Two Conceptions of the Core

If you know where you’ve come from, you can better understand where you’re going. In that spirit, we present to you this fascinating memo from the history of the Core Curriculum. We discovered it while rummaging around in our extensive collection of archived materials—reports, syllabi, minutes, and so on—from the pre-Core era, when an interdisciplinary committee of faculty brought together from every corner of the campus was tasked with figuring out what the new Core program should be, and how it would fit into the life of the University.

Sometimes it can be difficult to describe in a succinct way what the unique characteristics and interests of the Core Curriculum are, which distinguish it from other academic departments. We have a more difficult time than folks in Earth & Environment, for example, who can simply say: “We study rocks!” Classics: “We study ancient Greek and Latin!” Pardee: “We study, globally!” Sure, these kinds of reductionist descriptions can be misleading, but they are convenient starting points.

Whereas, what can we say about Core that doesn’t just raise many more questions? “We study the best of what has been written, said, thought, discovered, and created!” “Our faculty talk with us, not at us!” “We read the books and go to class!” All those are true, but Core is so much more.

In light of this problem of definitions, we were especially interested in this particular memo, since it gives a pretty great, two-part definition for what a Core Curriculum should be: namely, a program that connects students to the ideas and values they inherit as members of a cultural continuity, while at the same time alerting them to the context of disciplines and discoveries in which that continuity exists. Continuity and context: that sure sounds like the Core we know!

The Editors
Core - as COMMONALITY or LARGER CONTEXT

I. The Core Curriculum as COMMONALITY: “common intellectual heritage,” “perennial questions or issues,” “shared values and knowledge”

• Commonality suggests a centripetal force, a convergence upon. What is converged upon may range from data, ideas and concepts, traditions, discourses, etc. Commonality requires that pluralization be held in check through some means.

• A program in “history of western civilization” should present the conclusions of the perspectives of history, philosophy, art, classics, etc. This could be achieved through the “piling up” of specialties (“vertical coordination”) or the “spreading out” of specialties (“horizontal coordination”). Questions of integration, interdisciplinarity, are not central or decisive matters, if the main intent is to help students compose a fundamental historical narrative with major axes well lighted and minor axes ignored or actively suppressed.

• Connections & relations are assumed here; they are not rendered problematic.

II. The Core Curriculum as LARGER CONTEXT: “integrate knowledge,” “reduce fragmentation,” “show connections”

• Larger context suggests a centripetal and a centrifugal force; connecting and connected contexts of interpretation may derive from disciplines’ conclusions, i.e., what each one has converged upon; or, the connecting work may depend upon the horizons of the disciplines, not the individual or collective points of convergence. The construction and enjoyment of a larger context does not require that pluralization be held in check.

• A program of “great books, great ideas, and history of ideas” should present ideas whose meanings are specified by the perspectives of history, philosophy, art, social theory, literary studies, etc., through an integrated pedagogical format. Connections and relations are rendered problematic here and are not assumed. If core-as-commonality is a container for conclusions derived from the disciplines, then core-as-larger-context is an explosion of that container. This not only frees the ideas from ownership by any one discipline, but begins examination of the relationship between a discipline and “its” ideas.

• Internal and external connections are no longer taken for granted as they were in core-as-commonality.