View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by epublications@Marquette

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 38 Article 5

September 2010

# The Core and History

Thomas W. Worcester, S.J.

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations

Recommended Citation
Worcester, S.J., Thomas W. (2010) "The Core and History," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 38, Article 5.
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol38/iss1/5

## THE CORE AND HISTORY

# The Core: A Musty Relic or a Gift to 21st-Century Students?

**By Thomas W. Worcester, S.J.**

How I think about core requirements for my students is inevitably—and I hope happily—colored by my own scholarly pursuits: sixteen years teaching European and church history, including Jesuit, history. And though my specialties may make me seem to be an "insider," in some ways it is as an outsider that I approach this question of a core for Jesuit schools.

I myself did not go to any Jesuit college. I chose the Ivy League and I enjoyed my years as an undergraduate at Columbia University in the City of New York, as the full, formal name of what was originally King's College reads. In my time at Columbia, and indeed for nearly a century, Columbia College has continued to require a core that focuses in part on great literary and philosophical texts, from ancient Greece to the present, and in part on a distribution of courses in areas such as art, music, science, an intensive writing course, and foreign language.

Though the list of great books has been updated over the years to be more world and gender inclusive, the basic structure of the core has been little changed, even through periods of great upheaval on campus such as 1968. The amount of reading we were required to do was heavy by most standards, and some of the core courses met not three but four times each week. If some sections of core courses were taught by doctoral students with the status of instructor, many other sections were taught by the university's most accomplished pro-

*Thomas W. Worcester, S.J., teaches in the history department at The College of the Holy Cross.*

*Years ago the core was designed to prepare young men for the priesthood.*

fessors. And the number of students in a section rarely surpassed 20 or 25; discussion was almost always an integral part of the classroom experience. In fact, the only really large class I ever took was an astronomy course with some hundred students.

Yet even with the example of a well-established core at a university as prestigious as Columbia, the whole idea of a core for Jesuit undergraduate colleges may still seem very dated and old fashioned, especially if we tie it to traditions going back to the 16th century and the foundation of the Society of Jesus. It may well be that while the 1599 document known as the *ratio studiorum* spelled out principles and practices of Jesuit education that were appropriate in centuries past, we should now ask, with some insistence, what does it have to do with the 21st century? An antiquarian wallowing in a past imagined as a golden age is probably not a good idea for education of Americans poised today between late adolescence and adulthood.

It is also true that the kind of core that was required of undergraduates in some Jesuit schools in the U.S., as recently as the 1960s, was heavily influenced by the kind of education Jesuits themselves received on their way to ordination as priests. I dare say that the core that existed at many Jesuit universities some fifty years ago was particularly well suited for Catholic young men thinking of priesthood or religious life. It was a kind of preparation for the course of studies they would follow if they became Jesuits, with a very heavy dose of classical languages and literature, and a very large number of courses in neo-Thomistic philosophy. In most Jesuit schools today the majority of undergraduates are women. A small number may go into careers as chaplains or as other kinds of lay ministers. But even they—not to mention the rest of the increasingly diverse student body in religion and in many other ways—very likely do not need or want a course of studies originally designed for male priests, and in what seems like a distant past..

The history of Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States has been ably studied by a number of historians, Robert Emmett Curran, Kathleen Mahoney, Gerald McKevitt, S.J., and Anthony Kuzniewski, S.J., among them. Recurring themes they explore include the tension between fidelity to European and in particular Roman traditions, on the one hand, and adaptation to the particulars of an American context, on the other hand. Geographic and cultural difference within the US also played a role: from the Midwest to the west coast, departures from a core focused on classics and philosophy happened sooner, and went together with adoption of professional programs in fields such as business or nursing. On the east coast, there tended to be retention of a more traditional core, and more reluctance to embrace career-oriented, practical courses of study.

I identify five emphases in core requirements over the history of Jesuit undergraduate education in the U.S. One is **the classics**: Latin and Greek language, prose, poetry; history of ancient Greece and Rome. Though some schools have retained strong classics departments, many Jesuit institutions no longer offer much of anything in the classics. What was for centuries considered the indispensable foundation of Jesuit education has become but an option, and an option often not even available.

The second emphasis is **philosophy.** In the 19th century, and in the 20th century up to Vatican II, "Catholic philosophy" was some version of scholastic philosophy, most likely some textbook version of Thomas Aquinas. And undergraduates were often required to take more than a few course hours of this, with what effect it may be difficult to say. But with no consensus anymore on what would be a Catholic philosophy, course requirements tend to be quite minimal, one or perhaps two courses. **Theology**, a third emphasis, interestingly enough, was in most Jesuit schools less a part of the undergraduate program than were the classics and philosophy. But the size and quality of theology departments have grown a great deal in recent decades, and some Jesuit schools require two or more courses in this area. But there is little consensus on what their focus should be, and in some cases it is a religious studies rather than a theology requirement. There is a positive and a negative side to this development. Undergraduate knowledge of world religions is making some progress, and that is certainly a very good thing. But even the most basic understanding of Catholic theology, not to mention the history of Catholicism, remains minimal for the vast majority of students.

*Five points of emphasis*

The fourth emphasis is on **liberal arts** (or "arts and sciences"). Holy Cross is exclusively a liberal arts college, but this is exceptional for Jesuit institutions of higher education in the US. Recently I spent a year as a visiting professor at Marquette University. Though the terms of the chair I held meant that I taught only a seminar each semester, I also had a good opportunity to

A student conducts research in the Donnelly Science Center at Loyola College in Maryland.

observe up close how a Jesuit university functions when it includes a great array of schools and programs, including undergraduate courses of study in fields such as business. Though Marquette has a college of arts and sciences, the university's professional schools taken together form a far larger portion of the institution. Still, not only undergraduates in arts and sciences, but also those in the professional schools, are required to complete a substantial core of liberal arts courses.

Finally, the fifth emphasis is the **faith that does justice**. At least since the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (1974-75), Jesuit schools have worked to integrate in the curriculum Catholic social teaching, and a commitment to justice for the oppressed, the poor, the marginalized. This has not been without resistance in various quarters, from faculty proponents of laissez-faire capitalism to those who think that matters of social justice should be the domain of campus ministry but not of the academic side of a college. At Holy Cross, a recent effort to add a course in ethical reflection to the required core of courses met with opposition. Details do matter, and some of the thoughtful objections raised to such a course had more than a little merit. But other sources of opposition revealed a knee-jerk hostility to any requirement of a course that considers moral values.

Whether students recognize it or not, a required core serves their best interests. At Holy Cross, I have found that such a core protects students from parents overly eager to place their son or daughter in a lucrative career as soon as possible. In times of economic crisis or at least uncertainty, parental pressure may be particularly strong, and students are especially well-armed in responding to their parents when they can point out that the College's requirements for graduation include a wide array of courses in fields such as language, literature, history, philosophy, religion, natural and social sciences, and in the arts. While some faculty will say that students should be allowed to take whatever courses they want, beyond the ten or so courses required for a major, such appeals to choice are extraordinarily naïve in that they ignore the manifold and enormous pressures on students to take only those subjects that will help them gain ready access to a high-paying position after college.

In this era of so-called helicopter parenting and of omnipresent cell phones, it is not uncommon for students to talk with a parent several times a day. Every year, as an academic advisor, I try to help students who have attempted a pre-medical program but find that their heart is not in it, not because they are not intellectually capable of doing well in the necessary courses, but because they do not have a vocation to medicine. To succeed and to be happy, one must be able to make a living by doing something one loves. I know this from my own life and from what I see in the lives of my students. By requiring a substantial core of liberal arts courses, we create a space of freedom for our students that allows them to test and explore what interests them, what gives them life, and who they are.

As a Columbia undergraduate I read Augustine, Aquinas, Dante...and I read Nietzsche, Freud, and Sartre. And much, much more. The core for undergraduates at Jesuit colleges and universities ought to be at least as broad and as deep and as demanding.