

TRENDS IN GENERAL EDUCATION AND CORE CURRICULUM: A SURVEY

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Introduction: Canadian and American Perspectives

At present, very few Canadian universities have general education or core curriculum programs comparable in ambition and scope to the various models which American colleges and universities have introduced in the past twenty years. Where such programs do exist in Canada, they are most often options, in effect alternatives to conventional departmental majors, not requirements that must be met by all students (McMaster's interdisciplinary Arts and Science program is an example). Some Canadian universities offer special first-year seminar courses designed to introduce students to university-level studies, but again these are generally options. Most Canadian universities include breadth or distribution requirements of some sort in their programs, but allow students considerable latitude in selecting the courses needed to fulfil them. The University of Toronto's requirement, that students in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences must complete at least 1.0 full course equivalent from each of the three academic divisions, is fairly typical.

On the other hand, a great many American colleges and universities have developed substantial and often highly structured core curricula in recent years. Exact numbers are difficult to come by, but one major survey published in 1991 found that over 200 colleges and universities had undertaken significant expansion of their core or general education programs (Gaff and Wasescha, 52). This trend has continued throughout the 90's, particularly in the Ivy League: many of America's leading research-based institutions have implemented (or are currently in the process of implementing) major curricular changes, thoroughly overhauling their core and general education requirements. Princeton redesigned its program in 1995, Stanford in 1996, and Duke is in the midst of the process right now (Erindale faculty should find Duke's Curriculum 2000 Plan interesting to compare with our First Year Task Force Report). These changes are not new, untried innovations, but rather a revival or revitalization of traditional university values. The process is not an easy one--in some instances faculty and institutional resistance to change has prevailed--but the literature indicates clearly that the rewards of successful program renewal are worth the effort.

Most colleges and universities in the U.S. (and in Canada, for that matter) have had substantial general education or core programs in the past, but by the 1970's most such programs were moribund. During the 60's, structured program requirements at institutions throughout the Western world were cut or greatly loosened in response to ideological pressures to liberalize higher education and give students more freedom of choice (pressures perhaps best represented in Ontario by the Hall-Dennis Report); during the 70's the trend was to emphasize vocational and professional preparation, eroding what was left of core programs still further (Gaff, 12).

The pendulum began to swing back in the United States beginning in the late 70's. In 1977 appeared the influential *Missions of the College Curriculum* by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which drew attention to the fragmented, incoherent state of the undergraduate curriculum and called for the revival of core and general education programs. At roughly the same time, Harvard embarked on a much-discussed and widely-imitated renewal of its core curriculum. These and other

related events ushered in a period of intense debate on the issue, which books such as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* (1991) eventually put on the bestseller lists. All these developments were based on a growing recognition in both university faculties and the public sphere of such demonstrated trends as students' declining levels of general knowledge and analytical skills, changes in the demographics of the student population, and challenges to the traditional curriculum from such perspectives as feminism and multiculturalism. Faculty dissatisfaction with the condition of the learning environment led many institutions to try to restore earlier curricular models and the values they embodied.

Today Canadian universities are at the point their American counterparts were at twenty or so years ago. If we want to consider the possible benefits of a core curriculum, we are fortunate in being able to draw upon the increasingly substantial research literature on the subject. This document is a brief overview of that literature, intended to supply information that may facilitate UTM discussions of the First Year Task Force proposals; it is only a survey, however, not an exhaustive study. As well as drawing upon the available literature, it provides hypertext links to the Web sites of various American colleges and universities. Most of these are major research-based institutions comparable to the University of Toronto, but some are small liberal arts colleges that are nationally recognized (and widely cited in the literature) for excellence in undergraduate education.

The Rewards of Building Consensus

The American colleges and universities that have made the most ambitious and extensive curriculum changes have registered the greatest gains: a stronger sense of institutional identity, , greater faculty satisfaction, increased enrolment (particularly of high-quality students), significantly higher levels of student retention and performance, and an improved public profile, often reflected in more success in fundraising (Gaff, chapters 4 and 5 passim). While recognizing this, it is important not to downplay the difficulty involved, and the potentially damaging side-effects if the process is not well-managed. Ideally, curriculum renewal is "a community-building process" (Gaff and Wasescha, 59), but at many institutions it has left faculty deeply divided and embittered, even when the changes themselves have been highly successful; tensions between faculty and administration may also be made worse by conflicts arising from the renewal process (Kanter, Gamson, and London, 126-27).

Developing (or revitalizing) a core curriculum is usually a lengthy, difficult, and complex process. The American experience is that the average (median) time it takes is 2.5 years from initiation to implementation (Kanter, Gamson and London, 48). It can take considerably longer, of course: Harvard's reforms began in 1975 with the establishment of a Task Force on the Core Curriculum; the Task Force delivered its Report in 1978, and the new curriculum was developed and phased in over a four year period from 1979 to 1983. That the process takes significant time and effort should not be surprising, because it involves reaching an institutional consensus on the entire range of curricular and pedagogical issues, from the general philosophy of education to the minutiae of course requirements: program goals, degree requirements, structure of departmental majors and minors, course content, skills requirements, teaching and counselling techniques, assignment and test design, and methods and standards of assessment. Later on, it involves faculty development for the design of new courses, and it requires follow-up in the form of ongoing evaluation to ensure that the goals of the program are met. The registrar's office (especially high school liaison), student counselling staff, and other support services also need to be part of the process, to help students cope with the changes and to explain the

program to the institution's wider community.

The literature indicates that colleges and universities that have revitalized their core programs successfully and relatively painlessly have done so because they have recognized and accepted the inevitable conflicts involved, and made a concerted effort to arrive at the necessary compromises via an open and collaborative design process. There is, as one might expect, evidence that a "top-down" renewal process (i.e. one mandated and driven by the administration alone, or forced on the institution by government, accreditation bodies, or other external agents) is less likely to succeed. (Kanter, Gamson, and London supply a number of detailed case studies of reform efforts, both successful and disappointing; for an insider's account of Harvard's process, see Keller.)

Setting Program Goals

Most institutions have initiated the process by discussing the purpose of undergraduate education in the broadest sense, in effect re-examining the natures and roles of the basic components of the undergraduate program (major concentrations, electives, and general education requirements). Many participants in this process attest to its value; a common observation is that many faculty had never talked to their colleagues in other departments or divisions about such fundamental matters. Three key questions are involved:

What should graduating students know?

What skills should they have?

What values should they share?

The first two questions are perhaps obvious enough, but the attention given to the third in the literature may surprise some Canadian academics. Higher education in the United States has long been conceived in terms of inculcating the values of citizenship (Ratcliff, 141-42); in addition, many colleges and universities in the States are strongly sectarian. Even in the Canadian context, however, some discussion of the values implicit in the goals of the undergraduate curriculum is probably necessary, even inevitable.

The Harvard Task Force Report's statement of general program goals is worth quoting here as a good example of the outcome of this process (and a very influential one):

1. An educated person must be able to think and write clearly and effectively.
2. An educated person should have achieved depth in some field of knowledge. Cumulative learning is an effective way to develop a student's powers of reasoning and analysis, and for undergraduates this is the main role of concentrations.
3. An educated person should have a critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain and apply knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves. Specifically, he or she should have an informed acquaintance with the aesthetic and intellectual experience of literature and the arts; with history as a mode of understanding present problems and the processes of human affairs; with the concepts and analytic techniques of modern social science; and with the mathematical and experimental

methods of the physical and biological sciences.

4. An educated person is expected to have some understanding of, and experience in thinking about, moral and ethical problems. It may well be that the most significant quality in educated persons is the informed judgement which enables them to make discriminating moral choices.

5. Finally, an educated American in the last third of this century cannot be provincial in the sense of being ignorant of other cultures and other times. It is no longer possible to conduct our lives without reference to the wider world within which we live. A crucial difference between the educated and the uneducated is the extent to which one's own life experience is viewed in wider contexts.

(quoted in *The Great Core Curriculum Debate*, 7-8;

[click here](#) for a more detailed version and explanation on Harvard's Web site)

Harvard's program goals are clearly an update of the traditional ideal of the liberal arts education; variations on these themes can be found in the majority of rationales for the core curriculum. Most Ivy League institutions have goals very similar to Harvard's, with minor differences of emphasis here and there (Columbia, for example, adds familiarity with classical music to the usual list of desiderata). Some institutions add certain themes in the area of skills, such as familiarity with computer technology. Many also specify demonstrated competence in a foreign language and fulfillment of a physical education requirement.

Many institutions have found it helpful to produce a set of explicit criteria for core courses--in effect a course development handbook--once they have determined their general program goals; such a document helps to ensure that the core courses, once implemented, remain consistent with the program goals, and do not revert to being conventional departmental offerings (Kanter, Gamson, and London, 69-70).

Forms of Curriculum

While the goals of the core curriculum at various colleges and universities have a good deal in common, there is enormous variance in the structure of the programs designed to meet them, beginning with the actual size of the core requirement (i.e. the percentage of the degree program it represents). At most American four-year colleges and universities the core amounted to approximately 1/3 of the undergraduate program in the mid-1970's (*Missions of the College Curriculum*, 123-24 and 181-83). This is still widely the case (although here again precise numbers are hard to come by); the changes implemented by most institutions have made their cores more rich, more structured, and more rigorous, not necessarily larger. Institutions which have expanded their core requirements have generally done so at the expense of the elective component of the program. At some Ivy League universities (Harvard for one), the core is fairly small, amounting to roughly one-quarter of the degree program; at others it represents the standard one-third (Princeton and Dartmouth, among others); at a few it amounts to as much as 50% (this is the case at Chicago, which has traditionally placed great emphasis on its core program). Cores as small as the one proposed for UTM are relatively rare. Issues of breadth and depth of coverage, as well as achieving ambitious program goals, are clearly important factors here. (It should be noted that at most American

research-based universities the major itself represents only about one-third of the undergraduate program, and sometimes less; at Cornell, for example, it is only one-quarter of the total program--half of the courses taken in the last two years of study, no more. Developing a core necessarily entails rethinking the major.)

The majority of American institutions do not have a "true" core, i.e. a series of courses which are obligatory for all students: one study found that that form was used at less than 10% of the 322 colleges and universities it surveyed (Hurtado, Astin, and Dey, 155). Where a true core is required, it often takes the form of a sequence of thematically-focussed interdisciplinary courses (see full description below). It is worth noting that the idea of core courses involving all the disciplines in a single division, of the sort currently proposed at UTM, receives relatively little support in the literature--in fact it is scarcely discussed at all. (To do the Task Force proposal justice, it says nothing specific about the form or content of the three proposed divisional courses). The literature supports the idea of interdisciplinary courses, but indicates that these generally concentrate at least as much on building bridges between divisions as within them (bringing together History, Sociology, and Biology, for example, as well as History, Philosophy, and English). Institutions with the longest experience developing interdisciplinary programs, such as the oft-cited pioneer in this field, Evergreen State College, have found that a tightly-focussed thematic approach best achieves the goal of a coherent and integrative educational experience.

Most institutions rely on some form of distribution requirement for their core, and such requirements come in many forms. As already noted, the changes of recent years have involved tightening the requirements, making them more specific, and developing new forms of courses and methods of assessment to make them achieve program goals more effectively. The available evidence supports these efforts, suggesting that the best outcomes for students are achieved neither by a true core nor by a loose distribution approach, but by distribution requirements involving a carefully structured set of options, i.e. a selection from "discrete arrays of coursework" (Jones and Ratcliff, 98).

A number of general characteristics of core programs and courses have been identified as particularly desirable and effective. The literature indicates that the greatest benefits are experienced by those institutions that implement these as widely as possible (i.e. for all students and in all disciplines, not only in the core):

Integration of skills development with course content. Although some institutions still require students to take separate skills development courses (Freshman Composition is the classic example), the trend in recent years has been to integrate attention to skills development with course content. Keeping them separate, it has been argued, amounts to making a false distinction between content and process, not to mention thinking of knowledge in terms of mere information: "Knowledge cannot be opposed to skills because knowledge does not exist apart from the mental operations that transform information into knowledge" (Doherty et al., 172). With this in mind, the structure of core requirements and the content of core courses are often designed to develop students' skills in communication (reading, writing, listening, speaking), in quantitative thinking (numeracy), in reasoning (critical thinking, problem-solving, analysis and synthesis, decision making), and in interpersonal interaction (teamwork, collaborative learning, cooperative learning). The "Writing Across the Curriculum" movement is probably the

most widely-known and well-established exemplar of this trend, and many core programs have drawn upon its substantial literature for their approaches to writing (Maimon, 386-89). Many institutions that have not adopted the full-scale WAC approach have established "Writing Intensive" courses in most (or all) of their departments, and require students to take a certain number of such courses; see Princeton's writing requirement, for example.

Integration of new approaches to scholarship. As well as emphasizing skills development across the curriculum, many American colleges and universities have mandated the study of multicultural issues, gender issues, and other challenges to traditional scholarship in their core programs (there are examples in the course and program descriptions on most of the institutional Web sites linked to this document). The trend in recent years has been away from the establishment of new courses or programs in such fields as Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies because these tend to create "ghettos of the converted" (Gaff, 51). Integrating new approaches to scholarship across the curriculum requires significant resources for faculty development, but has the potential to renew and revitalize an institution as a whole.

=B7Emphasis on assessment. The literature indicates that attention to standards and methods of assessment is a very important part of the whole curricular renewal process. Institutional agreement on grading standards is an essential first step, because curricular changes from the Sixties onward have led to great variance among departments and disciplines in the levels of achievement expected of students. As well as faculty discussion of standards, comprehensive assessment of student performance across an institution may play a key role in the initial goal-setting phase; once a core curriculum has been developed and put in place, assessments of its effects on the students are needed to fine-tune and maintain it. Many institutions have also found it necessary to consider new approaches to assessment to serve the particular goals of the core curriculum, especially the effort to integrate skills development with course content. Recent trends in this area include portfolio assessment (sometimes across the curriculum, carried out by several instructors working together), performance-based assessment (feedback on seminar participation or oral presentation skills), and various forms of student and class self-assessment (Wright, 577-586).

Emphasis on small-group teaching. Many resource-rich institutions stress the importance of small, seminar-style classes in the core program, particularly in first year, which allow for more intensive learning and greater attention to skills development. "Students=85need the opportunity to practice intellectual skills under conditions where they can be observed and can receive feedback on their performance and suggestions of ways to improve it" (Doherty et al., 184).

Emphasis on primary texts. This goes hand-in-hand with the integration of skills with course content and the emphasis on intensive small-group teaching. Many institutions have found that teaching from primary texts advances the general goals of the core program more than working with secondary, textbook-style resources (Gaff and Wasescha, 53).

These general characteristics are often common features of otherwise very different core courses, forms of which include the following:

Designated Core Courses. Some colleges and universities require students to fulfill their core requirements by choosing from a menu of courses or course sequences offered by individual departments which are specifically designed for the core program (this is the most common approach in the Ivy League universities; see the requirements at Harvard, Princeton, and Chicago for examples). This means setting up carefully-defined criteria for the faculty developing the core offerings (based on the program goals and often involving the general characteristics noted above), plus establishing a clear set of requirements to help the students make their choices appropriately.

Thematically-Focused Interdisciplinary Courses. Many institutions have created courses for their core programs which involve examining a particular theme or issue from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. For example, the core program at Fairleigh Dickinson University takes the form of a sequence of four courses: "Perspectives on the Individual," "The American Experience," "Cross-Cultural Perspectives," and "Global Issues." Each course involves input from several disciplines across the Humanities, Science, and Social Science divisions; each course builds on the one before, and assignment design and evaluation are also integrated in a variety of ways (Grob and Kuehl, 34, 38-39). At Fairleigh Dickinson, this core is required of all students; at many other institutions, students select from a range of such thematically-focused courses or course sequences to fulfill part of their core requirements (see, for example, the interdisciplinary courses offered for the "Major Cultures" component of Columbia's core). The literature indicates that the tight thematic focus of such courses can ensure that they achieve significant depth of treatment of their topics, while the fact that they cut across the boundaries between the Humanities, the Sciences, and the Social Sciences in a purposeful way (focused on a theme, rather than on trying to achieve interdisciplinarity for its own sake) can ensure a genuinely valid interdisciplinary learning experience.

Course Clusters (or Learning Communities). This idea has gained ground in recent years as a useful alternative to the single interdisciplinary course. In a course cluster or learning community, groups of two or three courses in separate departments are planned together around a common theme; for example, the Honors program at Western Michigan University has offered "Peoples of the World," a cluster of courses in English, Anthropology, and Geography (Matthews et al., 463; click here for information on WMU's current offerings of this kind). The material studied and the assignments given in the separate courses are designed to complement each other in various ways. In many institutions, the work students do in the individual courses is supplemented by work in a common seminar, often led by a special tutor responsible for co-ordinating the whole cluster.

Capstone Courses. Many colleges and universities have instituted some form of capstone experience as part of their core programs: a special graduating-year seminar, for example, often based on an interdisciplinary approach to a particular topic or theme, allowing the students to bring together the work they have done in their studies as a

whole. Capstone projects may take unusual forms: at Dartmouth, they may be exhibitions or performances, rather than traditional papers or theses. In some cases, the capstone project requires the students to move out of the classroom and apply their knowledge and skills to working on problems in their community (Reardon and Ramaley, 528-29).

These forms of curriculum are varied and combined in many ways, as can be seen on the various Web sites linked to this document. Some institutions require the core courses in first year, some spread them across two, three or four years; some offer a limited range of options for the core, some a very wide one; some combine a certain number of courses required of all students with a set of distribution requirements allowing for considerable freedom of choice (for a detailed survey and taxonomy of program types, see Hurtado, Astin and Dey). All these program design possibilities have their advocates, and undoubtedly all have some virtue; which one is chosen is often influenced (or constrained) by institutional character and mission (bear in mind here that American colleges and universities are self-consciously "niche" institutions to a greater extent than their Canadian counterparts: Yale 's relatively loose program requirements seem to be at least in part designed to contrast dramatically with Harvard's highly structured core).

The Cost of Renewal

It is important not to underestimate the potential financial cost of curricular renewal. Funding may be required at every stage of the process, to cover the costs of general planning and policy making, the development and implementation of programs and courses, and follow-up evaluation and, if necessary, revision. There are many instances on record of disappointing results because of insufficient allocation of resources, particularly with respect to faculty development (Kanter, Gamson, and London, 130-31). It should be kept in mind that American colleges and universities are able to turn to a number of government and philanthropic sources for funding to support their renewal and faculty development efforts (the federal Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the Lilly Endowment for the Liberal Arts, among others). This has significant implications for any Canadian university contemplating major curricular renewal, considering the current fiscal situation at the provincial level and our lack of philanthropic sources of support comparable to those found in the US.

Post-Implementation Issues

Once a core program has been developed and put in place, maintaining it requires ongoing effort. The institutional forces that make setting up a core program difficult in the first place, such as the power of departments and the notable tendency of both students and faculty to focus on the major, will tend to undermine the effectiveness of core programs in the long run unless the institutional commitment is maintained. All the literature emphasizes that permanent organizational supports are needed, for example administrators and interdisciplinary faculty committees responsible solely for the core program.

Ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of the program via course audits and evaluations of student performance is also essential. An important background factor in the trend towards renewal of core curricula in the US has been the perceived need for colleges and universities to be more accountable for the results they achieve; defining clear standards and developing methods of evaluating student

work that are consistent, reliable, and tied to program development can have a substantial impact in this regard.

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