

Report on Core and Core Revision Discussions

Committee on Academic Policies

April, 2007

Background:

In January 2007, the Faculty Forum Executive Committee charged the Committee on Academic Policies with conducting a university-wide discussion about the core curriculum. The Committee was to gather information over the course of the Spring semester in order to ascertain perceptions of the core's purpose and of its effectiveness, with an eye to considering whether the core was in need of revision. CAP then met with the Chair of the Faculty Forum Executive Committee, the President of the University, and the University Core Committee, and agreed that in this preliminary discussion, CAP should aim to enable and report upon conversations with as many faculty as possible regarding the purpose and effectiveness of the university liberal arts core.

In order to encourage conversations that focused on the learning goals of the curriculum, CAP developed and circulated the following four questions to guide the discussion:

1. What do students need to learn as part of a JCU education?
2. How well does our current core ensure this happens?
3. Does the core need to be changed at all? In whole? In part?
4. If the core were revised, what would an optimal process for revision look like?

Using these questions as a framework, the Committee on Academic Policies facilitated ten discussion sessions, including meetings with groups of departments, with department chairs, with university committees, and with untenured faculty. In addition, the Committee invited feedback by email. Approximately fifty faculty and administrators/staff participated in these discussions either in person or by email.

Findings:

1. What do students need to learn as part of a JCU education?

This question consistently prompted faculty to respond in terms of what we hoped students would be when they completed their education at John Carroll. By the end of their time here, faculty thought students should be responsible, informed, engaged citizens. Accordingly, students need to be culturally and scientifically literate and that means learning social context, a foreign language, and a variety of different ways of thinking and of approaching problems. Students need to learn how to read, write, speak, and seek information competently, and they should be accustomed to acting as habitual learners who are curious about the world around

them. Students should be able to synthesize and integrate knowledge across fields and they should discover enough about themselves—their strengths, their interests, their values—to make informed choices about what to do with their lives.

2. How well does our current core ensure that this happens?

In terms of structure, a number of faculty felt that the present core is too big, (in terms of the number of credit hours required), too broad (in terms of the number of different disciplines required), too rigid, and that rather than encouraging interdisciplinary inquiry, it is too strongly distributional.

Faculty also identified issues related to articulation, integration, and support:

In terms of articulation, the core was frequently perceived to suffer from advising that focused on majors, that did not explain the function and purpose of the core, and that portrayed the core as an impediment rather than as foundational. In particular, the sentiment was often repeated that students and faculty alike spoke of the core as a series of meaningless requirements to check off or to get out of the way.

Faculty also thought that the core was not well-integrated with university mission or with outcomes assessment. Some faculty felt the core was not even coherent within itself in terms of the relation of FYS to the rest of the core, or in terms of how students progress through the core. There were also concerns about difficulties incorporating multiple goals into the same course—whether, for instance, a science course in the core could simultaneously ground students in laboratory methods and inform students' thinking about issues such as climate change while doing full justice to both aims.

Issues of articulation and integration also emerged in concerns faculty expressed about the extent to which core requirements can be fulfilled by courses from other institutions and the extent to which core courses are taught by part-time instructors. These concerns were framed in terms of concerns about institutional support for teaching and about John Carroll's commitment to the values of a liberal arts education.

3. Does the core need to be changed at all? In whole? In part?

There was no consensus on this question. While some faculty felt that the core suffered not from its structure or rationale but from its presentation and implementation, others felt the core was inherently problematic because of its distributional, discipline-based structure. Those who felt it should be revised most often indicated that the revision should be wholesale, but there were also faculty who advocated minor adjustments. Faculty also said that the decision to change or not to change the core needed to be driven by discussion of the current goals and effectiveness of the core rather than by fiscal considerations or by anecdotal student perceptions. Accordingly, two strongly-expressed, recurring worries about embarking on core revision of any sort were that it

could end up either as an insufficiently-considered response to a transitory enrollment phenomenon, or that it could end up as a destructive turf battle.

4. If the core were revised, what would an optimal process for revision look like?

Whether in favor or opposed to large-scale revision, faculty emphasized that a revision process would need to be well-informed, faculty-led, and explicitly linked to university mission and to assessment. On the information front, faculty suggested that an optimal process would mean systematic study and discussion of the current core goals to discover both the degree to which there was faculty consensus on those goals, and the degree to which the current core curriculum effectively accomplished those goals. It would also mean systematic study of the literature on core curricula, consideration of comparative data, and perhaps consultation with outside experts. On the leadership front, opinion was emphatic that faculty must devise and direct the process themselves, most likely through elections to a committee constituted through the new faculty governance structure. Finally, effective revision process had to relate the core to current reformulations of university mission, but also had to put in place means of subsequent evaluation of the effectiveness of any revisions, in addition to addressing formulations of learning outcomes goals that are currently being devised.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

While these preliminary discussions seemed to elicit broad agreement around a number of educational goals (many of which are part of the current core), there was less consensus about the degree to which the core curriculum as presently structured effectively addressed those goals, and still less consensus about the degree to which deficiencies in how the core operates could be remedied by improved articulation, by small-scale adjustments, or only by wholesale reformulation. Furthermore, although faculty affirmed the importance of tying mission and assessment to any core revision, current efforts at rethinking those very things (as well as FYS) add significant uncertainty to that endeavor, as does this year's reorganization of faculty governance. In consequence, the Committee on Academic Policies recommends that in Fall 2007, once the new Faculty Council and committees are up and running, the Faculty Council continue this conversation. CAP suggests that the Faculty Council charge the appropriate committee to continue the discussion, beginning with an examination of the current goals of the core and the extent to which faculty still support these goals, and the extent to which the revised mission statement and learning outcomes statement from the assessment committee are in alignment with the current core goals.