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TEACHING

# How Notre Dame Rethought Its Core Curriculum

SEPTEMBER 19, 2018

Hello, and welcome to Teaching, a free weekly newsletter from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Today, Beth tells us about how Notre Dame is rebooting its core curriculum to help students avoid going through the motions. Beckie highlights one reader's idea for improving group work, and she shares news about an effort to improve introductory history courses. Let's begin.

## A More-Cohesive Core

In recent years, faculty members at the University of Notre Dame came to a realization about their institution's core curriculum: Students had adopted a checklist mentality, seeing their required general-education courses as something to simply get through. And Notre Dame, the professors realized, was feeding that attitude.

This fall Notre Dame introduced the most noteworthy changes to its core curriculum in more than 40 years, following a lengthy review process. Among other changes, the new core will provide a more cohesive and thoughtful introduction to the liberal arts.

"That's a big lift," says John McGreevy, a history professor and co-chair of the committee that spent two years reviewing the core curriculum and recommended the changes. "Our curriculum had drifted over the past 40 years," he said, "where everyone just offered an intro course that wasn't really distinctive in terms of general education."

To restart the process of creating a more coherent design, Notre Dame has recategorized core requirements into "ways of knowing," including quantitative reasoning, science and technology, fine arts and literature, advanced language and culture, history, social science, theology, and philosophy. While all of the courses that met the previous requirements will be grandfathered in, a new core-curriculum committee will spend the next few years reviewing them, in collaboration with departments.

McGreevy points to a revamped philosophy course, "God and the Good Life," as an exemplar of the kind of core courses he hopes evolve under this new system, ones that look at pressing questions through the lens of a particular discipline. "God and the Good Life" is hugely popular, he says, because it asks big questions, such as: What does it take to live a meaningful life? "The kids are electrified by this," he says.

Notre Dame has also put out a call for faculty members to propose “integration” courses for the core. They must be team-taught and analyze complex problems from the perspective of two or more disciplines. Another new category of courses is called “Catholicism and the Disciplines,” designed to examine issues of faith and ideas from the Catholic tradition as they relate to one or more disciplines. The university will provide grants and other support to help faculty members develop these courses.

Part of the problem with the old system, says Michael Hildreth, a physics professor and chair of the new curriculum committee, is that departments controlled what met a requirement and what didn't. As a result, he said, no higher body was asking the tough questions, including: Is this what you want to be teaching students if it's their only exposure to your discipline?

“If I look at what I want a student to know,” he asks of his own discipline, “do I really care if they're going to be able to calculate the speed of a ball rolling down a plane? What I really want them to know is the scientific method, what is scientific research, how you do science, how you analyze data.”

Notre Dame is also making other key changes to introduce flexibility into the curriculum and make it more coherent. It's reducing the number of requirements, ramping up opportunities for writing, and no longer allowing students to opt out of core requirements with AP credit. Departments will review the requirements in their major so that students have room to take three or more electives, and the advising system will be revamped so that students will avoid bunching up their core courses in the first couple of years.

Notre Dame is not, of course, the only college trying to substantially revamp its core requirements and add more interdisciplinary, big-picture classes. Boston College, another Catholic institution, went through the process a few years ago, creating “Complex Problems and Enduring Questions” courses, a series of paired courses that are team-taught and designed for first-year students. In that arrangement a student could take, for example, a course on the psychology of emotions paired with an English course on the role of emotion in literature.

Hildreth says the biggest challenge going forward is to get faculty members on board who are excited to contribute to the revamped core. His hope, he says, is to create “a community of instructors who are interested in the problems of general education and whether they can engage their colleagues to make general education better.”

Notre Dame's experience raises a number of important questions. Among them: What should introductory courses accomplish? Should they lay the groundwork for a deeper dive into a discipline, or should they try to connect that discipline's way of thinking to broader societal questions? If you teach introductory courses, what purpose do you want them to serve? If you want to share your observations, drop me a line at [beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com](mailto:beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com) and I may include them in a future newsletter.

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## Working Together

The ability to work in teams is widely understood to be a key quality employers seek in college graduates. Still, we often hear that students resist group work. Unless instructors are careful, some students dominate group projects, and others skate by. It can be tricky, in other words, to make students feel accountable to one another.

That made an observation about fostering class participation from John D. Lawry, a professor emeritus of psychology at Marymount College of Fordham University, stand out to us. Lawry used to require students taking his seminars to lead a class discussion, either on their own or in pairs, he wrote. Students indicated that they really liked this practice, he added. “I think one of the dynamics at work was that students felt obligated to participate,” Lawry wrote, “knowing that their turn would come to lead and would need their classmates to participate as well.”

Have you found a good way to make students in your course accountable to one another? Tell me about it at [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com) and it may appear in a future newsletter.

## Redesigning Intro to History

The American Historical Association announced on Tuesday a new project, supported by a \$1.65-million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to rework introductory history courses.

Introductory courses are meant to give students a first taste of a discipline. But sometimes, they box students out instead of welcoming them in. The chances of that happening vary by students’ gender, race, family income, and first-generation status, as research from the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education has found. And failing an intro course, other research indicates, is linked to lower chances of graduating.

The data suggest that “many well-established approaches to teaching introductory history and other foundational college courses may be subtly but effectively promoting inequity,” wrote Andrew K. Koch, the institute’s chief operating officer.

To tackle this problem, the institute and association will work together with history professors from 11 two- and four-year colleges to rethink introductory courses, with a particular focus on serving a diverse population of students.

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us, at [dan.berrett@chronicle.com](mailto:dan.berrett@chronicle.com), [beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com](mailto:beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com), or [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com). If you have been forwarded this newsletter and would like to sign up to receive your own copy, you can do so [here](#).

— Dan, Beth, and Beckie

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