

## [In Praise of Core](#)

Published by [Dean Saitta](#) November 9th, 2006 in [Prez's Pulpit](#).

On October 20, 2006 the Faculty Senate passed a motion establishing a Senate Task Force to explore alternative ways that undergraduates can satisfy their thematic Core curriculum requirement. Justifications for such an effort vary, but most mention “problems” with the current Core. A “mini-minor” proposal for jump-starting discussion of alternatives has been circulated and discussed in the undergraduate units. This particular model would allow students to satisfy their thematic core requirement by taking three 2000-level courses in any discipline outside of the Division in which they are a major.

This task force initiative is based on the premise that faculty own the curriculum, and that good ideas for reform can come from anywhere, including the Faculty Senate. I wholeheartedly agree with this premise. In the specific case of Core, I believe that discussion should include not only ideas for reforming the curriculum, but also for *renewing* it.

We’ve just begun a UPAC strategic planning effort to re-examine our current mission and goals in preparation for an endowment campaign that will invest in people and programs. This process will almost certainly produce new ideas and emphases having implications for how we provide undergraduate education. It will likely highlight leveragable strengths and strategic capabilities that we can trade upon in improving undergraduate education. Interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship seem to be gaining increasing traction nationwide, especially at institutions concerned with serving the public good. It’s my experience that our Core curriculum—as it exists on paper and is delivered in practice—is both a leveragable strength and a strategic capability that can help us fulfill our ambition to serve the public good.

On paper, our Core is pretty impressive, offering a variety of courses that nicely reflect our commitment to interdisciplinary education and other priorities of institutional mission. As someone who was involved in planning the current Core I take a certain amount of pride in the courses that have been created. Our Core curriculum strikes me as superior to those offered by much better-known arbiters of gen ed tastes such as Harvard, which just disclosed the results of a Core curriculum planning process that began a couple of years after our Core was already in place (see [here](#)). For that, I think kudos are owed to our faculty, *especially* the faculty in Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences who, year in and year out, disproportionately shoulder the responsibility for creating and teaching Core courses.

In practice, teaching the Core course “Science and Religion in Dialogue” with my colleague and friend Greg Robbins has been one of the great joys of my professional life. From time-to-time Greg and I get dinged pretty good on our student evaluations—unsurprisingly, since the American population at large is deeply polarized by the issues at stake in the course—and we endure many other pedagogical frustrations. But viewed

over the long-term we're clearly moving in the right direction in our ability to challenge student capacities for critically negotiating multiple ways of understanding and representing the world. I suspect that the teachers of many other Core courses can make just as good, and probably better, reports.

It seems to me that the biggest “problem” with Core lies less with its structure and governing principles than with how students map on to it, and move through it. Faculty generally agree that the algorithm used by students to select Core courses is to take “whatever fits my schedule.” This algorithm is likely encouraged by the programmatic demands of disciplinary majors and reinforced by faculty advisors. We might contemplate changing the ways in which students and faculty think about Core. We might point out that there is a logic to Core’s thematic categories (Self and Identity, Environments and Communities, Continuity and Change), and remind ourselves that these categories are subject, by original design, to change with intellectual climates and student needs. More importantly, we might point out that intellectual coherence can be built across categories if students engage with Core as it was originally intended to be engaged: as a junior and senior level experience.

In spending just a few minutes with the Core course catalogue it struck me that courses can be strung together across the current thematic categories in ways that achieve at least five different kinds of *literacies*. Many courses have internationalization or globalization emphases and thus facilitate *intercultural* literacy. There are a number of courses that address topics of faith and morality, thereby cultivating *ethical* literacy. Several courses explore the nature of civil society, and thus build *civic* literacy. History looms large in a bunch of others, thereby promising the kind of *historical* literacy that can inoculate students against narrow-minded presentism. Fewer courses—but ones still distributed across the main thematic categories—cover the relationships between science, culture, and politics—thereby enhancing *scientific* literacy. These (and other) literacies could easily be highlighted as part of what we hope to achieve with undergraduate education. They might even warrant mention in the “Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes” document currently being discussed as part of the Marsico Initiative.

In short, I think that we can do better by our students (as well as society) if we encourage them to build “mini-minors”—or, *literacy concentrations*—within the established Core, rather than marginalizing or scuttling the requirement in favor of some other approach. We should consider this suggestion alongside all other suggestions for Core curriculum reform that will surface in the near future. We should face up to the challenges of interdisciplinary teaching, not shrink from them.