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How Jesuit Stars Can Win the Core Wars

By Justin Daffron, S.J.



Jesuits from Saint Peter's College.

My imagination was formed in the 1970s in part by the film *Star Wars*. So, as I started to read the Fall 2010 issue of *Conversations*, I began to wonder how we might permanently harness the *force* to be used for the good so that our students win in the Core Wars. Who wants the dark side to win: turf battles, wasted resources, disenfranchised students and frustrated faculty?

Having completed a research study on the core curriculum at the 28 schools of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU), I have also approached the topics addressed by the 36 contributing authors through the lens of my own survey data collected from 266 Jesuit faculty and administrators working at these Jesuit institutions in the United States. I offer three tactics, grounded in my research.

Tactic 1: Put the Best Faculty Teaching in Core Courses

Students emerge as winners when they have the opportunity to engage with excellent faculty in their core courses. In the *Star Wars* trilogy, Jedi Master Yoda was an excellent teacher and he imparted to Luke Skywalker the basics so he would need to be able to learn on his own. The core curriculum needs to do the same.

The majority of students who earn degrees from Jesuit institutions remember little from the disciplinary specific

Talking Back

knowledge they were exposed to during their core courses; however, they do remember the teachers who challenged them to develop a love for learning. The majority of core courses are often those that students take simply “to get them out of the way” so they can focus on their major courses. The faculty member who is able to inspire a young adult through excellent teaching, scholarly expertise, and creative pedagogy will engender a love for learning that transcends any one discipline. It is this type of Jedi Master Yoda faculty member who is essential to the success of the core curriculum.

Threats to this tactic include the number of adjuncts teaching in the core, the quality of instruction, competing demands for faculty time, and a lack of resources for on-going faculty professional development. The best faculty will need to address these issues to assure that the *force* is harnessed for the good.

Tactic 2: Stay True to the Tradition

Students win when they have the opportunity to engage with a curriculum that is uniquely Jesuit Catholic.

Each core curriculum is different, and from this we see that Jesuit institutions can share a common history and future vision while maintaining distinctive academic programs that allow each institution to offer a unique approach to Jesuit education. The era of a prescribed curriculum that all Jesuit institutions must follow is undesirable in our day. At the same time, the renewal of Jesuit education, initiated by Father Pedro Arrupe in 1973, re-positioned the purpose of Jesuit education towards justice. The trajectory towards justice has remained one of the most important aims of Jesuit education throughout the world. The connection between justice related themes and the goals of the core curriculum is explicitly drawn

at 16 of 28 Jesuit institutions. Explicit connections with the core and justice will continue, but there is no single method to accomplish this aim.

ore requirements within philosophy and theology have historically served as a disciplinary context for much of the justice related subject matter and have been a distinguishing element of the core curriculum at Jesuit institutions. Jesuits working at AJCU institutions closely connect their own satisfaction with the core curriculum with their perception of the quality of the philosophy and theology courses. Given the important role theology and philosophy play in the curriculum, further research into the type of theology and philosophy appropriate for the today's undergraduate students will be essential. The aim of this research would not be to narrowly define a curriculum but rather to investigate how philosophy and theology can become a foundational component to student learning.

Some institutions, like Boston College's PULSE program, have made significant headway in developing academic programs for philosophy and theology that are relevant to today's college students and therefore should be studied for the benefit of other Jesuit institutions.

Some of the threats to this tactic include a lack of understanding of the

mission of Jesuit higher education, a lack of appreciation for the liberal arts, a lack of belief that a distinctively Jesuit Catholic core curriculum can be developed, and the fear that a specifically Jesuit Catholic center to the core will limit academic freedom.

Tactic 3: Properly Resource the Core

Students win when they have the opportunity to engage with a curriculum that is more than a set of disconnected courses aimed at completing a certain amount of credit hour requirements.

The core curriculum cannot exist solely as the majority of course work that a student will take during her first two years of study. If the core remains disconnected from the rest of a student's experience—his or her campus activities, work, community involvement, major studies—it becomes insignificant and a burden. The core curriculum will be strengthened for students when high-impact learning experiences, including service learning, research, cross-cultural experiences, integration of classroom and out of class learning, and capstone projects are part of its structure.

Threats to this tactic include a lack of understanding of an integrated approach, a lack of financial support for an integrated learning experience, and a lack of administrative support to assist faculty in developing high-impact learning activities and assignments in their courses.

Throughout the history of Jesuit education, the best faculties have consistently been able to grapple with the challenges of their day to assure that needs of their students were served. May the force be with you! ■

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