Forum: Lessons Learned. Taking the High Road

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TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

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In addressing the question — what have I learned from working with the core — I’ve chosen to focus on the process of the revision of the core curriculum (some folks call it “reform”). In my forty-five years in higher education I’ve worked at three Jesuit universities: the University of Scranton, Creighton University, and Saint Joseph’s University. And I’ve been involved in a variety of ways with the core revision process four times — twice at Scranton and once each at Creighton and Saint Joseph’s.

My role in curriculum revision was a bit different each of these times. In my early years at Scranton, for example, I was the faculty chair of a committee charged with rewriting a general education curriculum that had not been changed for many years. At Creighton, where I was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, I initiated a faculty review of the core and ultimately accepted the results of a faculty deliberation.

At Saint Joseph’s, where I was the VPAA, I worked with the dean of arts and sciences in an attempt to promote a review and revision of what was called the GER (general education requirement) — a venerable and much revered institution of “the College.” We were largely unsuccessful in my view, through a few small changes were made. Back at Scranton, in the position of provost, I reminded the faculty senate that we had made a commitment at the last Middle States self-study to revise the general education curriculum, which was fundamentally the same structure installed by the committee I’d chaired in 1970. I then watched several faculty groups attempt to complete the job, with a fair amount of hassle with the faculty union. After the unsuccessful faculty vote, after which faculty leaders threw up their hands and asked not to be involved further, I attempted to rescue the process with the help of the deans and departmental chairs. The faculty senate — and then the board of trustees — ultimately approved a slightly revised version of the faculty effort.

What conclusions do these various — and varied — experiences suggest? First, I’m tempted to say that one should never expect to revise the core unsathed. I’ll say, instead, that the most significant thing I’ve learned is that revising the core is a complex and difficult process.

It is difficult to do well — indeed, difficult to do at all — because the process inevitably becomes politicized. Rather than being an opportunity for a university to clarify what it wants its students to learn, GE revision very frequently becomes a turf battle about gaining — or, especially losing — courses.

It’s easy to see why such a problem almost always occurs. Faculty members are, quite rightly, concerning about keeping their jobs and growing and developing their departments. Many departments have a large stake in core requirements. The prospect that a requirement might be reduced — or dwindled into a mere distribution — can seem to strike at a fundamental area of faculty self-interest.

Of course faculty folks, when they’re deliberating core modifications, don’t say that their self-interest is threatened. They say that academic values are at stake, that educational principles might be compromised, and that the institutional mission is threatened.

But have I learned anything positive about the core revision process at three Jesuit universities in forty-five years? Perhaps. Now that I’m an emeritus professor I’m reminded of something from my days as a relatively young faculty curriculum reformer. The key to doing a good job is to unleash the creative energies of the community and to engage faculty folks on the high road. And the only way to do that successfully is somehow to alleviate fears, which means achieving the proper focus.

The way to take the core out of the realm of turf warfare is start the process with the correct focus, by reminding those involved that a core is a way for a present faculty to express present beliefs about what present students should learn so that the University’s mission can be appropriately fulfilled in the present. That means that you’d start by flogging the old general education requirement. You begin by re-imagining what the University should be about academically — now and into the future. That also means that faculty get to reinvent their stake in a new core.

So, does this mean that revising the core can be stimulating, creative, and interesting — in short, fun — rather than bruising and debilitating. Yes, it does. Too often, in the past, it hasn’t been fun. But, then, we are people of faith.

By the way, ask me some time about what all this has to do with educational objectives and — groan — assessment.

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