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Student Pieces: A Call for Intellectual Boldness

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A Call for Intellectual Boldness

By Andrew Dwulet

In a strict sense, a core is a common set of courses required of all undergraduates; but at many universities, including Georgetown, it translates to a common set of distribution requirements. Two philosophies, two math/sciences, etc. In truth, it is not much of a common core. I think it is, however, a system designed to serve as the base recipe for a balanced liberal arts foundation and the point of entry for future intellectual pursuits.

Whether the core curriculum achieves these aims, however, is open to debate. Many Georgetown students and professors actually believe the answer is a resounding no. In March 2007, a committee of ten professors and three administrators delivered an “intellectual life” report after fifteen months of self-assessment. The picture it painted was overwhelmingly negative. Georgetown was nowhere near where it wanted to be in cultivating a vibrant intellectual culture or delivering a spirit of academic boldness and strong independent learning.

These conversations about intellectual life and culture are deeply connected to the structure of the core, whether it is a common set of courses or a distribution system. In fact, I think it is the most important factor in shaping intellectual life. It is the face of the university to new students about what learning looks like. It molds the trajectory of further academic pursuits. And it is a profound, if nuanced, statement about what higher education should be.

My experience has been unique. I participated in the Liberal Arts Seminar, a nine-credit, two-semester program for 30 freshmen in Georgetown’s College of Arts and Sciences. It is a 42-year-old tradition, based on an interdisciplinary study of literature, history, philosophy, and theology. For me, the program was outstanding. When I reflect back on what made it special, I think about the exemplary professors and the vigor of class discussions. But in many ways, it was as much about structure as anything else. It was a common pursuit, a common set of readings, shared for one year by the same 30 students. This program is no way the “answer” for a university at-large, but there is something really valuable in this, the raw makings of a vibrant intellectual community.

The face of the university

So, I offer two thoughts, based only on the experiences of an outgoing senior. First, universities should give a hard look towards integrating something like this common seminar experience into their broader core curricula. Bringing an entire class of undergraduates into a truly shared academic experience — and perhaps for a full year — could be highly effective in building intellectual life. Columbia University and the University of Chicago are two of the few elite universities that maintain a true core, a simultaneous examination of the same key texts and questions from different perspectives. It is the spirit, and not necessarily the precise model, that should be considered.

I also have a unique perspective on these issues as a reporter and editor for The Hoya, Georgetown’s newspaper of record. I have covered the development of the intellectual life report, edited opinion pieces about what professors and students believe a curriculum should look like, and spoken at length with our provost about this very topic. From many of these discussions, and from evidence gathered in the intellectual life report, it appears evident that the strength of independent learning and innovation at Georgetown is a cause for concern.

A modern university needs to cultivate and foster a spirit of intellectual boldness, both inside and outside of traditional academic bounds. I believe a common core course for freshmen, centered on the formation and execution of an innovative research project, could be immeasurably valuable. Its orientation would not really matter; it could be a project of scientific ingenuity, experimenting with something new, it could be a small contribution to one’s liberal arts discipline, or it could be something entirely unique. The scale would certainly be small, but igniting this spark in students from the beginning might make it more than worthwhile. And I personally think that is what intellectual growth is really all about.

Andrew Dwulet, former editor of The Hoya, is a 2010 graduate of Georgetown University.