A Eulogy for Core?

by Dean Saitta

I appreciate Jere Surber contributing to the discussion of thematic Core (see his comment on "In Praise of Core"), and respect his decision not to join me in praising that piece of University Requirements. He's certainly got lots of company. I'm posting this reply to him here instead of in the original comment thread so that my tables will format properly.

I didn't mean to suggest that all the current Core needed was some "judicious tinkering" to remedy "technical glitches."   I said that discussion of Core "should include not only ideas for reforming the curriculum, but also for *renewing* it." Renewing, to me, implies a bit more than tinkering. Many moons ago Greg Robbins urged that we should continually ask of our general education curriculum "What's Core about *that*?" I think that's still great advice.

If there's nothing particularly "Core" about the current Core then I'd be the first to join Jere in arguing that we should scrap it and start from scratch. However, I believe that the current Core categories—which to me communicate an interest in disseminating knowledge about Identity, Culture, and History that has been formed through explicitly interdisciplinary encounters—still have quite a bit of relevance and even urgency in today's world. Jere's argument that these categories are "artificial and constraining" is a new one to me. I've mostly heard that these categories are so broad that any given course could fit comfortably into any one of them. Obviously the Core Curriculum Committee has its own ideas because, like Jere, I'm aware that it has been rejecting a fair number of course proposals.

As for how well Core is working and what students think of it, the following tabulation of course evaluation numbers for the last four quarters might be instructive. These are average numbers for University Requirement courses in major divisional areas in the categories of "Challenging", "Instructor", and "Course", with highest numbers bolded:

Fall 2006	CHAL	INST	CRS
Core	**5.2**	**5.2**	**4.9**
AHUM	5.0	**5.2**	4.8
NSM	4.6	4.3	3.9
SOCS	4.9	5.1	4.7
Math	4.7	4.6	4.0
Spring 2006	CHAL	INST	CRS
Core	**5.2**	**5.2**	**5.0**
AHUM	4.8	4.9	4.5
NSM	5.0	5.1	4.5
SOCS	4.9	**5.2**	4.8

Math	4.7	4.7	3.9
Winter 2006	**CHAL**	**INST**	**CRS**
Core	**5.3**	**5.2**	**4.9**
AHUM	4.9	5.1	4.8
NSM	5.0	4.8	4.3
SOCS	4.7	4.8	4.5
Math	4.9	4.7	4.0
Fall 2005	**CHAL**	**INST**	**CRS**
Core	**5.1**	5.2	4.8
AHUM	**5.1**	5.0	4.7
NSM	4.9	4.8	4.3
SOCS	**5.1**	**5.3**	**5.0**
Math	4.8	4.6	3.8

Say what you will about student course evaluations and numerical averages (and I don't like or trust 'em much myself), these numbers seem to indicate that students are satisfied with Core at least as much as they're satisfied with all other areas of University Requirements, areas in which faculty teach from disciplinary expertise and, perhaps, with greater passion for the subject matter. They suggest that students don't hold what they see as the generally more challenging nature of Core courses against the instructor or the course. They might even imply that there are good things happening in Core that could potentially inform teaching in the other areas of University Requirements.

So, in dealing with the question of Core we might think about starting from a position that lies somewhere between praising it and calling for its burial.