

## [Don't Mess With Core](#)

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Because we're beginning to talk seriously about [General Education Review](#) I was curious to take another look at student evaluations of [Core Curriculum](#) courses to see if some [earlier conclusions](#) about the virtues of Core still held. What follows are student satisfaction data from the four most recent academic quarters. These are average numbers for University Requirement courses in major divisional areas in the categories of "Challenging", "Learned", "Instructor", and "Course", with highest numbers bolded:

<b>Winter 2008</b>	<b>CHAL</b>	<b>LEARN</b>	<b>INST</b>	<b>CRS</b>
Core	<b>5.4</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>5.2</b>
AHUM	5.0	4.9	5.0	4.8
NATS	5.0	4.6	5.0	4.6
SOCS	4.8	4.6	5.1	4.7
Math	5.0	4.2	4.8	3.9
<b>Fall 2007</b>	<b>CHAL</b>	<b>LEARN</b>	<b>INST</b>	<b>CRS</b>
Core	<b>5.3</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>5.1</b>
AHUM	5.0	4.9	5.0	4.8
NATS	4.8	4.4	4.7	4.3
SOCS	5.1	5.0	5.3	4.9
Math	4.9	4.1	4.5	4.0
<b>Spring 2007</b>	<b>CHAL</b>	<b>LEARN</b>	<b>INST</b>	<b>CRS</b>
Core	<b>5.3</b>	<b>5.1</b>	5.2	5.0
AHUM	5.0	5.0	<b>5.3</b>	<b>5.1</b>
NATS	4.8	4.4	4.6	4.1
SOCS	5.0	4.9	5.1	4.9
Math	4.8	4.2	5.0	3.9
<b>Winter 2007</b>	<b>CHAL</b>	<b>LEARN</b>	<b>INST</b>	<b>CRS</b>
Core	<b>5.2</b>	4.9	5.1	4.8
AHUM	5.1	<b>5.0</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>4.9</b>
NATS	4.9	4.5	4.9	4.3
SOCS	5.0	4.8	5.1	4.6
Math	5.0	4.3	4.8	4.1

Core takes the top spot in 11 of 16 categories and is a close second in the other 5. Although the caveats about working with student evaluation data and course averages still hold, this strikes me as a pretty good record. I think the numbers continue to reinforce [the case for praising Core](#), including its structure, the professors who teach in it (for a particularly distinguished contributor, see [here](#)), and the [faculty committee](#) that manages it.

This analysis obviously ignores the question of whether our students are actually learning what we intend for them to learn in Core, which is the province of university [assessment](#). Call me naïve, but I'm willing to assume that our Core faculty are capable of getting *something* of what we intend across, and that it might very well be just enough to achieve the aims of the curriculum. The *something* that I think I've been able to effectively communicate in the three Core courses that I teach— Science and Religion in Dialogue (with [Greg Robbins](#) in Religious Studies), [The Cultured Ape](#), and [Monumental London](#)— include good introductions to subject areas that lie at the intersection of the sciences and humanities, and good critical thinking about whether and how traditional disciplinary knowledges can be brought into mutually beneficial relationships with each other... perhaps in ways that open up whole new areas of human inquiry.

Do the [Core themes](#) need some rethinking and reformulating? Possibly. Do we need greater participation from scientists, mathematicians, and others so that we can achieve a more thoroughly interdisciplinary Core? Yes. Do we need to provide some Core teaching relief for faculty in AHSS, on whose backs the curriculum is currently balanced, so that they can pursue other teaching interests? Absolutely. But even in its current form I'm convinced that Core is succeeding in its mission to deepen liberal learning and better prepare students both for the workplace (which is demanding an ability to make multiple career changes) and for citizenship (which is demanding an ability to integrate knowledge from across disciplines and cultures).

In fact, Core is the one piece of our Gen Ed program that, given a little more love, might serve as a genuine source of intellectual pride for us. In older iterations Core was also a mechanism for building community among faculty across campus, a function that we should think about renewing. In short, we should stay the course with Core and continue to nurture its evolution. We should mess with it as little as possible