny of these multiple cores has revealed to me that many Jesuit universities are closer to a common core than is often imagined. I do concede the difficulty of this task, but I believe that with good faith and the spirit of compromise, creativity, and most importantly, a fixed and resolute focus on the Jesuit educational mission, it can be achieved. The grim alternative, in my view, is the continued slow erosion of the unique contribution the Jesuits have made to higher education over the last four and a half centuries, with the sad result that for a good many of our students, their education will be Jesuit in name only. ■

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