It’s the time of day when most CAS students are in class, and her animated shuffle brightens the quiet hallway. She enters the office, a stuffed backpack in tow over her shoulder, her head of tight ringlets visibly wet despite the chill of the 40 degree morning. She’s a few minutes behind schedule and immediately sets out for the coffee station, greeting everyone in her path as she passes student staff in the reception area, administrators and faculty at their desks, students in bunches reading or talking. With a mug of black coffee in hand, she makes her way to the door marked “Stephanie Nelson, Director.”

Nelson, a professor in the Department of Classical Studies, has been working with the Core Curriculum for nearly twenty years. “I guess I would say I’ve probably been involved in each aspect individually up until now,” she tells me as we sit down and we begin our interview. “But, of course, I’ve never had to do the whole thing together.”

The Core is a liberal arts program housed in the College of Arts & Sciences which focuses on classic works of the humanities and social sciences, and important concepts and discoveries in the natural sciences. The program offers an integrated set of courses typically taken over a period of two years. Prof. Nelson tells me that a negative aspect of college education in general is the lack of connection between courses. Making these crucial connections across disciplines is a main focus of the Core.

Nelson talks passionately about further promoting these connections during her time as the head of Core. In her first and second year as director, she has been working indefatigably to implement innovative ideas to keep Core relevant for incoming students: integrating the Core’s social science and natural science content into courses that blend the two domains of inquiry in each semester; an Honors program for Core students; Divisional Awards to acknowledge student achievement in each division of the Core; and new language to appear on official transcripts, so that students who have commit-
ted themselves to the sort of learning undertaken in Core seminars can enjoy recognition for that decision. Each of these changes has come about after long hours and tireless consensus building—the often unacknowledged labor of academic administrators!—but many other ideas are waiting for the attention and effort needed to bring them to fruition.

Even while bringing changes on board, Prof. Nelson is committed to maintaining the spirit of the program. Compared to her past duties in the Core—such as being in charge of the undergraduate science mentors, advising the Core House, or serving as a go-between linking the teaching in the Natural
Sciences to the Humanities curriculum—trying to do all of it together keeps her extremely busy. (She refills her coffee cup; no time to slow down!) I ask her how she does it, and she informs me that prioritization is key. She’s learned the importance of adopting the attitude: “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it.”

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As the drizzly morning turns into a drizzly afternoon, I follow the Dean—affectionately referred to as “Lord Nelson” by her students in Core and Classics—as she finds a seat in today’s social science lecture. The lights are low, and Nelson is focused, taking notes in the back of the hall. She’s thoroughly engaged in the speaker’s comments comparing Marx and Malinowski. Her throaty laugh echoes through the room whenever the lecturer cracks a joke. I can’t help but crack a smile; her enthusiasm for new academic experiences is terrifically infectious.

Attending each of the Core lectures may seem like an odd choice for a Dean with so many demands on her time. However, Nelson considers it an indispensable part of the job. She explains that staying plugged into the week-by-week progression of each class gives her a necessary perspective. She is devoted to understanding what Core students are learning, even if, as she admits, such a full schedule takes a toll in some ways.

“What inevitably happens is my own research suffers. The extra time that I’m putting in, I would’ve been doing my own scholarship,” she says. But even as she confesses this trade-off, she’s smiling—there’s no resentment I can see on her face. Her modesty and commitment does not go unnoticed by others. Core’s long-time administrative coordinator, Zachary Bos, gives me a succinct analysis when I ask him for his impression of the latest faculty member to sit in the captain’s chair of the Core Curriculum: “What’s there to say? She’s humble, she’s dedicated, and she wants to see everyone succeed. That’s what’s behind every one of her initiatives, as far as I can see.”

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As an alumna of St. John’s College in Maryland, Prof. Nelson had a very different undergraduate experience from that of the typical BU student. “It was
all great books all the time. The whole faculty always knows what’s going on in all the other classes.” Coming from a school where every member of the faculty is involved in teaching courses in every subject area, Nelson reports that one of the exciting parts about her involvement in Core is the opportunity it provides her to thoroughly reinforce the importance of making connections within a large college environment. Nelson considers it an indispensable skill, not just in the classroom, but in any kind of workplace, and wants to get students to understand just how useful it can be. Students’ concerns about the job market are very clear to her. With economic forces making higher education so costly, parents and students are anxious to see how college majors lead directly to a career path. In view of these concerns, it can seem unreasonable to choose a humanities education over more “useful” areas of study. High on Nelson’s agenda as director is assuring students that majoring in the humanities has the potential to lead to future employment. Among the many conversations she’s been having with other departments, she’s been talking with the Career Development staff, with plans to schedule additional workshops for students in first-year Core courses. All part of her effort to respond effectively to the practical concerns of students. Discovering what will be helpful to students can be a defeating process. Nelson confesses that sometimes events are held and simply no one comes. Despite these kinds of disappointments, she possesses a resilient attitude. “One of the nice things about having a program that keeps going on is you try it and see if it works. It doesn’t work? Try something else.”

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Spreading the love of humanities and learning has been a prominent theme throughout Nelson’s career, as has her steadfast work ethic. After she finished her graduate studies in Classics at the University of Chicago, she commuted back and forth between Boston and Chicago, teaching at BU several times a week, and spending the rest of her time in the Windy City. Countless hours on planes and subways were spent grading papers. Incredibly, she kept up this lifestyle for ten years, holding to the notion that “travel time was work time.”

Not that things have slowed down much. With so many responsibilities accompanying her new position, she finds that her obligations are constantly
multiplying. Nelson says, “Since you end up putting so much time into work you’re doing, it’s much better in the end to actually be doing something that you think matters. It takes over your life, but this is true of most things you care about. The more you do, the more you find there is to do.”

It’s clear that Lord Nelson is passionate about her job, and means to continue bringing new ideas and energy to the program. She sums up her persevering dedication by way of closing our conversation for the time being: “Everything ends up being more complicated than you expected. But who needs to sleep, right?”