

History of the Current Core Curriculum

The Core Construction Committee

The Core Construction Committee consisted of a group of elected faculty representatives from each academic division; Arts and Humanities, Daniels College of Business, Graduate School of International Studies, Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Engineering, and Social Sciences. The group was called together by Provost Bill Zaranka to reconsider the University of Denver's undergraduate requirements, then known as a 'whole' under the moniker of the "Core Curriculum". The faculty committee was empowered to examine every aspect of the curriculum, and worked throughout the calendar year. The only form of undergraduate requirement that was expressly forbidden was a classic "breadth requirement", where students fulfill out-of-program requirements by taking certain credits in other departmental offerings. The committee met with consultants from other universities such as Duke, and conducted research on comparable programs across the country. Members of the CCC visited each department and division on campus that is implicated in undergraduate education to see what faculty liked and disliked about the Core Curriculum. During the CCC's discussions, two models seemed to move forward. One was a matrix model that combined courses tailored to the undergraduate requirements with select departmental courses. Students would complete a course in each square of the matrix. The advantage of this model is that it did not sequester courses such as First-Year English, Mathematics, or language into a "skills" zone or category. The other model was a progressive theme model, which held students to a series of courses that would build one upon the other in successive modes and topics of inquiry. The courses for this model would all be designed and taught specifically for the undergraduate requirements. The advantages of this model were simplicity and a tight interaction of courses.

At issue, as always, was the number of credits that each department or division would offer in any model of the curriculum. DU's undergraduate requirements already comprised a large chunk of its students' programs of study. Ultimately, a hybrid model of the undergraduate curriculum was presented for faculty consideration and vote. The matrix model was integrated into the concept of Foundations courses and the themes of the Core Curriculum, whereas the progressive theme model was integrated into the articulation of Foundations and Core and the fact that the courses would be specific to the curricula themselves. During the discussion about the new Undergraduate Requirements (or "UREqs" as they are now referred to), the NSME representatives on the CCC argued persuasively that a three-course sequence in Natural Science Foundations was essential to enable students to properly understand the mode of scientific inquiry. The representatives from AH/SS agreed that their own 24 credit foundations requirement could be shortened to 16, in order to enable the staffing of the proposed upper-division Core Curriculum (under the new iteration the term "Core" only refers to the 12 upper division credits). The understanding was that the faculty in AH/SS would shoulder the burden of providing Core courses for all undergraduate students, since the NSME faculty would be teaching primarily in Foundations. In addition, whereas the new proposed Foundations sequence would be controlled by divisions, the Core Curriculum would be run by a faculty committee representing all undergraduate units on campus, and Core courses could be proposed by any full-time faculty member at the University. Paralleling the new Faculty Core Committee would be an administrative group of the undergraduate deans, the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Studies, and the Provost. The administrative group would help coordinate the administrative aspects of the Core Curriculum. The Faculty Core Committee would have independence in running the curriculum and would report directly to the Provost. A program coordinator would be hired to manage the implementation of all curricular policies and to serve as the liaison to the academic community concerning the Core Curriculum.

The restructured Undergraduate Requirements were voted in by the Undergraduate Council, the Faculty Senate, and faculty in undergraduate units in the Spring of 2000.

The First Year of the New Core Curriculum

The new Faculty Core Committee was seated in Fall, 2000. Initial concerns were focused on how best to ramp up a new curriculum in two years, given faculty and budgetary constraints. The FCC began its work seriously in mid-November. Courses needed to be solicited from faculty, with departmental deadlines for the fall rapidly approaching in January. Furthermore, a budget needed to be established. One of the first standards set by the FCC was the concept of offering \$1500 in course development funds, really to be used to reward faculty for successfully proposing a Core course. (The concept behind the award was crucial because faculty were prohibited from teaching Core courses off-load.) The first Core Course Proposal Form was drawn up quickly, with the FCC opting that it would decide on its process for actually selecting successful course proposals only after meeting for a retreat, where lengthy and serious discussions ensued concerning this process, in January, 2001. The retreat would provide an opportunity for the committee to devise a system that would best implement the spirit of the Core as actually voted on by faculty.

(An aside: the "Administrative Group" was never a truly functional committee. The FCC in practice communicated primarily with the deans of AH/SS and NSME, since the Provost and the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Studies never apparently called the administrative group together. Initially, communications concerning the progress of the FCC, were sent to all deans of the administrative group; however, over time, only the deans of AH/SS, NSME, and the Provost were involved in providing feedback and/or guidance to the FCC. Also, the position of Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Studies was eventually eliminated, and the very concept of the administrative group withered away.)

During the FCC's January 2001 retreat, they realized that foremost of all concerns was a desire not to repeat the mistakes that were committed in previous Core incarnations. The committee reiterated its commitment to ensuring a Core of the highest quality, distinguished from the general education programs of other universities by its cultivation of reflective judgment, its interdisciplinarity, its scope, and its involvement of DU's best faculty. Questions that naturally arose were: the creation of a targeted system of rewards and incentives to assure that faculty are enthusiastic in their embrace of and commitment to Core, the maintenance of sufficient financial flexibility to ensure that instructors can invite guest speakers and arrange excursions for the students, and, finally, the institution of a set of opportunities specifically targeted for faculty development in Core and in teaching methodology as applicable to Core. These three topics (Faculty Rewards, Classroom Support, and Faculty Development) are each discussed below. Perhaps most importantly, the FCC targeted the development of critical thinking ("reflective judgment") as the single most important curricular factor. Reflective judgment would be articulated through differing approaches in a single course ("interdisciplinarity").

Faculty Rewards: the committee felt that teaching in the Core should be considered an honor. As such, the Core course proposal process should emphasize the collegial aspect of teaching in the curriculum. An annual award for excellence in the Core would be developed to reward faculty for their service to the University. Classroom Support: funds would be made available, on top of the \$1500 in course development funds, to help faculty produce and maintain a successful course. Guest speakers would be encouraged, within certain parameters. Faculty Development: Core should attract and keep

the most successful faculty possible. As such, opportunities should be provided that enable faculty to develop and improve their teaching abilities and their Core course offerings. Funding should be provided to enable interested and qualified faculty teaching in the Core to attend conferences dedicated to teaching and developments in general education. Conversely, the University should bring to campus people who can stimulate Core course development and teaching improvements.

During the retreat, the FCC also discussed a number of concerns, including the awareness that there is a need to remind faculty that Core course proposals do not need to be fully fleshed-out syllabae, as the proposals are intended to be just that: proposals that will be developed upon approval by the FCC. The committee also recognized that Core classes would be taught on-load, and that many departments might be tempted to shunt less-productive faculty to the Core. Of particular concern was the notion that an atmosphere of mistrust and cynicism would return if Core classes are demanded of faculty and programs with no suitable incentive system in place.

The first round of Core course proposals was, initially, a public-relations disaster. The rejection rate of proposals submitted was around 80%. Faculty, needless to say, were understandably incensed, claiming that the FCC had never properly communicated the criteria that was to be used for evaluating proposals (which was true, in fact: the standards were discussed and developed only a week or so before the deadline for course proposal submissions). Also, the FCC recognized that rating success in the classroom is impossible, and discarded the notion of DU's "best faculty" as something that could be identified outside of the proposal process. The FCC responded to the complaints by meeting with every faculty member individually who submitted a rejected course. Members of the FCC worked with faculty proposing courses to explain more explicitly the proposal process and more specifically, the ideas behind the new curriculum. There was a quick turn-around, and the majority of resubmitted courses were accepted. The end result of the first round of submissions was a wide understanding that the FCC was serious about setting high standards for the new curriculum and maintaining their commitment to those standards.

For the following round of Core course submissions, open meetings were held with faculty to discuss the Core Curriculum and the course proposal process, and a new, more-detailed course proposal form was developed. The rejection rate fell dramatically. By this time, however, the FCC was busy setting policy, developing a budget, and being interviewed for the University's re-accreditation. The budget was negotiated such that the Core Curriculum would be its own budget unit, with its own gain-share funds. The re-accreditation process highlighted the concerns of the visiting accrediting body, which openly worried that an entirely faculty-run curriculum could never hope to provide the required number of courses without open administrative intervention. The policies formalized by the FCC were instrumental in moving the Core Curriculum forward. Each policy is listed below (along with an approximate time of adoption; not every policy dates from the Winter and Spring Quarters of 2001).

1. Speakers in Core courses: a maximum limit of 2 speakers per course (or quarter), with each speaker paid \$150 per visit plus travel expenses (within reason). Visits by DU faculty to be paid as well. More expensive speakers, requiring plane fare, for example, would be considered individually by the FCC. Any deviations from this policy would need to be reviewed by the FCC. (Winter 2001)
2. The "Outstanding Core Faculty Award" will reward faculty (awarded annually) for excellence in the Core Curriculum. (Winter 2001)
3. Core policy allows for a maximum of 4 Core credits to transfer into the requirements, only if the student is not eligible for other programmatic waivers for the Core requirements. The transfer credit may be credit from study abroad, or credit from other institutions of higher education. Courses transferred into the curriculum from study abroad programs must be approved for Core credit and will be placed into the requirements after the student has completed the required eight credits (if transferring credits in); the study abroad credits may be placed in any of the three themes. Study abroad courses taught by DU faculty are not eligible for Core credit unless the course is an officially approved Core course. Courses transferred from other universities must apply to a specific Core theme. (Winter 2001, modified 2002, modified Winter Quarter, 2004, modified again Spring Quarter, 2004)
4. The Core course student evaluation form: 4-point scale and set questions. (Summer 2001; changed to a 6-point scale effective Fall Quarter, 2004)
5. Assessment: a template will be used to assess the three Core themes, using understanding of the course's relation to the theme through specific assignments as the basic level of charting the development of students' reflective judgment. (piloted AY 2002-2003, instituted Fall Quarter, 2003; the templates are available online www.du.edu/core)
6. Course continuation policy: faculty identified through course evaluations as having repeated problems (as defined by extraordinarily low student evaluations in the "instructor" and "course" categories) delivering a successful Core course, would, after the initial setback, be consulted by the chair of the FCC to discuss the course; after the second set of problematic evaluations would be asked to submit a plan to improve the course; after the third set of negative evaluations, would be asked to reconsider teaching in the Core Curriculum. (Spring 2004)
7. Core petition process: if a student has been misadvised by an academic advisor, and, as a result, cannot complete the Core Curriculum requirements within the framework and policies established by the Faculty Core Committee, that student can then petition the committee for a modification of his/her Core requirements. The petition must be accompanied by a letter from the respective advisor explaining the situation. (Fall, 2003)

The beginning of AY 2001-2002 saw the first set of Core courses implemented – far below the target of 30 courses per quarter ultimately needed for students when the requirement would be implemented fully – but nonetheless with the participation of AH/SS (the majority of courses, as expected), NSME, GSIS, and GSSW (one course). DCB did not provide any Core courses, primarily because faculty are already booked up teaching courses needed for their programs.

Subsequent Years

After an initial flurry of interest, the practice of holding open faculty meetings for faculty interested in proposing Core courses ceased. Instead, faculty were encouraged to contact individual members of the FCC to discuss their Core course proposals, which, in fact, they are very receptive to and thus it has worked well under this paradigm. Nonetheless, due to many external factors that were beyond the control of the FCC, we began to experience course shortages beginning as early as Winter 2002, when the proposals for Fall 2003 were expected. The divisions of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, which were expected to provide the bulk of Core courses, were also expected to provide courses in a

number of other areas. The Dean's office, faced with a shortage of Foundations and Core courses, produced "expectations" of courses from each department in AHSS, based on their number of departmental major courses and students.

The impact on the FCC was to create a need for a more proactive way of working with faculty on their course proposals. Departments and faculty did not take kindly to outright rejection of courses. The FCC began to conditionally approve courses, provided that the faculty member work with a member of the FCC to improve the course according to the FCC's suggestions. The end result was the same, but the relationship with departments across the University improved considerably, as the FCC was now seen as a collaborator. The curriculum had matured.

From roughly 40% of the needed number of courses, the Core was now scheduled to offer roughly 85%. There were complaints from students that courses filled too quickly, but no complaints that could not ultimately be solved. New initiatives across the campus also began to compete with the Core Curriculum, particularly the Marsico Initiative and the Cherrington Global Scholars program. The Core Curriculum provided a natural testing-ground for piloting writing-intensive courses for the Marsico Initiative, and the FCC worked to modify its study abroad policy to accommodate the increasing number of students planning to study abroad.

The majority of the decisions made by the FCC during the January 2001 retreat have been implemented in some form. The Core Curriculum has developed a strong reputation of supporting its faculty curricular development, and has teamed up with other areas of the University, such as the Center for Teaching and Learning, to provide developmental support for faculty. As well, the Core brings a number of high profile speakers every year to the DU community.

Beginning in the 2003-04 academic year a number of Marsico lecturers were hired to teach in Foundations and Core to compensate for the fact that AH/SS faculty were being asked to do First-Year Seminars, and to compensate for the significant impact that the smaller writing-intensive courses created in the Core Curriculum. These lecturer positions will eventually be removed and the lines converted to tenure-track faculty in the Arts and Sciences (once the Marsico Initiative is close to completion).

Ongoing Structural Concerns

Divisional participation is necessarily based primarily in AH/SS. However, the Core Curriculum, by its design, is open to all divisions, and the FCC has tried repeatedly to involve faculty from other divisions on campus. Participation from faculty in GSIS has been particularly good. Faculty in NSM, while generally expressing an interest in the Core, have been unable to provide many courses (outside of the Department of Geography) because of requirements elsewhere. DCB has been struggling to find a way to provide Core courses, and one was almost at hand – once. The course load and structure of requirements of DCB's curriculum make it necessarily difficult for faculty to provide Core courses. The FCC has tried parties, lunches, programming, and other incentives to encourage faculty from divisions outside of AH/SS to contribute more to the curriculum. It is an ongoing concern, and one that has no clear resolution. The deans of those divisions, as well as the Provost and the Chancellor, have been made repeatedly aware of these difficulties.

Another main concern is institutional memory (the reason for this document). With each new incarnation, the FCC is further removed from its original history. Policies, and the reasons for those policies, need to be transmitted clearly to new FCC members. Particularly difficult is the concept of interdisciplinarity. The FCC has repeatedly tried to pin down this idea, only to be foiled by the vast differences in its comprehension across disciplines and academic areas. The FCC has always judged courses based on the particular merits of individual courses (hence the need for an annotated reading list), and ultimately has chosen to exercise judgment in specific instances with regards to interdisciplinarity.

Finally, student expectations are changing. The Core is at the center of the Cherrington study abroad experience. Despite the efforts to accommodate DU students by modifying specific Core policies with regard to credit transfer or exceptions, there is an increasing desire among students to see yet even more relaxed policies. The original FCC chose to adopt a stricter policy in the belief that the Core Curriculum provides a unique 'DU' experience.

However, the FCC recently approved that a maximum of two Core courses could be taken abroad (really a maximum 2/3 ratio: for students with a two course Core requirement, one may be brought in and for students with a one course requirement, no course may be counted).

Finally, the FCC has a redesigned assessment protocol that is tailored to each individual course, and has a streamlined process for approval of writing-intensive Core courses.

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