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Forum: Lessons Learned. Think Locally

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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,

e.g. the “great books” or should it focus upon the development of critical analytical skills and the mastery of methodologies?

2. Within those curricula which do emphasize content how much weight should be given to the achievements of Western civilization and how much to the riches of a more multicultural, pluralistic, and global perspective ?
3. Should the core curriculum build upon the established disciplines, or should it focus upon interdisciplinary attempts to deal with themes and problems which transcend any single field?
4. Should the core offer a limited number of common courses taken by all students, or should it provide an elective menu of offerings which addresses a wide variety of topics within selected areas?

Given the legitimate alternatives, how does one decide? *The answer, I believe, is to think locally.* One should not attempt to create *the* core for some generalized or abstract “student body” at some “ideal” university. Rather the question should be “Given our students, their levels of academic preparation, and their socio, economic and demographic profiles, what curriculum is the most appropriate for them?”

I believe the answer would be different for an urban school whose students are economically and socially diverse, less well prepared academically, and likely to be among the first from their families to attend college than it would be for a residential school with a more homogeneous, advantaged, and established student body. For example, a meaningful Theology core for a school where 92 percent of its students are Catholic/Christian would most likely be different from one at a school where the corresponding number is 46 percent.

Just as our students differ from one another so too do our faculties. A university faculty that is expected to support a large number of Ph.D and advanced professional programs and at the same time is responsible for securing external research support differs from a faculty that is focused primarily on undergraduate education. Depending upon the nature of the programs they are expected to serve faculties at different institutions have differing sets of responsibilities, expectations, and working conditions. To develop a core curriculum without acknowledging the special character of the faculty, which is responsible for offering it, is to base a program upon an abstraction. Thus just as an institution must consider whom it is teaching so too must it consider who are its teachers. The “right core” depends to some extent upon the particular gifts, strengths, and character of the faculty who will deliver it.

James L. Wisner is the former provost of the University of San Francisco.

FROM PLATO TO THE SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS

One-dimensional justice is not good enough.

Robert M. Senkewicz

I had the privilege of serving as director of the core curriculum at Santa Clara University for eight years. During that period, our core consisted of thirteen required areas. Some of them, such as composition and rhetoric, western culture, ethics, and religious studies, were relatively traditional. Others, such as world cultures and societies, reflected the broadening of global perspective which has occurred in American universities over the past few decades. Still others, such as technology and society, owed their existence to our location in Silicon Valley.

As its designers realized from the beginning, this core was far from perfect. It was replaced at the beginning of this academic year by another set of core requirements, which attempt to offer students a more interdisciplinary perspective, and whose design, both for better and for worse, reflects the current emphasis upon student outcomes and assessment. But my experience with what we now call our “old” core suggests to me some thoughts which I think might have some validity for existing and new cores as well.

1. Trust the Faculty

One of the most impressive aspects I witnessed was the enthusiasm and creativity of our faculty in embracing the core and in experimenting how various core requirements might creatively intersect with their own disciplines. By the conclusion of my term as director, over 300 faculty were teaching almost 800 distinct courses which satisfied one or other of our core requirements. Faculty enthusiasm to develop new courses which might satisfy the core was uniformly high and the results were often unexpected and impressive. I occasionally wondered, for instance, what was contained in one of our courses, entitled “The Joy of Garbage,” which satisfied a natural science requirement, but I consistently heard from students that it was a demanding and rigorous, as well as joyful, experience. Also, a good number of faculty in the profes-