

A Brief Personal History of General Education Reform at DU, 1988-2018

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Identifying “positionality” in these matters is important, so here’s a bit of mine to start off. I arrived at DU in September, 1988, pretty much fresh out of graduate school. My graduate program in anthropology at the University of Massachusetts wasn’t simply *shaped* by 1960s civil rights unrest. Rather, it was *born* in that crucible. It was a PhD program invented on the fly, unencumbered by academic tradition or legacy. This promoted innovation, disciplinary boundary-crossing, and activism both academic and political. Gender, racial, and intellectual diversity were prioritized in faculty hiring. Graduate students were given stand-alone teaching assignments and a strong voice in department governance. We had voting rights on everything from faculty hiring to curriculum. In fact, we graduate students were probably more enfranchised back then than many full-time faculty are today.

Among the stand-alone teaching assignments given to graduate students were courses in UMass’s general education curriculum. We took these courses very seriously because of the opportunity they provided to share anthropological knowledge about human bio-cultural diversity and the “deep history” of humankind with students on a campus historically plagued by racial unrest. A commitment to general education was fully-embraced by our professors and hard-wired into our constitution as graduate students. I brought that commitment with me to DU.

Looking Back

Core Curriculum

At the time of my arrival at DU a critically acclaimed Core Curriculum was in place. Designed and implemented in the early 1980s, the Core Curriculum played a crucial role in shaking the university out of a significant intellectual malaise produced by a severe financial crisis that nearly sunk it in the mid-1980s. The curriculum was located in a unified Undergraduate College, led by a single dean. Among other things (e.g., proficiency courses in English, Math, and Languages that have always been a part of recent general education at DU), students were required to take year-long, thematic, interdisciplinary, team-taught courses in the three great domains of human knowledge: Arts and Humanities (AHUM), Social Sciences (SOCS), and Natural Sciences (NATS).

I started teaching in the Core Curriculum in 1989, in a SOCS course called “Culture and Technology.” The course examined the role that technology played in shaping relationships between Indigenous and Western cultures in the context of an expanding world capitalist system. I then joined a NATS course called “The Origin and Evolution of Life.” I taught human evolution for five weeks in spring quarter. After that, I gave guest lectures about slave life as perceived through the lens of plantation archaeology for an AHUM course called “Multiple

Voices of America.” I’m pretty sure that I was the only faculty member on campus who taught in all three domains of the Core Curriculum.

The experience of teaching in DU’s Core Curriculum was truly formative. Planning and teaching explicitly interdisciplinary courses with colleagues from other academic units allowed me to find my persona, and my voice, as a classroom teacher. As a new Assistant Professor, what I learned from observing my colleagues in action was off-the-charts valuable. It certainly expanded my intellectual horizons. It also led to a strong identification with the teaching mission of the university, and with the university’s faculty. I still treasure the simple little bookshelf clock—inscribed with the words “CORE FACULTY: THE COLLEGE”—that we received as a token of appreciation for teaching in the curriculum.

I count teaching in the Core as one of three great faculty development opportunities in my 30 years at DU, each of which articulated with general education. The other two were the faculty-led DU study abroad program that allowed me to twice teach semester-length anthropology and general education courses in London, and the University Professorship program created by Provost Bill Zaranka. The latter awarded a \$15,000 stipend over three years for faculty to use as they pleased in exchange for creating and teaching *one* new general education course. Sadly, none of these fabulous faculty development opportunities, or anything really like them, now exists.

University Requirements

It’s in the nature of things for general education programs to change. Change came to the Core Curriculum in the late 1990s after The College was broken into the three undergraduate divisions that exist today, and a new Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Studies was appointed. We eliminated the year-long thematic courses in AHUM and SOCS. These were replaced by two-course sequences comprised of abridged Core Curriculum courses or mix-and-match introductory courses. We preserved, at the insistence of science faculty, the year-long thematic courses in NATS. The curriculum was capped by a three course “Integrated Experience Core” that required students to take team-taught AHUM-SOCS, SOCS-NATS, and AHUM-NATS courses delivered by faculty housed in those units.

This curriculum didn’t work out so well, mostly because it was tough to find enough courses that connected NATS with the other domains of knowledge. It was abandoned after three years. It was replaced, in 2000, by “University Requirements.” University Requirements was a hybrid Distribution/Core model. It had a mix-and-match two-course “Foundations Component” within AHUM and SOCS. The year-long NATS courses continued, again at the insistence of science faculty. This curriculum was capped by a three course “Core Component” organized according to three themes: (1) Self and Identities, (2) Communities and Environments, and (3) Change and Continuity. Students had to take one course in each theme.

The thematically organized Core Component of University Requirements was pretty successful. It offered an impressive variety of courses that nicely reflected our commitment (at

the time) to interdisciplinary education and other priorities of the university's "Public Good" vision. That vision was approved by the Board of Trustees in 2001. As one of the vision's authors, I understood "dedicated to the Public Good" very broadly as work that builds a citizenry's *capacity* for cooperative action and transformative change. The Core course "Science and Religion in Dialogue" that I taught with Greg Robbins, my colleague in Religious Studies, for the Communities and Environments theme was certainly vision-sensitive. It was also one of the great joys of my professional life. Regrettably, over the years the Public Good vision has become narrowly and rather exclusively defined as service learning and civic engagement through various sorts of community partnerships.

The thematic Core Component of University Requirements was also appreciated by students. On two different occasions, I tabulated anonymous student course evaluation data for all University Requirements courses in the categories of "Challenging", "Instructor", and "Course." I discovered that the numbers were very often (e.g., 68% of the time) better for Core courses than courses offered in other areas of University Requirements (AHUM, SOCS, NATS) in which faculty taught from their disciplinary expertise. I wrote up these findings and published them to a Faculty Senate blog in a series of essays during my tenure as Senate president between 2006-2008. The blog no longer exists, but the essays are posted to the [Teaching](#) page of my DU Portfolio site under "Contributions to General Education Review."

It strikes me that the success of this general education program may have been attributable to its resonance with wider social and cultural developments. The themes of the Core Component of University Requirements from 2000-2010—*Identity, Community, Change*—were precisely those that galvanized the popular insurgency, driven by young people, that helped make Barack Obama president in 2008. Obviously, we can't credit DU's thematic Core for delivering progressive change in American politics and society. However, I believe that our themes were tapping into something that, at the time, was generationally very important. I, for one, certainly felt it. I've always believed that instead of replacing the thematic Core we should have *renewed* it. I actually wrote a formal proposal to that effect, and submitted it for discussion in the Faculty Senate. The "counter-proposal" received some positive reaction, but it wasn't enough to save the thematic Core.

Looking Around

Complaints about the difficulty of delivering University Requirements and, especially, its Core Component led to another general education revision in 2008-2009. The result was today's "Common Curriculum." Common Curriculum eliminated the knowledge content categories of AHUM, SOCS, NATS in favor of "Ways of Knowing." Broad epistemologies of "Analytical Inquiry" (AI) and "Scientific Inquiry" (SI), organize courses under subject areas called "Society and Culture" and "The Natural and Physical World." Mixing and matching of introductory courses continues in the categories formerly known as AHUM and SOCS, although these courses are now pulled directly from department course offerings. The year-long natural science courses persist as usual. Common Curriculum established a required First Year Seminar

(FSEM) and a required Advanced Seminar (ASEM), both taught from the perspective of individual faculty. A *lot* of different disciplinary content is poured into these various categories.

An argument has been made that there is a “Core” quality to the Common Curriculum. Alternatively, I believe that Common Curriculum represents the final purge of anything even remotely Core-like in general education at DU. The Common Curriculum is a set of distribution requirements, pure and simple. Its creation was driven by a “we want our majors back” attitude, a sentiment that was expressed to loud approval in AHSS chairs and directors meetings in the run-up to curriculum ratification.

There are a number of problems with the Common Curriculum. Most practically, it hasn’t solved deliverability problems. This burden continues to be disproportionately loaded onto AHSS faculty. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that we continue to exclude adjunct faculty from general education teaching assignments and we’ve made no provision to include interested professional school faculty in the curriculum.

There are serious intellectual problems with the curriculum. For example, the epistemological distinction between “Scientific” and “Analytical” inquiry makes no logical or intuitive sense. It’s philosophically unsupportable. The curriculum committee, apparently inspired by general education reform elsewhere, wanted a structure that could conform to a “matrix.” It created organizing categories that could accomplish that goal in what appeared to be a classic case of form driving substance.

The Student Learning Outcomes for each category are also vague or completely mysterious, even though they are ostensibly based on university-wide undergraduate learning outcomes. For example, I teach a Scientific Inquiry: Society and Culture course that’s supposed to “*describe basic principles of human functioning and conduct in social and cultural contexts.*” I have no idea what this means. I never got an answer when I asked general education revision committee members in 2009, and I know of no effort to talk about it among SI: Society and Culture faculty in the years since.

Finally, it might be worth noting that while we were teaching the Common Curriculum another popular insurgency, unbeknownst to just about everybody, was gathering momentum. That’s the insurgency fueled by racism, sexism, xenophobia, pseudoscience, incivility, and extreme political partisanship that propelled Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016. It’s not the Common Curriculum’s fault that the country has gone tribal. But it’s interesting that our general education curriculum, inaccurately described as “Common”, went tribal at exactly the same time that the country did.

Looking Ahead

If the correlations between curriculum design and societal trajectory have any significance, then this is a critical moment in general education review at DU. It’s a critical moment even if the correlations are trivial. We need to think very carefully about how we will

organize, describe, fill, and deliver the general education curriculum. We shouldn't try to out-clever or out-gimmick programs at other universities, like I think we tried to do in 2008-09.

We should use organizing epistemological categories that make good intuitive sense. Alternatively, we might return to content categories (AHUM, SOCS, NATS) that usefully carve knowledge at its major joints. We might jettison the dichotomy between "Society and Culture" and "The Natural and Physical World", given that today's righteous interest in all forms of sustainability demands a radical re-thinking of the relationship between culture and nature.

In rethinking the relationship between culture and nature we might give some thought to slaying the sacred cow of year-long foundational science courses. More foundational natural and physical science, like more humanities and more social science, is often better than less. But I don't see that there's anything inherent in the natural and physical sciences that requires students to have more basic exposure to this domain of knowledge than to other domains. The asymmetry has never been adequately justified from an educational perspective. We should consider alternative approaches to teaching basic scientific literacy, a conversation that has been going on at other schools and for which there is a sizable literature.

We might eliminate the Writing Intensive *requirement* of the high-end Advanced Seminars. Other classroom pedagogies—discussion-intensive, laboratory-intensive, fieldwork-intensive, performance-intensive—can be just as effective as writing in communicating course content. Pedagogy should track subject matter and academic objectives, not be stipulated *a priori*. It's a simple matter of academic freedom.

We should generate Student Learning Outcomes that have abundant transparent meaning. In that regard, we might create some general education courses that explain to students *why* human bio-cultural diversity exists before we ask them to "constructively engage" with it.

We certainly need to bring more faculty from other academic units—like the professional schools—into the curriculum. These faculty can help fulfill the university's [Learning goal](#) of empowering students to "integrate and apply knowledge from across the disciplines" to "imagine new possibilities for themselves, their communities, and the world." Professional training is clearly part of DU's identity. Creating synergies between liberal and professional learning is something the university is uniquely positioned to accomplish. If nothing else, incorporation of professional school faculty would provide desperately needed teaching relief for colleagues in the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences on whose backs the Common Curriculum is currently delivered.

Here's an idea for a curriculum framework that might be worth considering going forward. It's based on concepts proposed some years ago by the philosopher Rudolf Weingartner in his book *Undergraduate Education: Goals and Means* (for a taste, see his article "[On the Practicality of a Liberal Education](#)"). Weingartner distinguishes between *Proficiencies*, *Competencies*, and *Conversancies*. Proficiencies include basic writing, math, and language

courses. Competencies cover learning in the academic major. For Weingartner, "*Conversancy with an area or field of knowledge implies a perspective sufficiently broad so as to enable a student to see a [major] field's relations to other worlds.*" In his view, the "pedagogic road to conversancy" is best served not by courses rooted in disciplines or "pieces of academic fields" but rather by courses that address much bigger topics, issues, and problems. I take this as an argument for a high-end thematic Core Curriculum akin to what we successfully created under University Requirements, one that builds on foundational learning in the great domains of human knowledge as well as in the major.

Weingartner's prioritization of conversancy as an educational value is echoed by other philosophers like Ruth Grant and Richard Rorty. Grant (in *The Ethics of Talk: Classroom Conversation and Democratic Politics*) considers "good conversation" to be a "non-partisan, ethical activity necessary for effective public discourse in a democratic society." In her words, it "establishes our sense of ourselves in relation to society as a whole...to be part of the conversation is to be part of the community." For Rorty (in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*), "edifying conversation" is a discourse in which we join with others in an attempt to "make sense of the multidimensional aspects of human experience." It's a project of finding "new, better, more interesting, and more fruitful ways of speaking." The conversation involves "being prepared to listen and learn from others, as well as to respond and reconstruct our own views, as we investigate together what it means to be a human being and how this might be brought about through education." This certainly seems like a skill worth promoting given the current political and cultural moment.

Tinkering a bit with Weingartner, we might re-establish a genuine, thematic Core Curriculum capable of serving multiple trustee, administration, faculty, and student interests. We might organize it into *Core Competencies* (basic proficiencies and literacies in the liberal arts and sciences) and *Core Conversancies* (high-end, theme-oriented encounters between and across disciplines). The latter might include distinct seminars focused on interdisciplinarity/"knowledge bridging", civic engagement/applied scholarship, and diversity/interculturalism. We might frame Competency as an attribute of the career-ready employee, one who needs to be prepared to change jobs multiple times over the course of a lifetime. We might frame Conversancy as an attribute of the informed, engaged citizen. The concept of Conversancy dovetails with the original, inclusive intent of the Public Good vision. It's consistent with many aspects of the Impact 2025 strategic plan. It would certainly address the widespread national worry, prompted by the 2016 election, that we have become a civically-illiterate people. Other conceptual formulations are imaginable.

A curriculum organized along these lines would be taxonomically unique. It might also serve as a genuine source of intellectual pride, and a mechanism for building intellectual community and/or a shared identity, for faculty across campus. As described above, intellectual community and shared identity is something that older versions of general education at DU sometimes succeeded in cultivating, to the individual's and institution's benefit. Regrettably, these shared commitments are non-existent today. I think we're the poorer because of it.