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Creating and Caring for a Core Curriculum

JAMES N. LOUGHRAN, S.J.

Asked to write a comprehensive article on core curriculum at Jesuit colleges in the United States, I must admit at the outset that my credentials are shaky. On the one hand, I have not done a literature search, nor have I studied the curricular history and content of the twenty-eight Jesuit colleges. I feel like the well-known public policy expert whom I heard speak recently at a business conference. When asked, after his speech, about Bill Gates and his problems with the federal government, he replied, “that topic is something I know very little about . . . and thus I can speak freely.” On the other hand, as a teacher, dean, academic vice president, and president, I have been involved with core curriculum issues and changes at three Jesuit colleges (Fordham, Loyola Marymount, Saint Peter’s) as well as at two non-Jesuit colleges, one Catholic (Mount Saint Mary’s) and one public (Brooklyn College), both nationally acclaimed for their core curricula. In other words, please understand that at best I write as an experienced practitioner who has given these matters considerable thought. I make no claim to expertise.¹

Let’s proceed by means of an imaginative exercise. One of our Jesuit colleges for some reason—the

recommendation of the regional accrediting association, a directive of the Board of Trustees, faculty recognition of changing student demographics or of student malaise, a need to keep the president or some other academic administrator happy—wishes to reexamine and, very likely, redesign its core curriculum. I am called in at the start of the academic year to offer counsel and perspective.

My words are to the entire college faculty, for curriculum is the responsibility of all the faculty, the chief way in which faculty exercise college governance.

James N. Loughran, S.J., is president of Saint Peter’s College, Jersey City, New Jersey.

¹ If I were to recommend one book, it would be *Missions of the College Curriculum: A Contemporary Review with Suggestions* from The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977). Twenty years have passed since it first appeared, but it is still the best book I know of on core curriculum—as well as on many other things having to do with undergraduate education.

I arrive assured of several things ahead of time. There is general faculty agreement that a typical student's academic program should retain a balance among general education, the major, and electives. The faculty agree that "general education" refers to some sort of structured academic experience, a set of courses or core curriculum taken by all students. The faculty remain committed to offering a curriculum, especially the core, that reflects the values of the Jesuit tradition of education. Finally, a workbook has already been put together containing data and information requested by the faculty for thinking through core curriculum issues—including, for example, a profile of the student body, curriculum documents from the other Jesuit colleges and universities, charts showing similarities and differences, pertinent readings and bibliography, and particularly interesting and innovative practices at other liberal arts colleges whether Jesuit, Catholic, or neither.

My presentation has four parts: (1) core curriculum and the college's mission, goals, and values; (2) aims, uses, and byproducts of a core curriculum; (3) some keys to the success of a core curriculum process; (4) keeping a core curriculum evolving and improving. I also have a conclusion in which I make what are perhaps my most important points.

Core Curriculum and Mission

The faculty of a Jesuit college, preparing to evaluate and change its core curriculum, will obviously begin with larger questions such as: What is this college's mission and goals? What is Jesuit education? What goals do we want our students to attain by the time they graduate?

What I want to stress most in this section is that these more philosophical discussions, although essential, need not be lengthy or complicated or contentious. It is silly to get bogged down, for example, in fancy theories of epistemology or developmental psychology that are sure to drive half the faculty away. I assume that any good college will already have available for review a simple, straightforward statement of its mission and goals. Here follow examples of simple, straightforward, non-controversial responses to the other two questions above.

What is Jesuit education? This is the statement we used for discussion at Fordham in 1994:

Jesuit education means things like this:

- a. familiarity with and appreciation of our western heritage;

- b. development of skills of language, math, thinking;
- c. knowledge of our contemporary world—its ways of knowing, its peoples and cultures, society, nature, technology;
- d. aesthetics and ethics;
- e. reflection on religious experience and faith.

Faculty had refinements and additions to make, and these were included with the above statement, still one page, as "Additional thoughts." The exchange was lively and engaging, but it ended. And without rifts. I remember the comment of one young faculty member with no prior experience in Catholic education: "Oh, I get it. If it's good, it's Jesuit." Saint Ignatius, I think, would have smiled.

*What goals do we want our students to attain by the time they graduate?*² Here is how the faculty of Brooklyn College answer that question:

Goal 1: Development of the faculty of critical thought and the ability to acquire and organize large amounts of knowledge; along with this, the ability to write and speak clearly—to communicate with precision and force.

Goal 2: An informed acquaintance with the vistas of modern science and a critical appreciation of the ways in which knowledge of nature and man is gained.

Goal 3: An informed acquaintance with major forms of literary and artistic achievement, past and present, and a critical appreciation of the contributions of literature and the arts to the life of the individual and society.

Goal 4: An informed acquaintance with the working and development of modern societies and with the various perspectives from which social scientists study these.

Goal 5: A sense of the past—of the foundations of Western civilization and the shaping of the modern world.

Goal 6: An appreciation of cultures other

² See *Missions*, chapters 7, 8, and Appendix B for an array of sample responses to this question.

than one's own, including the diverse cultures represented in the collegiate community at Brooklyn.

Goal 7: Establishment of personal standards of responsibility and experience in thinking about moral and ethical problems.

Goal 8: Depth in some field of knowledge, a major field of concentration.³

I deliberately chose to use this "portrait of an ideal graduate" from a public, secular institution rather than one from a private, religious college. The latter no doubt would put greater stress on such things as a commitment to service and social justice or an openness to religious faith, but for the most part it would match the aspirations of the Brooklyn College statement. In my experience, faculty of liberal arts colleges, whatever their backgrounds, have very similar understandings of what they want to give students. And just as deeply religious faculty members at Brooklyn College respect and value their school's traditions and culture, non-Catholic faculty can be expected to respect and value the traditions and culture of a Jesuit college.

Minimally, the point of a core curriculum at a Jesuit college is to get students off to a good start in their quest to achieve the educational goals of that college. It will help if those goals receive succinct, elegant expression, but their identification and formulation need not take forever.

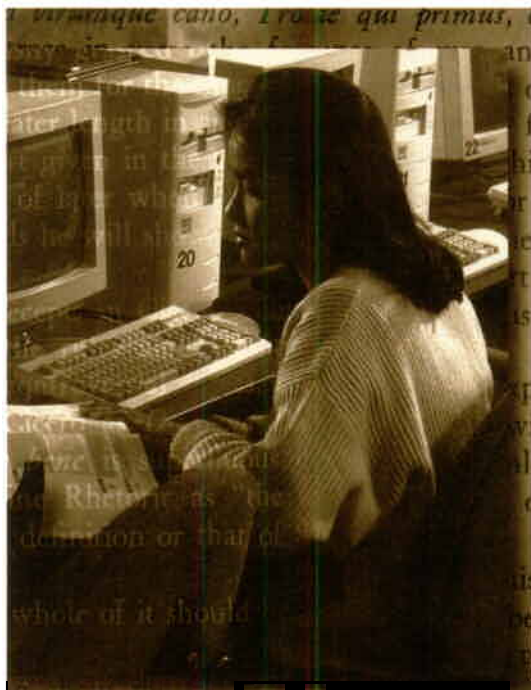
Purposes of a Core Curriculum

To the question—*how does a core curriculum get students off to a good start in their liberal arts education?*—the following would be a typical answer.⁴ A core curriculum aims to nurture curiosity, to inspire a love of learning, to round out students' learning in such a way that they have a solid basis for a lifetime of self-education. A core curriculum does this by imparting a set of skills and ways of knowing as well as by teaching a body of valued knowledge. Traditionally Jesuit education gives a primacy in the core to literature, language, history, phi-

losophy, and theology. Jesuit education, rooted in the traditions of Christian humanism, intends that a curriculum, in particular courses and as an integrated course of study, form and transform students both intellectually and morally.

For the individual student, the core curriculum is an introduction to college and the stuff of at least freshman year. Thus the core is an opportunity for faculty to assist students to make the adjustment from high school to college not merely by discussing issues such as personal responsibility and time management, but by showing them new habits of thought and inducting them into the culture, the values and behavior, of the collegiate world. A core curriculum is a kind of academic advising en masse. It gives students direction for their study. By embodying the ideals of the college, it teaches students what it is important to know, what it is to be an educated person. A core curriculum fails if students do not discover for themselves, at least eventually, that study is important and exciting.

I would urge consideration of three other purposes of a core curriculum in the education of students. As a shared learning experience, a common core can be the basis of academic



³ "Introduction to the Core Curriculum," prepared by the Faculty Council Committee on Core Curriculum "for Brooklyn College students who are now beginning study of the core curriculum," September, 1987.

⁴ See Ernest L. Boyer and Arthur Levine, *A Quest for Common Learning: The Aims of General Education* (Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1981). Along with arguing their thesis ("Seeing the connectedness of things, is, we conclude, the goal of common learning" [52]), the authors provide a chronological summary of "Historical Purposes of General Education," in Appendix A, pp. 53-61. It is quite a list, including everything from "educate for democracy" to "make use of under-utilized faculty."

community in which students easily talk with and learn from one another. A core should assist students to see and make connections in their studies, to organize and integrate their knowledge. A core should serve as a “bridge” to life after college so that intellectual and moral growth continue beyond graduation. All of these purposes, of course, suggest that the curriculum should be a dimension of a student’s academic program throughout the college experience.

A faculty, preparing for a reevaluation of “general education” at its college, should recognize other valuable opportunities that the development, implementation, and maintenance of a core curriculum offer in areas such as the following: faculty development, the intellectual climate and co-curricular life on campus, attracting and retaining students. I shall say a word about each.

Designing and teaching in a new core curriculum should prove to be a catalyst for faculty development and renewal. Assuming good will and common sense, discussion of educational goals and values strengthens the commitment of faculty members to undergraduate liberal arts education and to the college itself and its mission. Debate about curriculum breaks down academic department barriers; faculty from different disciplines come to know (and like!) one another; reference to “the faculty of the college” has greater validity. A core curriculum helps to make teaching a more exciting and worthwhile experience for faculty: new courses and the stimulation of dialogue with colleagues can provide a clearer and stronger sense of purpose. If a core curriculum is designed and executed well, the students will respond well, and their exuberance and friendliness have to be a source of joy and encouragement for faculty.

If education at a Jesuit liberal arts college is considered to be a forming and transforming experience, it would be a mistake, when thinking about a core curriculum, to think only of academic courses and study. The atmosphere of the campus and co-curricular activities should complement and supplement the classroom experience. Right from the start core curriculum planners should be thinking of strategies and methods, in addition to a more demanding and sensible course of study, to improve the intellectual climate and co-curricular life on campus, to build academic community: more informal faculty-student contact, stronger academic clubs housed within departments, lecture and film series, symposia, debates, and trips off-campus to theaters and museums, for example. Representatives from the Division of Student Affairs and the students themselves should be

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invited to participate in this reflection on how to enrich campus life outside the classrooms, study halls, and libraries and inside the residence halls, campus center, college church — even the gymnasium, fitness center, and other recreational facilities.

Finally, those working on a core curriculum do well to remind themselves that students are attracted to colleges that know what they are doing, that have a reputation for being demanding, stimulating, friendly, caring. When students experience that that reputation is deserved, they remain at such colleges in high percentages and persevere to graduation. In other words, for private liberal arts colleges, concerned about the size and quality of their student bodies, much is at stake in deliberations about core curriculum and the will to deliver what the core promises.

Everything I have written up to this point adds up to a charge to be given by the entire college faculty to its core curriculum planning committee:

Having participated in these discussions of the entire college faculty, come back to us with a structured, integrated core curriculum that supports the college's mission and goals, that is faithful to the Jesuit tradition of education, that is clear on and promises to deliver what we want to give the individual student, that recognizes the opportunities of the core for improving the quality of the faculty, of the whole of campus life, of the student body.

I would add two more points to the charge:

Limit the core to less than fifty percent of a student's program so that there remains ample room for the major and electives; come back to us by the end of this academic year so that the new curriculum can be in place for the entering class two years from now.

Recommendations for a Successful Process

Here follow what I consider keys to a successful core curriculum process.

1. *Begin with the involvement of the entire faculty.* I have already stressed that curriculum belongs to the faculty; it is their major governance responsibility. There will be no new core curriculum unless the faculty votes for it. The core will be dreary business unless the faculty is

committed to teaching it. From the outset the faculty at large has to be comfortable with the core curriculum process and its goals.

2. *Find someone to guide the process.* Perhaps there is an individual on hand—faculty member, academic administrator—who, all would agree, possesses the requisite experience and respect for such a task. More likely someone from the outside is needed, not so much to be directly in charge, as to point the way, provide an objective, non-political viewpoint, and help to move the process along despite the inevitable impasses.

3. *Select the core curriculum planning committee with great care.* Needed are patient and cooperative hard-workers who know the college well and are esteemed by their faculty colleagues for both their personal qualities and their professional competence. The faculty should think of the committee as their committee. The committee, as I have said, should understand its charge as coming from the faculty. Thus it is better that the committee not be formed until the discussions of the whole faculty about the college's mission and the purposes of the core curriculum have taken place.

4. *Select a steering committee from among the committee membership.* I am assuming that, because all sorts of groups and interests will want to have voice within the committee, the committee will be large and unwieldy. A smaller steering committee will help to move things along.

5. *Establish ground rules with the administration.* For example, the planning committee will require a budget for secretarial help, printings and mailings, and various amenities. The faculty and the committee need to know ahead of time the likelihood that funding will be available to pay for new curriculum initiatives. Will additions or trade-offs in faculty lines be possible? Obviously there needs to be ongoing discussion with the administration as curriculum planning unfolds. It makes no sense to propose a core that can't possibly be funded and executed.

6. *Invite all faculty members at the outset to send in their ideas about the core.* The invitation needs to make clear that all ideas are welcome, but should especially encourage responses grounded in a careful study of the previously prepared workbook and answering the question "what would you do if the whole decision were up to you, individually?" The steering committee would then put these ideas and proposals into some kind of order, and the whole committee would consider both the submissions and the summary.

7. Now have the members of the committee draft their proposal for a core curriculum. Again, ask them to write as if the whole decision were up to them individually. When the steering committee sorts out these submissions, I predict two results: With regard to content and distribution of courses across disciplines, there will be more agreement than disagreement (after all, these are faculty who have been teaching at the same college for many years); some interesting ideas for innovation will surface. In other words, the committee will be on its way toward both consensus and renewal.

8. *Stay in constant touch with the faculty. By mailings and meetings of all kinds, keep the faculty involved.* Keep asking for feedback as the core curriculum takes shape within the committee. It will eventually be necessary, of course, to form subcommittees from among the faculty to plan the details of the various courses and components of the core. It does not hurt at all if faculty working on the core curriculum meet at times off-campus in some attractive, informal setting and enjoy a meal together.

9. *Keep alive the students' point of view.* When debating the content and shape of the core curriculum, the major concerns should be whether or not this is the best way to deliver a Jesuit liberal arts education to the students of this college. No doubt a student or two should be on the curriculum planning committee to help provide this perspective. When the new core is approved, special care should be given that the entering class understand and buy into the new curriculum and its underlying philosophy and goals.

10. *Develop strategies and mechanisms for keeping the core curriculum renewed and evolving, for keeping the faculty involved.* This should be done even as the new core is being designed, as part of the new curriculum proposal. I want to stress and say so much about this "key" to a successful core curriculum that I have made it a separate section of my presentation. Incidentally, I have noted that to the extent the faculty believe in the core, to that extent will the students believe in it.

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Keeping a Core Curriculum Alive and Well

I would argue this thesis: Just as important as a core curriculum's design and content are the mechanisms and strategies employed to keep the core alive and well. Here are some suggestions:

Core Course Coordinators. For every course or component of the core, appoint a faculty coordinator—

for example, for each literature or philosophy or theology or science course. The task of this coordinator would be to facilitate discussion among those teaching the course, the exchange of syllabi, the sharing of teaching successes and failures, and so on. Core course coordinators would be responsible for an annual report on their course or core component on the basis of which changes could be proposed.

- **Faculty Seminars.** At least once a year, over several days, when classes are not being held, and involving a significant cross-section of the faculty, run a workshop to discuss topics relevant to the core—for example, uses of the computer, critical thinking, the teaching of science, interdisciplinary clustering, and so on.
- **Annual Faculty Meeting.** Conduct for all faculty a once-a-year, half-day meeting, with a carefully prepared agenda, to review the state of the core curriculum, and, if called for, to consider substantive changes. It is on or around an occasion like this that ideas generated by core course coordinators or by faculty seminars can be reported and acted upon.
- **'Across-the-Curriculum' Programs.** Workshops should be held to assist core faculty to build on the special training received by students in their special freshman courses—composition, freshman seminar, or the like. Ethics, gender, cultural diversity, epistemology, humanism—are examples of other topics that could be given “across-the-curriculum” attention and focus.

Academic Advising and Support Services. Those in charge of the core should also be in charge of advising and support services or at least be working closely with those in charge. And all such services should be consolidated. Why not agree ahead of time that faculty play a major role in planning and conducting freshman orientation?

Propaganda and Publicity. Working with the Office of Public Affairs, develop print materials that explain the content and philosophy of the core clearly and compellingly to faculty old and new, to students and their families, to other educators, to benefactors and foundations. Keep updating such materials. Beware overdoing their use, however, in recruiting freshmen. High-school students are glad to hear that you have an award-winning core, but they are not yet ready to be fascinated by its detail. Wait until they are on campus.

- **Films, Lectures, and other Core-curriculum Programming.** Working with the Office of Student Affairs, develop each year a schedule of out-of-class events that would complement what is being studied in the core.
- **Core Publication Series.** To make more readily available materials desired for core courses, provide for a publications series of textbooks, readings, and other materials in various formats.
- **Review of the Preceding Mechanisms and Strategies.** Report formally each year both to the appropriate faculty bodies and to the entire faculty how these mechanisms and strategies have worked and how improvements will be made in the following year.

At this point, I beg the reader's indulgence. I would like, for the record, to admit a past mistake, a serious one I judge in retrospect.

These thoughts about keeping a core alive and well are basically what I said as a member of a panel on core curriculum at a conference at the University of St. Thomas in August, 1995. I said then that the importance of core curriculum follow-up as just described was something that I had overlooked when I was dean of Fordham College in the early 1980s, but something that I learned vividly when, as interim president of both Brooklyn College and Mount St. Mary's in the early 1990s, I witnessed how those faculties, years after the adoption of their core curriculum, still gave the core serious and continuing attention.

In preparing this paper, however, I went back to Fordham's 1979 curriculum proposal, the one sent by the planning committee to the faculty for approval by a vote, yes or no. In the document itself is included a recommendation for the development of a “Center for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning.” Its functions would include the following:

1. proposing, promoting, and coordinating pedagogical improvement mechanisms;
2. generating new curricular ideas, new clusterings, and functioning as a “think tank”;
3. serving a facilitative function with respect to the curriculum and related issues;
4. being a clearing house for faculty desiring to create new clusters;
5. seeking outside funding in support of curricular projects;
6. coordinating academic, co-curricular, remedial, and tutoring services;
7. acting as a liaison to and coordinating agent for existing student services at Fordham College;

8. developing means of evaluation.⁵

In other words, I did not merely overlook the importance of strategies and mechanisms for keeping the core alive and well; I ignored that strong recommendation right in the voting document. (My lame excuse: I was still on the faculty and not a member of the committee when the core was planned and the vote taken; right afterwards I became dean and for the next few years was absorbed with implementation, as opposed to renewal and improvement, issues.)

So now my recommendation is this. Link the continuing assessment and advancement of a core curriculum to a Center for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning. Recruit someone to be in charge of that Center. The responsibility of that office would be to make happen suggestions like those inspired by what I witnessed at Brooklyn College and Mount St. Mary's or those listed in Fordham's description of a Center for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning.

Conclusion

As I come to the end of my imaginative exercise in core revision, I anticipate that some readers are likely to complain: "You have said almost nothing about the content of the core curriculum in a Jesuit college." Others will object: "You underplay the significance for a core curriculum of a Jesuit college's commitment to Catholicism as well as to social justice and service." Still others will observe: "You have not even acknowledged the inevitable 'turf' skirmishes as departments vie for a larger claim on core curriculum territory."

With regard to content, I am tempted to say, not merely for effect, that for the most part either content is obvious or it doesn't matter. I have already written that a core consists of skills, ways of knowing, and a body of valued knowledge. I think that the faculty of any Jesuit college in the United States already knows and generally agrees on what skills an educated person should have, what ways of knowing an educated person should be acquainted with. Since the body of valued knowledge a truly educated person should possess goes far beyond what any core curriculum could possibly deliver, choices need to be made. What factors are to guide these choices? The answer seems obvious to me: the Jesuit tradition of liberal arts education—especially the emphasis on philosophy and theology—the college's own mission and traditions which no doubt will be reflected in its resources, the needs of the stu-

dent body as determined by the faculty, the faculty's own convictions about education and passions about teaching. If this is the way choices are made, in a real sense it doesn't matter what body of valued knowledge is decided upon, especially not if mechanisms are in place to keep the core curriculum lively, evolving, and improving.

With regard to commitment to Catholicism and to social justice, I have several comments. I assume that these emphases can already be found in the college's mission and goals statement, in its traditions, and in the convictions and scholarly interests of many of its faculty; these are chief among the factors, as I just noted, which are to guide choices regarding core curriculum content. I stress again that, if effective mechanisms are in place for a continual evaluation of the core, they provide opportunity for regular faculty dialogue about the college's mission, including its commitment to Catholicism and social justice, and how the curriculum might more effectively achieve that mission. An important mark of a Jesuit college is that it encourages its students to become "men and women for others." But this effort should go on in every dimension of college life. I am not so sure it should be identified with some particular course or component of a core curriculum. Social justice issues and service learning opportunities might be better handled in the curriculum by departmental majors or special academic programs—particularly, perhaps, in both introductory and capstone courses. I find promising the recent development in many Jesuit (and non-Jesuit) colleges of interdisciplinary programs in Catholic Studies. Finally, I point out, with some fear of predictable wisecracks in response, that anything in the "Jesuit" tradition, including a core curriculum, by that fact also qualifies as a way of being authentically "Catholic."

With regard to "turf" wars, I have nothing special to say. (It would of course be prudent to keep an eye on the impact of core curriculum changes elsewhere in the College.) Much of what I have urged already is meant to move core curriculum reflection beyond narrowness and selfishness: involvement of all the faculty; building a sense of faculty, faculty unity, faculty responsibility for the total educational experience; keeping an eye on the big picture—the college's mission, the philosophy of Jesuit education, the core curriculum's goals; the usefulness for objectivity of an outside guide; constant dialogue and exchange to break down suspicion and build

⁵ "A Proposal for a Structured Core Curriculum," Fordham College, April, 1979, p. 69.

up camaraderie; a carefully chosen planning committee in whom the faculty has confidence; concern for the college as a whole for both noble and down-to-earth reasons; concern for red-blooded students with minds and hearts to educate and who pay tuition. A successful curriculum process will depend on the leadership of several and the cooperation of many. It won't be all smooth sailing; there will be much muddling through.

Finally I recommend reflection on these sentences from Alfred North Whitehead:

[T]he curriculum is important, but it is not the most important aspect of undergraduate education. The most important is the quality of the faculty: "that the teachers should... be alive with living thoughts."⁶

I would just add that a core curriculum, to be successful, needs such a faculty. A core curriculum process, done well, can further enliven such a faculty.

⁶ Quoted in *Missions*, p. 7.



Cheryl Unger / St. Louis University Public Relations