PROJECT MUSE®

Reinventing the Core: Community, Dialogue, and Change

Adele Pittendrigh

Penn State University Press

PROJECT MUSE®

➡ *For additional information about this article*
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/220564

REINVENTING THE CORE: COMMUNITY, DIALOGUE, AND CHANGE

Adele Pittendrigh

The process of changing a general education curriculum has been compared to moving a graveyard. Hardy (2001) concludes that reformers of core curricula face "the resistance of the living as well as the inertia of the dead." Rhodes (2001) reports that when discussion of the curriculum is proposed, "Eyes glaze over; tempers shorten; people of generosity and good will become intolerant, and those of sound judgment and thoughtful balance become rigid, hard-line advocates" (p. B7). Awbrey (2005) begins her analysis of general education reform with the words, "I died on the hill of general education reform" (p. 1), words often heard, she says, from reformers who have been defeated in their efforts to revitalize undergraduate education.

Why is the reform of general education so difficult? Gaff (1980) identifies 43 potentially fatal errors that could doom a project to failure and stresses that "strategies for curricular change are as important as the substance" (p. 50). Awbrey (2005), who uses the tools of organizational change research to analyze the process of curriculum reform, argues that there is a hidden barrier to change that faculty and administrators may not see. Because general education is deeply enmeshed in the culture of the institution, change must encompass not only the structure of the curriculum but also the values, ideologies, and basic assumptions of members of the institution. Faculty who are assigned the task of reform, Awbrey says, often have little understanding that their assignment "thrusts them into the unfamiliar role of agents of cultural change" (2005, p. 1). In addition, the organization of faculty into specialized disciplines housed in departments with strong vested interests makes interdisciplinary education difficult and creates additional challenges to revitalizing the general education curriculum, which,

by its very nature, spans multiple disciplinary areas (Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, 1998; Ratcliff, 1997; Rhodes 2001).

Montana State University (MSU), a midsized public university with approximately 12,000 students, 800 faculty, and a flourishing research program, recently completed the reform of its general education program. The university succeeded in replacing a cafeteria-style core curriculum with a new curriculum, CORE 2.0, focused on student learning, inquiry, and research. The process of revising the general education curriculum took six years, from 1998 through the implementation of CORE 2.0 in 2004. From start to finish, core reform at MSU was a grassroots effort, launched by a grant entitled "Reinventing the Core" from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's program General Education at Research Universities and sustained by a multidisciplinary community of faculty committed to improving students' experience of general education.

The grant award, matching university funding, and support from university administrators made the core reform effort possible by providing resources and allowing faculty to devote significant time to the project. But in the end, the successful transformation of the curriculum depended on a critical mass of faculty, along with key campus administrators, agreeing to pursue a new model of general education. This article examines the process through which the campus came to this critical agreement, focusing on the development of a cross-disciplinary community of faculty and a lengthy and complex campus-wide dialogue.

The College Seminar: A Foundation for Change

The development of a seminar for first-year students two years before the first "Reinventing the Core" grant was awarded set the stage for reforming general education at Montana State University. The learning goals of the seminar—improved critical thinking and communication skills, active engagement in learning, understanding diverse perspectives—permeated the core reform process, and a central theme of the seminar—"How do we know?"—is central to CORE 2.0. These goals and themes had been discussed and

integrated into classroom practice by faculty teaching the seminar, providing a head start for core reform at MSU. Further, the seminar generated a cross-disciplinary dialogue and a sense of common purpose among faculty and demonstrated for many that offering high-quality academic experiences for all beginning students is a good investment.

In 1996, the College of Letters and Science at MSU joined a national movement (Boyer 1992) to help entering students succeed and persist in college by creating small seminar courses designed specifically for first-year students. When I was asked to develop such a seminar, I interviewed over 20 college faculty about the kind of seminar they would support and teach. Faculty were clear that the Letters and Science seminar should be intellectually challenging, should incorporate perspectives from the three broad disciplinary areas in the college—humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences—and should be taught by tenured and tenure-track faculty. I recruited a team of four senior faculty from history, English, psychology, and microbiology to collaborate with me in developing this seminar. We settled on two central, intertwined themes for the seminar: "How do we know things?" and "Who are we as human beings, members of society, and individuals?" The course would be taught through discussion, not lecture, and would incorporate significant writing and speaking practice, including an oral final exam. We developed a challenging reading list of seven texts, including Plato's *Apology*, Galileo's *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina*, Jonathan Winer's *Beak of the Finch*, and Leslie Silko's novel *Ceremony*.

I list these texts to illustrate the challenge faculty encountered teaching from a common syllabus with demanding texts drawn from disparate disciplines. Because no faculty member could be an expert in all the course topics and readings, faculty were encour-aged to give up their traditional stance as experts and instead become learners along with their students. They would help students learn to interpret texts, support conclusions with argument, evaluate evidence, and ask meaningful questions, but they were not expected to be expert in all course topics and texts. The faculty met weekly to discuss course readings, engaging in cross-disciplinary conversations about course texts, ideas, and teaching. For many, the

weekly staff seminar became one of the most enjoyable aspects of teaching the course.

Faculty Perception of Students

Although the College Seminar most resembled an honors course, it was offered to all first-year students. One of the course goals was to invite beginning students to enjoy discussing ideas and texts in a community of learners and, thus, to participate more actively in their other classes and in the intellectual life of the university. Not surprisingly, some faculty wondered whether the goals of the seminar were realistic. Some doubted that nonhonors students would be prepared to read the texts or engage in the kind of thinking and discussion course planners envisioned, and some raised concerns about investing scarce resources in this course on the grounds that only a few of the best-prepared students could handle the readings or the discussion-based format. As we shall see, when similar concerns about the wisdom of investing in inquiry and research courses, especially for beginning students, were raised during the core reform process, faculty perception of beginning students' intellectual abilities became part of the dialogue about core reform.

Many faculty at MSU do not teach first-year students, and if they do, they are likely to teach beginning students in large lecture classes. The College Seminar gave faculty from all disciplines an unusual opportunity to know first-year students well. From 1996 to 2001 only tenured or tenure-track faculty taught the course, and most reacted enthusiastically. The course attracted faculty from a wide range of disciplines, with 47% from natural sciences, mathematics, and technical fields; 27% from the humanities and arts; 22% from social sciences; and 4% from professional disciplines. Early assessment of faculty experience teaching the course showed that the seminar was influencing faculty perceptions of students as well as their teaching in other courses (Pittendrigh, 1998). Subsequent assessment, conducted through focus groups and surveys, continued to show that faculty members who teach the course are affected in ways that are important for reforming general education.

   Most faculty enjoy teaching first-year students in the seminar, and for some, their experience elevates their perceptions of first-year students, as captured in the following faculty comments:

> Not having taught many freshmen before, I was pleasantly surprised at the open-mindedness and rationality of most of the students. Our group loved . . . the chance to meet and talk . . . outside of the mega-culture course format typically inflicted on freshpersons.

> I really loved this class—and the students. I had forgotten how much I enjoyed teaching—I now want to know what happens to each of them.

> Teaching this course was a very positive experience for me, one of the best experiences of my academic career. I learn more about my field when teaching graduate courses, but I learned more about students and teaching in this one. I would love to do it again.

One faculty member described a discussion with a student in the seminar and called it a defining moment:

> One of my students . . . asked me one day after class[,] "[A]re there any courses like this I can take next year?" And I said, "No, you'll find that your upper division courses will feature discussion sections, but probably you're going to find that most of your freshmen [and] sophomore classes are going to be large classes . . . they may have a discussion section but [the seminar] is a pretty unique sort of opportunity, but one of the things we're trying to do here is model the kind of behavior that you might even have outside of the class, that your friends may get together and discuss these things." And he looked at me said, "Yeah, I've tried, but I can't get them to talk about anything but baseball!" And I just thought, "Wonderful! Here's someone who's actually out there trying to do something besides talk baseball!" and that for me was a defining moment.

A Sense of Community

In addition to improved perception of first-year students' intellectual ability, seminar instructors reported that teaching in collaboration with faculty members from other disciplines creates a sense of community:

> I met a lot of people and I really enjoyed the company, and I think it did help with a sense of community. I got a better feeling for what's going on in their disciplines; they had a little more sense of what I do. We had a common purpose when we were teaching the course, and I think that . . . really gives more of a sense of community.

> I think this was a very good experience for the faculty and for the students, and I think the idea that faculty come together and take some sort of shared responsibility . . . was a positive thing, a sense of we're all in this game of educating all students rather than all this sort of disciplinary perspective we tend to take.

By participating in weekly staff discussions, faculty from diverse disciplines and colleges got to know each other and gained a better understanding of contrasting disciplinary perspectives. As one faculty member put it, "Teaching in an interdisciplinary environment enhances our appreciation of the different ways . . . critical thinking is cultivated across [natural] sciences, social sciences, and humanities."

Although the seminar did not, in itself, cause core reform, it involved many faculty from Letters and Science and the professional colleges with a wide range of diverse disciplinary perspectives (see Table 1), helping to establish a sense of common purpose and setting the stage for an expanded cross-disciplinary dialogue conducted through Reinventing the Core. In addition, faculty members who taught the seminar played important roles in the reform effort. Ten of the 11 faculty who served on the project executive committee had taught the seminar, and 44 (60%) of the 73 faculty who served on project committees had taught the seminar. I served as both director of the College Seminar and program director of Reinventing the Core. By the end of the project, key campus decision makers had

Table 1. Disciplinary Affiliation of Faculty Teaching the College Seminar (Continued)

Discipline	1995–1996	1996–1997	1997–1998	1998–1999	1999–2000	2000–2001	2001–2002	2002–2003	2003–2004	2004–2005
English	x	x		x			x		xxxxx	xxxxxxxx
History	x		xx	x	xx	x	x	xxxxxxx	xxxxxxxx	xxxxxxx
Humanities	x									
Microbiology	x		x					xx		
Psychology		x	x	x						xx
Architecture		x			x	x				
Biology		xx			x		x		x	
Chemistry		x								
Earth Science		x						xx	x	
Libraries		x			x	x	x	x	x	xx
Mathematical Sciences	x		xx	xx	x	xx	x	xxx		

Table 1. Disciplinary Affiliation of Faculty Teaching the College Seminar (Continued)

Discipline	1995–1996	1996–1997	1997–1998	1998–1999	1999–2000	2000–2001	2001–2002	2002–2003	2003–2004	2004–2005
Physics		x		x	x	x				x
Political Science			x							
Museum				x				xx	x	x
Native American Studies				x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Electrical Engineering					x		x	x	xx	xxx
Modern Languages					x			xx	xx	xx
Animal and Range Sciences					x		x			
Nursing					x	xx	x	x	x	x
Education					x	x	xx	xxx	xxxxx	xxxxxx
General Studies					x				xx	
Biochemistry							x			x
Film Studies						x	xx			

Table 1. Disciplinary Affiliation of Faculty Teaching the College Seminar (Continued)

Discipline	1995–1996	1996–1997	1997–1998	1998–1999	1999–2000	2000–2001	2001–2002	2002–2003	2003–2004	2004–2005
Entomology						x	x	x	x	xx
Plant Sciences						x		x	x	xx
Philosophy						x				xxx
Business						x	x		x	x
Civil Engineering							x			
Sociology							x	xx		x
Art							x			
Anthropology								x		
Music									x	xx
Health										x
Land Resources										x

taught the seminar, including six deans, seven department heads, two vice provosts, and the provost.

Reinventing the Core: A Plan for Change

In 1998, the first proposal to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation laid out a blueprint for rethinking MSU's general education curriculum with the goal of making it "a philosophically coherent program that reflects the creativity and expertise of [MSU] faculty." The proposal described the institutional framework for the reform. Five faculty representing humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences committed 20% of their time to Reinventing the Core, and as project director, I committed 50% of my time to the project. Together, we formed an executive committee that would guide all aspects of the project. Each of six college deans agreed to appoint a faculty representative to the New Core Task Force, which was charged with developing recommendations for the future of the core curriculum. The provost, vice president for research, and dean of the College of Letters and Science agreed to provide matching funds to the project if the proposal was funded. These commitments, along with support from the existing University Core Curriculum Committee, promised broad and substantial campus support for the project.

The plan for Reinventing the Core was based on two activities: a campus-wide dialogue about the future of general education at MSU and the demonstration and assessment of experimental courses and curricula. These two program elements were essential to the success of the project. The dialogue gave all members of the campus community opportunities to stay informed about the project, to provide creative ideas about core reform, and to discuss concerns. The curricular experiments informed the dialogue so that it was not based solely on theoretical issues but included reports of assessment outcomes, as well as faculty members' firsthand experience teaching new courses and working with students in inquiry-based, multidisciplinary courses.

The grant proposal promised that the outcome of the curricular experiments and campus-wide dialogue would be, at the end of the first year, a proposal for the future of the core and, in the second year,

a plan for institutionalizing the new curriculum. There was indeed a proposal for the future of the core at the end of the first year, but that proposal, rather than leading to a plan for implementation, set the stage for four more years of discussion, more experimental curricula, and a full-scale pilot project before a curriculum emerged with sufficient support across campus to warrant implementation.

Rationale for Change

The 1998 proposal to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation presented a critique of the existing core curriculum, which the university had adopted in 1986. The existing curriculum required students to complete 32 credits of course work, divided among communications, mathematics, fine arts, humanities, natural science, and social science, with two courses codesignated multicultural/global. By 1998, the core curriculum had become a menu of almost 200 largely unrelated courses, many of which served as introductions to specific majors and were taught in large lecture format. There was little rationale for why some courses were counted in the core and others, especially those in the same discipline, were not. For many students, the core seemed an arbitrary collection of hurdles, rather than a coherent educational foundation. For faculty, teaching core courses was often the least desirable teaching assignment. Further, there had been little assessment of core courses or of the curriculum as a whole in the decade since it was adopted. In 1999, the University Core Curriculum Committee asked faculty teaching core courses to identify strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and, based on survey results, recommended increased resources for core courses and a more integrated and meaningful core "that eliminates students taking courses simply to fulfill their credit requirements." These concerns were central to the thinking of the reformers, who valued active learning, student engagement, cross-disciplinary connections between courses, and a sequenced building of knowledge and skills.

Although articulating this critique was essential for gaining credibility and trust on campus, in our early enthusiasm for the new ideas we were developing, we sometimes forgot to explain that our reasons for wanting to change the core curriculum were based on

sound criticisms of the existing core curriculum. We learned that our commitment to change could be perceived as a blanket criticism of all core courses and, by implication, the faculty who taught them. We learned to explain the reasons for reforming the core at every opportunity and to acknowledge the contributions of committed and talented faculty who taught core courses in the existing curriculum.

Evolution of a New Curriculum

The plan for a new curriculum evolved throughout Reinventing the Core as reformers learned what curricular elements would promote student learning objectives and be sustainable at MSU. In the first grant proposal, reformers planned a "Demonstration and Assessment of a New Core Experiment" based on the experience of 100 entering freshmen going through a new, more integrated curriculum. The proposed curriculum began with the first-year seminar paired with English composition, followed by a cluster of three thematically linked courses focused on the Lewis and Clark voyage of discovery, additional cross-disciplinary paired courses, and a research experience. The goal was to create a small, high-quality "core of the core" that students would take within the larger distributed core requirement. Almost immediately the idea of thematic clustered courses was dropped when one of the three courses in the cluster could not be taught in the semester it was needed. Experimentation with course pairs continued as a way to create cross-disciplinary connections without incurring additional cost. Faculty who taught paired courses were enthusiastic about the experience of working closely with a colleague from a different discipline, but students generally placed a lower value on their experience of paired courses. Some complained that course pairing forced them to take a course they did not need in order to take the one they did need, and some said paired courses restricted equal access to courses and freedom of choice. Paired courses also proved surprisingly difficult to coordinate, and after two years, they were dropped from the New Core Experiment and replaced by team-taught cross-disciplinary courses that explored issues from the perspectives of the sciences and the humanities within a single course.

In 2001 the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation awarded a second grant for two additional years to fund a pilot curriculum called the Montana Learning Community (MLC), which was expected to enroll 300 students in a curriculum that was the product of the new core experiments. MLC included a first-year seminar, college writing, a team-taught cross-disciplinary course in science and humanities, a diversity course, quantitative reasoning, a research experience, and core electives—one course each in art, humanities, natural science, and social science. The pilot project enrolled a large number of students, and assessment showed both faculty and student satisfaction with pilot courses. But even so, there were disappointments with the pilot curriculum. Some felt that the curriculum did not go far enough in changing the old core because the core electives in humanities, social science, natural science, and art were essentially the same as they were in the existing curriculum. Team-taught courses were, on the whole, highly valued by both faculty and students, but in the end they, like paired courses, proved to be complex, hard to sustain, and expensive. The structure of the university—where faculty are attached to disciplines, and teaching loads are determined by counting courses—was not flexible enough to sustain widespread co-teaching of courses across disciplines.

During six years of curricular experiments, the College Seminar was expanded from four sections in 1995–1996 to 50 sections in 2004–2005, when it was renamed "University Seminar." When CORE 2.0 was adopted, faculty from 34 different disciplines (see Table 1) had taught the course and had firsthand experience with inquiry-based teaching and learning. Additional faculty taught experimental research, diversity, and paired or team-taught courses, increasing the number of faculty who were directly involved in teaching the new core and who could speak from first-hand experience about the emerging curriculum in public forums and meetings.

CORE 2.0

The lessons learned from the New Core Experiment, the MLC pilot project, and the ongoing campus dialogue led to the creation of

CORE 2.0, the curriculum that was adopted in 2003 and implemented for all students in fall 2004. CORE 2.0 included most elements of the pilot curriculum: a first-year seminar, a diversity course, college writing, a course in quantitative reasoning, and a research and creative experience. The four core elective courses, which were really vestiges of the distribution requirement, were eliminated. They were replaced with a new course category called "Inquiry" that explores not only the products of the disciplines but also the methods used to discover and create knowledge. Inquiry courses include at least one major discovery-based project, and students take one inquiry course in arts, natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Team-taught courses were eliminated, and a second new course category entitled "Contemporary Issues in Science" (CIS) was created for nonscience majors. CIS courses are taught not only by scientists but also by historians and philosophers of science and by others whose scholarly work focuses on scientific inquiry. Once the concepts of Inquiry and CIS courses were incorporated, the new curriculum was adopted and implemented without objection.

Campus-Wide Dialogue

During the six years of curriculum development, assessment, and revision, Reinventing the Core engaged the campus in a dialogue about the future of general education on the MSU campus. This dialogue was conducted in a series of forums, panel discussions, working lunches, and off-campus retreats and an extraordinary number of meetings with individual departments, divisions, deans, and student groups.

Project leaders worked to make the campus dialogue as inclusive, open, and productive as possible. Soon after receiving the first Reinventing the Core grant, we expanded the New Core Task Force to include representatives of student government, who made invaluable contributions to the project, brought other groups of students into the discussion, and kept student concerns on the table. Student representatives stressed their desire for high-quality education with intellectually challenging courses in the core that would

prepare them for the critical thinking and communication challenges they expected in the workplace. We also created a new group called the New Core Advisors to allow faculty who had not been appointed to the task force by a college dean to participate fully in project deliberations. We tried to maximize the number of participants in the campus-wide discussions by inviting all members of the campus community to attend the public forums and by initiating meetings with individual colleges, departments, and other units of the university and holding evening meetings with students in the dormitories.

Deliberations within project committees were frank, open to divergent views, and focused on moving the project forward. Most decisions were reached by consensus rather than by vote. Committee members freely discussed experimental courses and assessment results, project strategy, and the emerging curriculum, as well as problems and concerns. Public, campus-wide forums were intended to communicate project ideas, progress, and accomplishments and to generate as much discussion and as many creative ideas as possible. To achieve these goals, public forums usually began with a presentation and a discussion, followed by a workshop in which small groups of participants were asked to focus on a particular task or set of questions. Working in small groups gave everyone a chance to talk and contribute to the project. Groups reported to the whole forum, and results were discussed and recorded. Input generated in public forums was reported back to project committees that decided how to incorporate ideas from the campus into the project. Two examples of how these forums contributed to the project follow. The first example resulted in a statement of purpose for the project, and the second converted a critic of the project into an ally.

Statement of Purpose and a Hybrid Curriculum

A workshop held during an off-campus retreat in 1999 resulted in the development of a statement of purpose for the core reform effort. This working session began with a short presentation and discussion of Alexander Meiklejohn's 1932 description of the goals of liberal education, taken from his account of an experimental college at the University of Wisconsin. Intelligence, Meiklejohn says, is what a

liberal college is thought to "build up" in students. In contrast to specialized professional education, "there is the general liberal teaching of men for intelligence in the conduct of their own lives as human individuals" (Meiklejohn, 1981, p. 4). What, he asks, is this intelligence?

> Intelligence, it seems, is readiness for any human situation; it is the power, wherever one goes, of being able to see, in any set of circumstances, the best response which a human being can make to those circumstances. And the two constituents of that power would seem to be, first, a sense of human values, and second, a capacity for judging situations as furnishing possibilities for the realizing of those values. It is very near to "wisdom." (1981, pp. 4–5)

After discussing Meiklejohn's ideas, participants broke into small groups to work together on drafting a mission statement for a new core curriculum. How could we articulate the overarching goals of reform in a short statement of purpose? The 18 participants developed six draft statements that were reported back to the whole group for discussion. Drafts emphasized understanding the multiplicity and commonality of human experience, developing skills of reasoning and analysis, making reasoned and ethical decisions, and applying skills and knowledge in daily life. The formulation that emerged from that workshop reflects these values: "The mission of the Montana State University core curriculum is to prepare students to use multiple perspectives in making informed, critical and ethical judgments in their personal, public and professional lives." Like Meiklejohn's description, this statement of purpose emphasizes the application of intellectual skills to all realms of life. It also places understanding of diverse perspectives at the center of critical inquiry.

Awbrey (2005), citing Newton (2000), describes three dominant models for general education in the United States. The "democratic citizen model" focuses the curriculum on what citizens need to know, on the relevancy of instruction to societal concerns, and on multiculturalism and diversity. The other two models Awbrey describes have contrasting aims. "The great books model" seeks

"discussion of fundamental questions viewed from the perspective of western civilization" (Awbrey, 2005, p. 9). The "scholarly discipline model" focuses on the methods practiced by different academic disciplines to create knowledge. It is associated with the rise of research universities and remains the dominant model among U.S. liberal arts faculty (Awbrey, 2005, pp. 9–10). The statement of purpose developed in 1999 would place MSU's core curriculum squarely in the tradition of the democratic citizen model. But the creation of CORE 2.0 in 2003 added a suite of Inquiry courses focused on how academic disciplines create knowledge. The curriculum that emerged from joining the "core of the core," focused on dialogue, discovery, and research, with the newly conceived Inquiry requirement combined the democratic citizen and scholarly discipline models. The hybrid curriculum that resulted seems a remarkably good fit for MSU's long tradition as a public land-grant university and its more recent success as a research university. The evolution of the hybrid curriculum also illustrates that as part of the process of reforming the curriculum, reformers had to align their aims and ideals with the culture and values of the campus. We had to learn through conversation with many constituencies what kind of curriculum could be widely supported on our campus.

Gaining an Ally

Several times during Reinventing the Core, a faculty member who had not been involved in the project attended a campus-wide forum for the first time and passionately criticized the reform effort and then, after the forum, unexpectedly declared support for the project. In preparing this article, I talked with one of these "converted" faculty members, a respected senior member of the faculty. He remembered the forum clearly and described the concerns he had about Reinventing the Core and the reasons he changed his mind about the project. When he stood up in the forum and criticized the project so forcefully, he was concerned that Reinventing the Core would lower standards and create a curriculum that was "too general" to be rigorous. He was concerned about potential conflict between the goals of retaining students and maintaining rigor. Why

did he change his mind about core reform? He said that when he talked with colleagues whom he respected during the forum, he could see that reformers wanted a more coherent and intellectually challenging curriculum and that the proposed curriculum was evolving as a result of faculty input. He said that the forum was designed to allow genuine dialogue and that hearing peers articulate their ideas, beliefs, and principles resulted in greater trust. The forum, he said, allowed people who were not making the decisions to feel that there could be a real debate before the final form of the curriculum was decided. It was important to him that discussions were taking place early in the process, so that faculty input could affect the outcome of the project. When faculty are not listened to, he said, and it seems that decisions are coming from above, then people become cynical. In the end, he became a key member of one of the project committees and helped design criteria for one of the new elements of CORE 2.0. There is no mistaking the message here. Talking about changing the curriculum when reformers have no intention of changing their direction can be counterproductive. But a true dialogue among peers who respect and listen to each other can be a powerful force for gaining allies and expanding the community supporting core reform.

Objections to Change

Forums and meetings did not resolve all the issues that concerned members of the campus community. Certain issues were brought up repeatedly at public forums and meetings throughout the project, and although never resolved once and for all for the whole campus, they were taken seriously and discussed each time they were raised.

One challenge focused on whether the reformers could prove that a new curriculum was better than the existing one. The initial plan for Reinventing the Core proposed such a demonstration through assessing the learning outcomes of a cohort of 100 students who would complete an experimental curriculum. But it was not possible to persuade students to take a sequenced series of courses over four semesters without severely restricting their choices, something that would not be acceptable on our campus. The project could

show how students and faculty perceived individual courses but could not demonstrate how the outcomes of a cohort going through the curriculum differed from those of other students. What project leaders could say in the absence of a controlled experiment was that Reinventing the Core would report assessment results from experimental courses and provide ample opportunities for discussion but that the adoption of a new curriculum would ultimately be based on faculty judgment, not on scientific proof.

A second concern involved doubts about student preparation to successfully pursue a curriculum centered on critical inquiry and research. These concerns, echoing doubts expressed earlier in connection with the College Seminar, posed fundamental objections to change. If students were incapable of succeeding with the intellectual tasks envisioned in the new curriculum, then it would be a waste of resources to implement such a curriculum. This line of reasoning supported the opinion of some that resources would be better invested in upper-division classes. In the absence of a controlled experiment, the most persuasive response to this belief about student ability came from faculty who had personally seen first-year students successfully grapple with challenging intellectual tasks and who could offer firsthand observation of student performance. Fortunately, there were many faculty who taught the College Seminar, developed experimental core courses, or used active learning in their classes and could speak persuasively on this issue.

Some faculty argued that there was a common body of knowledge all educated persons should possess and that an improved core curriculum should be designed to convey this knowledge. This subject was explored in several meetings with faculty in particular disciplines, and in each case, the task of identifying the set of common knowledge required by each broad disciplinary area proved daunting. Faculty realized they were unlikely to agree about what constituted the essential knowledge in their discipline, and even if the common set of knowledge could be identified and agreed on, it was hard to imagine fitting foundational knowledge of the arts, sciences, and humanities into the hours of instruction allotted to the core curriculum, roughly one-quarter of the total credits students would take as undergraduates. Because no one cared to reduce the size of the major curricula to

accommodate more general instruction, the subject of a common body of knowledge was quietly shelved.

Concern about funding a new curriculum was the most common concern expressed and one that troubled everyone working on the project. MSU, like so many other universities, faces a challenging fiscal environment in which there are important competing claims on any discretionary resources. It was, therefore, critical for the campus community to recognize how a strong core curriculum would benefit every undergraduate instructional program. Improved critical thinking, speaking, and writing, along with a willingness to participate actively in learning, are abilities that major programs seek in their students. Because few new resources would be available for the new curriculum, it was also essential that the community think about realigning existing resources, especially faculty time, already invested in the core curriculum. Implementing first-year seminars for all students would require additional faculty time, and hence new resources, to teach the small sections, but shifting faculty effort from the old core to the new one would support the other elements of the curriculum. Considering the cost of implementing a new core helped core reformers devise a feasible plan and prevented the group from proposing a curriculum that was too expensive to implement well.

Good Conversation

Most of the conversations conducted as part of Reinventing the Core were productive and interesting. Contrary to Rhodes's description, eyes did not glaze over; "people of generosity and good will" did not "become intolerant," nor did "those of sound judgment . . . become rigid, hard-line advocates" (2001, p. B7). In her essay "The Ethics of Talk: Classroom Conversation and Democratic Politics," Ruth W. Grant (1996) gives an account of good conversation. She argues that a good conversation—whether a dialogue, deliberation, or critical inquiry—is a "non-partisan ethical activity" that entails ethical behaviors necessary for effective public discourse in a democratic society. Grant contrasts dialogue and debate, noting that in a dialogue the talking is expected to

result in an agreement on "whatever comes to light as most reasonable—and with the expectation that something new and better will come to light" (1996, p. 474). In a debate there is no such expectation, only that one side will be judged to have won, and another, to have lost. "A dialogue," she says, "presumes that all participants are open to persuasion" and that each "accepts an obligation to yield to the better argument" (1996, p. 473). If one party takes a partisan position and has no intention of yielding to the better argument, a good conversation is impossible. Although Grant's argument is aimed at promoting good conversation in university classrooms, her characterization of the assumptions and behaviors necessary for good conversation apply to other dialogues as well, including the kind of talk that could allow a large and complex university to find enough common ground to change its general education curriculum.

Reinventing the Core encouraged dialogue by focusing discussion on how best to reach the common goal of improving general education for all students. Reformers minimized polarizing debates by allowing the form of the proposed curriculum to evolve through the entire process as they received new ideas and discovered unanticipated barriers. Reformers were willing to change their minds and revise their ideas about the curriculum when persuaded that it was best to do so, even when these changes involved giving up cherished ideals, such as a firmly sequenced curriculum and paired and team-taught courses. After describing conversation among regulars at Valois, a neighborhood cafeteria in Chicago, Grant says, "Public conversation establishes our sense of ourselves in relation to society as a whole. Put simply, to be part of the conversation is to be part of the community" (1996, p. 480). The long series of conversations at MSU expanded the community of people who were interested in improving general education and willing to change the curriculum in a way that promised a richer intellectual experience for students. The dialogue also fostered tolerance of and respect for multiple viewpoints, which in turn made a kind of consensus possible even though MSU faculty, in all likelihood, would still disagree today about philosophies of general education and about what an ideal curriculum should look like.

Conclusion

Even though the structure of CORE 2.0 differs from the reformers' initial vision, it meets most of the goals of the reform project. It refocuses the core on inquiry, active learning, and communication. Common learning outcomes, specified for each new category in the curriculum, emphasize critical thinking and the ability to see multiple perspectives. Throughout CORE 2.0, students develop skills in discussion, teamwork, and writing, and they practice applying intellectual skills to problem solving and decision making. CORE 2.0 creates coherence by building skills that are introduced in the first-year seminar; expanded in Inquiry, Diversity, and CIS courses; and culminate in an authentic research experience for each student. The emphasis on a research experience for each student was a particularly good fit for MSU, which already had a strong tradition of undergraduate research and a growing reputation for world-class faculty research. The requirement that all students complete a research and creative experience as part of the core curriculum is now central to the university's identity.

In retrospect, it might seem that the CORE 2.0 curriculum, or something like it, could have been imported *in toto* and implemented expeditiously. But without the sustained process of dialogue and revision, there would have been little community support for a new curriculum and little enthusiasm for change. MSU had advantages that contributed to the success of Reinventing the Core. Funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the university gave core reformers resources and time to develop and test experimental courses and curricula and to conduct an extended series of conversations involving multiple constituencies on campus. The College Seminar, established prior to the core reform effort, engaged a multidisciplinary group of faculty in a challenging teaching experience, sustained a dialogue about books and ideas, and helped establish a sense of common purpose, setting the stage for a lengthy effort to improve the university's core curriculum. The reform effort was successful in large part because the project leaders approached discussion of curriculum reform as a genuine dialogue and expanded a community of faculty and administrators committed to improving the general education experience of MSU students and to making quality general education a high priority for the university.

References

Awbrey, S. M. (2005). General education reform as organizational change: Integrating cultural and structural change. *Journal of General Education, 54*(1), 1–21. Retrieved December 20, 2005, from the Project MUSE database, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_general_education/v054/54.1awbrey.pdf.

Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University. (1998). *Reinventing undergraduate education: A blueprint for America's research universities*. Stanford: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Boyer, E. L. (1992). The undergraduate experience: Critical issues for the 1990s. In *Perspectives on the freshman year, vol. I* (pp. 5–13). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience.

Gaff, J. G. (1980). Avoiding the potholes: Strategies for reforming general education. *Educational Record*, *61*(4), 50–59.

Grant, R. W. (1996). The ethics of talk: Classroom conversation and democratic politics. *Teachers College Record, 93*(3), 470–482.

Hardy, L. (2001). The new core curriculum: "Engaging God's world." *Calvin College Spark Online Edition*. Retrieved April 12, 2006, from www.calvin.edu/publications/spark/spring01/core.htm.

Meiklejohn, A. (1981). *The experimental college*. Washington, DC: Seven Locks Press, Inc.

Newton, R. R. (2000). Tensions and models in general education planning. *Journal of General Education, 49*(3), 165–181.

Pittendrigh, A. (1998). Montana State University–Bozeman (2). In B. Barefoot, C. Warnock, M. Dickinson, S. Richardson, & M. Roberts (Eds.), *Exploring the evidence: Reporting outcomes of first-year seminars*, *vol. II* (pp. 63–64). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

Ratcliff, J. L. (1997). What is a curriculum and what should it be? In J. G. Gaff & J. L. Ratcliff (Eds.), *Handbook of the undergraduate curriculum* (pp. 5–29). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rhodes, F. H. T. (2001, September 14). A battle plan for professors to recapture the curriculum. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, B7. Retrieved April 24, 2006, from http://chronicle.com/weekly/v48/i03/03b00701.htm.