I think one could possibly demonstrate scientifically that the most important things in life are unplanned and unforeseen. Not that planning isn't important, but one mustn't lay too much stock by it. When I reflect on my contact with the Core Curriculum which extends from the 1990s to the present, the thing which stands out in my mind isn't brilliant lectures, good discussions, wonderfully written papers and home-run-quality exams—though we try hard to plan for these and successfully produce many every year. Rather it's something much more fundamental, not as easy to document, and not exactly planned. I refer, of course, to the invisible, but powerful state of mind which, like gravity, pulls everything in the Core together.

How can I define this non-material reality? Perhaps it’s best to describe how I sense it, to set out a brief phenomenology of the esprit or Geist that animates us. I think it consists of six parts.

First and foremost comes a hunger for knowledge and a joy in learning. To a degree unparalleled in most of my other teaching assignments over the past thirty-one years at Boston University, I find students in Core sections intensely curious, eager to learn and excited by “getting it right.” Teaching, as everyone knows, has mediocre monetary rewards, but dealing with students who are thrilled by what they learn is a large reward no dedicated teacher can fail to appreciate. A parallel phenomenon prevails among Core faculty. Naturally, all scholars should have lifelong curiosity and their learning should never end, but I sense that my Core faculty colleagues have these qualities to an above-average degree. They also direct them towards disciplines outside their own narrow fields, thereby displaying what I consider to be superior role models.

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1 Though I sometimes think that in his infinite patience and wisdom, Dean Jorgensen plans this as he does virtually everything else! [Prof. Brian Jorgensen was the founding director of the Core, succeeded by Prof. James Johnson, Prof. David Eckel, and the currently-serving Prof. Stephanie Nelson. –Eds.]

2 I do apologize for the dreadful, but irresistible pun of my title, by the way.
Which brings me to the second key feature of the Core spirit: its catholicity (with a lower-case “c”). I immediately think of Dean Robert Neville’s magnificent tai chi demonstration during a CC 102 lecture several years ago (during which one could have heard a pin drop in the Tsai). The sight of a Western theologian, expertly and with great reverence, presenting a central practice from Eastern culture speaks volumes about the breadth and inclusiveness of the content of Core—which students and faculty alike endorse with unhesitating enthusiasm. Naturally I care very much about getting across the ideas and animating spirit of science, and I have found most Core students receptive—though sometimes apprehensive! Many of my non-science colleagues among the Core faculty have been very supportive in this regard also—from Professor Christopher Ricks’ passing along the poem about the learned astronomer,3 to Professors Stephanie Nelson and Greg Fried taking time from their busy schedules to sit in on science lectures (and in Professor Nelson’s case, discussions as well). As we move out of a century notorious for its fragmentation of intellect and culture, I feel very strongly the need for integration and wholeness—and that certainly includes science.

I sense that students also crave to understand where everything fits into a single whole as they make their way through a uni-verse and try to comprehend their place in a uni-verse that somehow includes Newton and Nietzsche, Dante and Darwin, Plato and Freud. Perhaps they can take consolation from the wave/particle duality, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, the relativistic twin paradox, Gödel’s incompleteness theorem and other sometimes baffling, counter-intuitive concepts that we present in the second-semester of the Core Natural Sciences.4 If the systematic, rational approach to the physical universe forces us to tolerate the coexistence of paradoxes and apparent opposites, we may feel less disappointed if our demand for wholeness in the human sphere isn’t adequately met by some simplistic consensus. In this context, however, the Core’s breadth also provides a significant range of perspectives that may afford

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3  “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” was written by Walt Whitman in 1865. –Eds.
4  At the time of writing, Prof. Mohr would have been referring to CC 104, a course since superseded by CC 106 and, beginning in Fall 2015, CC 212. –Eds.
an opportunity to attain wholeness by transcending any single viewpoint.

Another key feature of the Core way is conversation. At Williams College, my mentors were fond of quoting James A. Garfield's definition of the ideal college as “a student sitting on one end of a log and Mark Hopkins sitting on the other.” (Hopkins was President of Williams from 1836 – 72.) Anyone familiar with the Core floor in Warren Towers or the special subculture of the work-study students of the Core Office (a culture which has an amazing way of perpetuating itself…) knows that part of the Core experience consists of extended, often-penetrating conversations. And in my best moments as a teacher I have managed to provoke serious and even passionate conversations in my discussion classes. When I ask myself what we’re trying to achieve with the Core Curriculum, one answer that immediately comes to mind is that we want to facilitate the development of informed conversationalists who can engage each other on a range of topics that broadly covers the (high) cultural and intellectual landscape. We hope that by the time students finish Core no major field of human learning is completely foreign to them.

Of course the “conversation” our students engage in extends far beyond the present. I remember a television program hosted by the comedian Steve Allen many years ago, each installment of which featured four actors impersonating famous figures from disparate periods of history, literature, art, etc., who sat around a dinner table discussing topics appropriate to their characters. Very importantly—to preserve peace and decorum—Allen acted as the host and moderator. Of course it was meant to be funny (imagine a conversation between Napoleon and Cleopatra… ), but there was a serious side also. The idea that great thinkers and artists inspire one another and interact across time and distance is centrally important for the understanding of human culture. The notion that students (and their teachers) can partake of this great conversation is the core of the Core. In contrast to any other undergraduate liberal arts program, I think the Core prepares students so that if asked, they could probably sit down and dash off the script for a pretty convincing dialog between, say Aristotle and Shakespeare (and maybe even between Newton and Einstein!).

Implicit in the idea of conversation is the prerequisite of civility, of manners and of consideration for one’s interlocutor. This constitutes a fifth ele-
ment of what I observe to be characteristic of Core people: they listen as well as speak, and though they often disagree, they do so without disparagement. The shared value of the interchange of ideas surpasses insistence upon the supremacy of any one person’s particular set of ideas (most of the time…). I think this aspect is especially important for the freshmen, many of whom are reluctant to speak up lest they be ridiculed. Core is not a place of ridicule, and the shelter it provides by virtue of its civility probably plays an important part in nurturing students who would otherwise hesitate to develop their talent for self-expression.

Among the faculty this ethos of mutual respect also plays a key role. Sad to say, even in those temples of learning that we call universities, scholars and teachers all too often fall into the old tribal, parochial trap of dismissing the concerns and approaches of those in fields different from their own as trivial and meaningless at best, and perhaps downright pernicious. (I would be less than honest not to say that this attitude directed toward scientists by their non-science colleagues causes me great pain. And I also have to bemoan the corresponding reciprocal prejudices of some of my science colleagues—not, however, including any who teach in Core!) At any rate, simple common sense says that a closed mind has no way to expand its content. By our efforts, formally in integrating forums, and informally by the way we speak to and of one another, Core students and faculty try to avoid this particularly common, regrettable pitfall in the life of the mind.

The final pillar in my attempt to define the spirit of the Core can be best expressed by a favorite quotation of mine from Alfred North Whitehead: “Ideas,” he said, “won’t keep. Something must be done about them.” What fools we would be to make all the effort that we do to teach and learn the content of the Core Curriculum if all that amounted to was the perfunctory filling of a requirement, a mere going through motions! Whether our primary concern at any given moment is figuring out how better to live our individual lives or how to change the world, the depth of familiarity with the struggles and inspirations of our forebearers plus the experience of clear and critical thinking that the Core provides makes a difference. It’s my sense that students relate to
this—indeed, contribute to it!—in a big way. In CC 103 we put forward the conclusion that humans are *thinking* apes, but the emphasis falls on the first word: we are thinking apes. This is our destiny and it matters. It matters more than anything else.

So that’s my take on the unplanned, unquantifiable esprit of Core: hunger for knowledge and joy in learning; catholic and inclusive approaches to subject matter; continual efforts to integrate knowledge; meaningful, deep conversations; mutual respect among students and teachers; and a deep-seated belief in the power and importance of ideas. I’m sure Mark Hopkins would approve.

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5 The first-semester Core Natural Sciences course, superseded by CC 105 and, beginning in Fall 2015, CC 111. –Eds.