What is Different about BU’s Core Program

excerpts from the memo titled
“A Brief History of Boston University’s Core Curriculum”

Boston University’s Core Curriculum has a number of features which, while each may not be entirely unique, distinguish it from most others now being offered.

Perhaps most important is its goal of creating a humanities-based program that integrates the natural and social sciences. Few core curricula anywhere in the country undertake such a project in a systematic way. Given the fragmentation of knowledge in our time, and the frequent ignorance and hostility between those dedicated to different branches of knowledge—and given the origins and the philosophical basis of both the natural and social sciences in humanistic concerns—this is a project of some importance. The Boston University Core has as its goal a wholeness of understanding for both students and faculty. This has not proved easy to achieve—but it has proved to be possible, exciting, and important. Each year, the integration between various parts of the Core becomes deeper and richer. Students who complete the Core in 1991 can be expected to have a real knowledge of the origins of the scientific approach to nature, of the philosophical problems at the heart of the scientific enterprise, of the origins, limitations, and philosophical problems of the social sciences, and of what the knowledge gained by the natural and social sciences can offer to the areas of concern of the humanities.

Integration is being achieved through ongoing study and discussion between faculty from various parts of the Core who then broaden their own teaching to include references to, and study of, relationships between the disciplines; through Core lectures specifically devoted to cross-divisional ties and differences; and through readings designed to stimulate the kind of philosophical and critical thinking which brings to light the similarities and differences of various approaches to knowledge.

Another distinctive feature of the Core: In both the Humanities and the Social Science Core, seminars are focused on a relatively small number of important texts. These texts are read in depth, and are, for the most part, read in their entirety. A number of core programs, some of them quite well-established, either require students to read far too many works—sometimes twenty-five or thirty in a semester—or assign only bits and pieces, or in some cases summaries, of the texts to be studied. By assigning entire works and giving students and teachers time to attend to them in some detail, Boston University’s Core fosters not merely an acquaintance with great works of the Western and Nonwestern traditions, but an ever-increasing ability to read, appreciate and respond to them. Students learn the depths to which specific passages may be interpreted, and the important to the whole of what William Blake calls “minute particulars.” At the same time, students can see the ways in which texts such as the Tao Te Ching point in a variety of ways toward a single mystery of which neither Western philosophy nor modern science can take hold, or how texts such as Plato’s Republic develop a vast and cohesive argument from a set of initial frustratingly inadequate propositions (and sophisms) to a grand vision of the nature of justice, the equality of the sexes, and the crucial importance of education.

Students who successfully complete the Core will likely be far more capable of reading with genuine delight and profit (and therefore far more likely to read) the hundreds of great texts that any Core Curriculum must leave out.

In designing and implementing the Core, faculty have worked hard to develop a curriculum in
which great works of the Western and nonwestern traditions are studied for their own sake and in relation to a few important themes. Similar efforts have been put into placing the works in historical and cultural context, while also teaching students wherein and why they may be called timeless.

Along with its emphasis on the ability to read, Boston University's Core curriculum places a heavy emphasis on teaching students to express themselves clearly, both orally and in writing. Where many core programs require perhaps a six-to-ten-page paper at the end of a semester, the Boston University Core requires a minimum of twenty-five pages distributed throughout the semester. Close criticism of style, argument, and content, and sometimes rewriting of an entire paper, are essential components of Core courses. Writing is emphasized not only because the overwhelming majority of college students write so poorly. It is also emphasized because learning to write about something contributes immeasurably to understanding and appreciating it. Lectures and discussions are valuable tools for learning, and reading for oneself is an even more valuable tool; but there is no substitute for the hard thinking and the wrestle with words and sentences that occurs when one must write cogently about something one has read. One learns not only the work, but learns too how to use language, and how to think critically and coherently.

Core teachers also spend a good deal of time helping students to sharpen and strengthen their ability to express themselves orally. Clearly, if one cannot say what one means so that someone else can understand it, one’s knowledge has limited efficacy. Most often, an inability to talk clearly and with some facility about something means that one has not understood it well. Student in the Core are encouraged to participate in class discussions and to make oral presentations to the class, and their performance in these endeavours is part of their grade.

Only a few professors will be expected to devote themselves exclusively to the Core Curriculum. These professors will provide continuity and guidance for the Core, but the majority of the teachers in the program are and will be professor from various departments within the College, and, as time goes on, from other colleges within the University. Thus the philosophy and the knowledge of the Core, and its emphasis on the importance of undergraduate teaching, will be spread throughout the College and eventually throughout the University.

Core seminars are taught by regular faculty members drawn from both junior and senior faculty. The accompanying lectures draw not only upon Core seminar teachers, but upon the most outstanding scholars and lecturers in the University. Considerable time and effort are put into this extremely popular and successful aspect of the Core, so that students not only hear people who are outstanding in their field, but the lectures they hear have been developed to contribute to the texts, topics, and themes on which the curriculum is focused.

The Core Curriculum includes both Western culture and important works, themes, history, and cultural insights from nonwestern traditions. The works studied in the Core are chosen not to indoctrinate, but to educate. While teaching that there is much that is admirable about Western culture, much that is worth knowing and preserving about the traditions which are embodied in the United States, the Core does not ignore the fact that there is also much to criticize. It seeks to provide students with the knowledge and skills required for intelligent and balanced criticism, and to teach them the essential importance of a historical and philosophical perspective on the problems of their time.

As the Core Curriculum continues to develop, great attention will be paid to striking a balance between the valid claims of each particular discipline, and the way in which each discipline contributes to that basic integration of knowledge on which a liberal education is built. At Boston University, the Core is recognized as a beginning. Core teachers encourage students to pursue various avenues of inquiry in other courses offered throughout the University, and to recognize that education is an open-ended process which does not, for that reason, have to be a fractured and fragmented one. ■