Shaping the core

EIGHTEEN FACULTY HAVE PAIRED UP FOR A FRESH APPROACH TO THE COMMON CURRICULUM

This coming fall Boston College will begin piloting a renewed core curriculum, unveiling nine semester-long offerings for freshmen that apply an interdisciplinary lens to contemporary social problems and perennial questions about the human condition. Three are courses that will utilize team teaching, with faculty from divergent disciplines working side by side—a sociologist and an ecologist, for instance, teaching “Global Implications of Climate Change.”

The pilot initiative, the first core renewal since 1991, will in six cases also introduce a lesser-known approach, which John Rakestraw, director of the University’s recently established Center for Teaching Excellence, refers to as “tandem teaching.” This involves faculty members teaching separate courses with overlying topics to a shared group of students. One such coupling will be of courses in music and theology, focusing on aesthetic and spiritual “exercises,” ways of contemplation that spring from art and faith.

The three team-taught courses, grouped under the heading of “Complex Problems,” will each enroll 80 students. The six pairs of linked courses will enroll 19 students and will address what the planners call “Enduring Questions.” The pilot courses will be optional for first-year students, who will also have the opportunity to meet their core requirements through extant programs. At Boston College, about a third of the courses most undergraduates will take are core courses.

“It’s a renewal, not a radical reconstruction,” University provost David Quigley says of the changes underway. “It’s taking what we value in the core, and making it better.” One key value, he says, is “integrated learning,” which aims to help students draw connections between courses and use the learning to shape their lives and callings. As one example in the extant core, Quigley cites the PULSE program, which combines public service experience with coursework in both philosophy and theology.

Quigley adds that the core revision comes partly in reaction to accelerating specialization in academe, with long-recognized disciplines splitting into fields and subfields. (For instance, it’s grown increasingly hard, he says, for someone studying in his own field of 19th-century U.S. history to “stay current with the literature” on other framings of the period.) A goal of the renewal is to compel students to step back and see the whole.

Formal discussion of the core renewal began in the fall of 2012. At the time, Quigley (then dean of Arts and Sciences), Carroll School of Management dean Andy Boynton, and Institute for the Liberal Arts director Mary Crane spearheaded a yearlong series of campus discussions on the future of the core at Boston College. They did so, uncommonly, with assistance from a global design and innovation consultancy, Continuum, headquartered in West Newton. The company is best known for developing consumer products (most famously, the Swiffer mop and the Reebok Pump athletic shoe), but its teams spend much of their time helping institutions to choreograph the conversations and shape the processes that will lead to innovation. From such discussions at Boston College came the dual framework of “Complex Problems” and “Enduring Questions.”

In February 2014, Gregory Kalscheur, SJ, then a member of the Law School faculty (and now interim dean at the newly renamed Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences), began to lead a 15-member faculty task force to help prepare the way for pilot program development. In light of the Jesuit liberal arts tradition, Kalscheur speaks of a distinction between merely teaching the material and, more significantly, “teaching the person.” He explains, “You’ve got to master the material. But the
question is also: How does the material help this person better understand how to live in the world?"

The new courses knit together several learning experiences. For example, in addition to three class meetings each week, the co-taught “Complex Problems” courses will include weekly small-group lab sessions led by graduate students that might engage in research, practical projects, and other ventures on campus or elsewhere; they will also include weekly one-hour evening sessions that promote reflection and additional learning, often with guest speakers. The seminar-style “Enduring Questions” classes are designed to offer similar extra-classroom opportunities.

Like their peers at other universities, Boston College students often see their core requirements as “something to get out of the way,” in the words of Quigley, or as an obligatory “gateway to their major,” as Kalscheur puts it. But Quigley says that one of his hopes for the renewal is that a decade from now, students as well as faculty will “decide to join our Boston College community because of the reputation and substance of our core curriculum." He expects the University to devote perhaps three years to testing a renewed core, with growing numbers of piloted courses and first-year students taking them during successive years.

The following conversations with the nine pairs of piloting faculty are drawn and adapted from introductory videos made for the incoming Class of 2019.

—William Bole

Maxim Shrayer (left) and Devin Pendas.

**Genocide and Crimes against Humanity**

**Devin Pendas, associate professor of history**

**Maxim D. Shrayer, professor of Russian, English, and Jewish studies**

**Pendas:** No problem in the world poses the question of what it means to be human quite like genocide, because genocide is not simply about killing people, but about destroying humanity, as Hannah Arendt put it.

**Shrayer:** We’re teaching history. And we’re teaching issues of culture and ethics. How is it that some people who committed murders during the Holocaust were highly educated, “cultured” individuals who loved music, loved their children and wives, and recited poetry?

**Pendas:** It sounds strange to say this, but genocide is profoundly ambiguous. From an ethical standpoint, murdering millions of people is obviously wrong; but if that is self-evident, why do so many people do it? How do the perpetrators come to perceive it as being just, moral, and necessary? Through a series of case studies, we’ll look at the core features of genocide—the driving dynamics, the politics, the economics, the ideology and psychology. What has genocide meant for survivors? For perpetrators?

**Shrayer:** We start with World War I and the Armenian genocide, which is the beginning of modern genocide. We’ll learn how genocide is experienced in real time and in recaptured time, in photographs, documentary footage, memoirs, witness depositions, in a poem on an execution of thousands, in fiction.
Pendas: Students will do some of their assignments in groups, because it’s helpful to work through this material with friends. It’s a topic in which they will confront the best and the worst in humanity. The worst is obvious, but there are questions of rescue, survival, resistance, and justice-after-the-fact. The students will keep a journal in which we will ask them to reflect.

Shrayer: What I’m hoping is that students don’t come out of this course with just a new baggage of knowledge—but that they come out armed against a certain proclivity to think that genocide is somebody else’s story. Part of their learning experience is to master this story, to make it their own. Their journals are a way of recording their experience and the experience of experiencing.

Pendas: That’s a nice way of putting it.

Humans, Nature, and Creativity

Min Song, professor of English

Inquiring about Humans and Nature

Holly Vande Wall, lecturer in philosophy

Song: We humans have always defined ourselves in relation to what we’re not, and Nature is what we’re not. Even when we’re extolling it, Nature is something separate from us. Yet our ideas of Nature keep changing, and that keeps putting pressure on our sense of what it means to be human. In 18th-century literature there’s an assumption of human agency. Robinson Crusoe can reinvent his whole society stranded on an island. Moving into the 19th century, and especially the 20th century, you begin to see worlds where humans are never as in control as they want. You’ve got Freud telling us that our motivations are being controlled by the unconscious, and Darwin saying we’re descended from animals. The line between animals and humans starts to break down.

Vande Wall: Right. Coming out of a philosophy and history of science background, I keep thinking about how the universe looks to us—how we think it works—defines us. When we start believing that Copernicus is right and the Earth goes around the sun, what does that say about where we fit?

Song: In the Aristotelian world, the idea was that Nature is there for our use, but there was also a kind of complexity, a kind of soul. And then Descartes comes along, and a being is either human or like a machine, with no in-between. You and I both grew up in the Midwest with the consequences of that thinking. All around us the land had been divided up into square mile blocks, to be sold off to settlers. Nature was an empty space upon which you could just . . .

Vande Wall: Draw things! Aldo Leopold said, You can draw square grids on the map all you like, but the truth is the land has contours. And if you plow in straight lines, the soil’s going to run downstream. Nature doesn’t work on gridlines. And neither do humans, because maybe we are more natural than we think. We’re going to examine these persistent questions: What
calls it mean to be human? What does it mean to be natural?

Daniel Callahan (left) and Brian Robinette.

**Spiritual Exercises: Engagement, Empathy, Ethics**

Brian Robinette, associate professor of theology

**Aesthetic Exercises: Engagement, Empathy, Ethics**

Daniel Callahan, assistant professor of music

**Callahan:** The idea behind aesthetic exercises is that we will look not just at aesthesis—how we apprehend the true, the beautiful, and the good—but also at the process of apprehending. Many people expect they can just stand in front of a work of art, or hear a symphony, or attend a sporting event of a type they've never seen before—cricket, say—and they'll just get it. But that's not the case. Even as an observer, you have to practice. You have to be in the habit of attending to an artwork or an event.

**Robinette:** The great spiritual traditions have taught us the wisdom of a life lived with attentiveness. My spiritual exercises class will introduce students to theological inquiry, which is a fancy way of describing the study of how humans ask the biggest possible questions—like what is the meaning of life? Is there a purpose to life? What is death? The objective of the class, similar to yours, is not only to explore a set of propositions about reality but also to ask, Is there a certain kind of training, or formation, that might enable us to ask these questions well? It is a theoretical endeavor in some ways. But it's only significant if it is inhabited or lived in, too. We'll be looking at religious views within the Christian tradition and beyond—at texts and practices from Judaism, as well as Buddhism, and at philosophical traditions that wouldn't necessarily be described as religious at all.

**Callahan:** I expect my students to leave knowing a bit more about Plato, Aristotle, Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, and other interesting thinkers. But I'd also like to take them to hear the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and to museums. To be present and aware of how media affect the messages—it's important in a digital culture. I want to take students to a Boston College hockey game and have them reflect on why they feel so charged and so alive in that moment.

**Robinette:** Can I take your course?
Truth-telling in Literature

Allison Adair, associate professor of the practice of English

Truth-telling in History

Sylvia Sellers-García, associate professor of history

Sellers-García: Is it possible to tell the truth about the past? Most historians and most students start with a presumption that truth is what they’re aiming for, but even historians have suggested that truth-telling isn’t something that you can achieve. In my course, we’ll question whether we can rely on historical evidence from times that are lost to us and people who have disappeared. We’ll read Natalie Zemon Davis’s The Return of Martin Guerre—about a 1560 Inquisition case—asking, Can we really know what happened? I’m particularly excited to take on oral history, and the inevitable realization that actual people sitting in front of you remember things differently. I want to work with the oral account by Rigoberta Menchú, who was the Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1992 and an activist in Guatemala. A U.S. anthropologist exposed many aspects of her story as false.

Adair: Why is the text of an encyclopedia seemingly more authoritative, when it too has the taint (or joy) of personal perspective and perception, as oral history does? I want students to challenge assumptions about the importance of truth, to consider whether there’s ever something that’s preferable to truth—the imagination, for instance, or fiction—that could lead us to greater insight. Think of a character like Huck Finn. Huck is a kid. He’s an unreliable narrator. Yet he represents a kind of moral truth. So we’ll discuss the relationship between historical fact and some sort of truth that transcends dates and verifiable information. We’ll also think critically about texts that exist outside of literature—legal documents and policy papers—and discuss them as having been constructed. Students will read Christopher Columbus’s exuberant early letters and his late, fourth-voyage letters when the voyage hasn’t gone well, he has no money, and his reputation in Spain is at issue. The shading changes. He drops the first person. He talks about everything in passive voice.

Sellers-García: On a personal level, I’m excited to teach this course because we were classmates [at Brown University] and did a little joint learning there.

Adair: Still doing joint learning. [laughter]
Epidemics, Disease, and Humanity

Mary Kathleen Dunn, associate professor of biology

Devising Theater: Disease as Metaphor

Scott Cummings, associate professor of theater

Cummings: Many people might perceive a fairly large gap between a biology course and a theater course. But they’re both forms of inquiry that involve experimentation. In our case, the experimentation will take place in a theater rather than in a biology laboratory. Students are going to come to the Bonn Studio Theater and collectively make short theater pieces in response to the material they’re covering with you.

Dunn: Epidemics and diseases are good venues for learning science. Students in my class will study bacteria and viruses, which are part of our world and part of our bodies. We will study vaccinations and antibiotics and learn how to make intelligent decisions when epidemics occur (and they will). Human behavior is remarkably predictable, and that’s going to be something worth looking at.

Cummings: Epidemics and theater performances both take place in the context of a community or a society, and even though we’re dealing with biology on a cellular level, we’re also going to be thinking about matters of public policy and citizenship.

Dunn: The science class is small, which is unusual in the sciences. And through the theater class, the students will have gotten to know one another and be comfortable speaking with one another. So we’ll be able to take the facts, the data, and discuss controversial situations. We’ll look at the subject sometimes through current events, sometimes through history. It will provide a lot of emotional material for a theatrical performance.

Cummings: Turning these issues into theatrical scenarios is a way of personalizing and processing—of taking ownership of—abstract scientific concepts. I look forward to seeing the students that we attract, because they’re going to need to have both an interest in studying cellular biology and other things that I don’t understand at all, and they’re also going to need to be willing to turn microorganisms into characters in a theater piece.
Bartlett: We knew we wanted to teach a course that would involve an enduring question. On the first page of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides answers the question of what’s enduring about our theme. He says that for so long as human beings are as they are, as human nature is what it is, there will be war. If that’s true, and history so far hasn’t refuted him, I think it’s incumbent upon us to try to reflect on that sad fact, to think about our place in the world as citizens, and to try to bring a kind of moral sensibility to the inevitability of warfare.

Brinton: One question to put to students is how Thucydides’s ancient perspective is still pertinent—where it might be and where it might not be. Michael Walzer argues in *Just and Unjust Wars* that certain rules about war have arisen in the course of history, and that we should try to stick to those for the sake of justice. To me, World War II, and the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, represent a turning point, where the question of justice in war had to be addressed urgently and differently than in the past. In my class, we’ll come at power in multiple ways. In politics—in all contexts, really—you’re in power relationships. There are those who are more powerful than you; you are more powerful than some others. Students will read texts representing a plurality of modern ideas, from Hobbes through Nietzsche, ending perhaps with works by Václav Havel, whose essay “The Power of the Powerless” is among his best-known.

Bartlett: Together we’ll bring in veterans who’ve had direct experience in warfare—in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan. In Thucydides’s book, the Athenians argue that there aren’t moral rules anymore, that it doesn’t make sense to talk about justice in war; the opposite was argued, too. When you see the world as it is, can you really talk about moral rules, even, or especially, in warfare? We hope students will get out of this a greater facility in reading tough books. There’ll be quite a bit of writing—and speaking—argument and counterargument.
Global Implications of Climate Change

Brian Gareau, assistant professor of sociology

Tara Pisani Gareau, lecturer in earth and environmental sciences

Tara: Climate change is a great example of an issue that requires an interdisciplinary approach. As an ecologist, I look at different parts of the ecosystem—soil, plants, and other organisms, humans included—to see how they interact and function given climate change. Brian sees the world through a political and sociological lens.

Brian: For me, it's fascinating that people are still debating whether climate change is effected by humans. I want students to examine the role the media and other economic entities play in that debate as well as the role of politics in creating a situation where science becomes contested terrain. We’ll bring in guest speakers, from both the science and the policy sides of the subject. We also want to introduce a local perspective, so we’ll talk with the folks who provide Boston College with energy. This is a class where you’re going to participate in discussions every time we meet—about what climate change is, and what we can do about it.

Tara: I’m going to cover the basic science. We just saw the snowiest winter on record in Boston. How does that fit into the planet warming up? We’ll look at climate change through the perspective of past cycles over thousands of years. But I also want the class to understand that climate change involves some big social justice issues. These are most prominent in areas where people live the lightest on the land. What is our responsibility as a developed country to people in developing countries? We’ll study environmental governance issues and global agreements; the United Nations climate talks in Paris next December; and the pope’s upcoming encyclical, which will address climate change—we’ll use that to discuss the role religious communities might have.

Brian: We can’t teach everything in this course. But we can open the door to possible futures at Boston College, in terms of the courses our students might take, the majors they can form, even future senior theses. They’ll have a good understanding of where their education can go if they choose.
The Body in Sickness and Health

Jane Ashley, associate professor of nursing

Reading the Body

Laura Tanner, professor of English

Tanner: In Western philosophy, we have traditionally thought about the body as subordinate to subjectivity, or consciousness, so that it gets pushed out of the picture. But starting with philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, we've tried to readjust the balance and to think about a kind of dialogue between embodiment and spirit. The body is central to our experience of who we are. And that has implications not just for the way we frame ourselves philosophically, but for the way that we act and care for people.

Ashley: I'm hoping students in our courses will give thought to the question, What is empathy? What sustains it? What responsibilities do we have to ourselves? What responsibilities do we have to others, not only in our families but also in the larger society? We've both taught the article “Swamp Nurse,” from the New Yorker [February 6, 2006], about a program to assist mothers in Louisiana with raising their children. In our courses, we're going to start off talking about health and the normal transitions that the body makes—in, say, pregnancy or aging. But we're also going to cover trauma and pain. I'm interested in having students do some interviewing, maybe conducting a life review with someone who's older. We'll also use the Nursing School's hospital simulation lab.

Tanner: We want to get students to think about how illness is defined, not just by what happens to our bodies, but also by the unpredictability and chaos it brings to our lives. What's the difference between mental illness and physical illness? Between someone who lives with a chronic illness for his or her life and someone who is stricken immediately and overwhelmingly? What's at stake in defining a condition as a disability? In one of my classes today, the students were talking about the idea of the flexible body: On the one hand, your body seems unchangeable, connected to your identity; on the other, if you don't like something—nip, tuck—you can change it. We'll talk about eating disorders, and obesity.

Ashley: I think in putting our courses together, our biggest problem is going to be . . .

Tanner: Excluding things.
Understanding the Social Contexts of Violence

Marilynn Johnson, professor of history
C. Shawn McGuffey, associate professor of sociology

Johnson: This course is about understanding violence related particularly to race, sex, and gender. We’ll be looking at domestic abuse, genocide, lynching and racial uprisings, police violence.

McGuffey: Sociologists often refer to these forms of violence as structured. They have a pattern, which has historical roots but continues to be reproduced. So, violence is not only a consequence of inequality, it also creates inequality. Once violence occurs in a community, the responses to that violence often trigger the very mechanisms that caused the violence in the first place.

Johnson: But there have been times when matters have gotten worse and times when they’ve gotten better. Violence in the present seems chaotic and illogical—examining historical examples will help students to understand its modern forms. We also want to understand responses to violence. Some interventions have succeeded. How? And the survivors—are they immobilized? Are they fighting back? Are they organizing, politically or otherwise? How can we bring knowledge to bear on the issues we have today? We’ll also have a variety of lab projects.

McGuffey: The lab component is going to involve students working in the community—with the bystander prevention program at the University’s Women’s Center, perhaps, or with Boston’s Hispanic Black Gay Coalition, which does a lot of work in the local LGBTQ community on domestic violence and sexual assault as well as hate crime prevention. Some of the best learning happens outside the classroom, and the students can bring that back to the class to share.

Johnson: For me, that’s a really exciting way to teach. Service learning has been happening at Boston College for a long time, and my experience has been it creates an intellectual and social energy unlike any conventional classroom experience.

McGuffey: We want students to develop a personal philosophy, to take what they learn in this class and apply it. How are you going to engage with the world differently now that you have this material?

HOW THE BOSTON COLLEGE CORE CAME TO BE

I arrived at Boston College in 1998 as a new faculty member in the history department, hired to teach American urban history, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. I had no previous experience with a core, as my undergraduate institution only had one required course (outside of the major) and my graduate institution took the general-education, distribution-requirements approach.

One of the great surprises of my 18 years at Boston College has been my growing commitment to the core. I volunteered to teach in it very early on, and I’ve been struck by the satisfaction at being part of the larger project.

For much of Boston College’s history, no one spoke of a core. Philosophy was a de facto major for most undergraduates through the 1950s, and all students took extensive coursework across the liberal arts. The institution began to move toward a
core in the postwar era, as the student body grew and the faculty became increasingly lay. In 1963, Boston College President Michael Walsh, SJ, convened a Committee on the Total Curriculum. Walsh saw himself as a modernizer and hoped to transform Boston College into a serious research university. He launched a series of doctoral programs and began the nationalization of the student body. But at the heart of his ambitions was the undergraduate curriculum. As the Committee on the Total Curriculum began its work, Walsh wrote to his provincial in hopes of securing Rome’s support for his reforms:

In an effort to provide a more scholarly and reflective setting for the college experience, it is our hope to cut the present 48-course schedule to 38 courses, with five in each of the first three years and four in the senior year (per semester). Within this less course-burdened schedule, there has also been an attempt to provide for the freedom to take advanced electives in the traditional humanistic areas such as English, languages, and history, while at the same time giving adequate but not overbalanced attention to the student’s major area of study. . . .

In the ensuing back-and-forth, the provincial posed a series of questions about the curricular revisions that Walsh seemed to have in mind. Walsh’s final response to the provincial was illuminating:

[It is] not by any means for the purpose of lessening the effectiveness or contribution of the liberal arts that the suggested reductions are made, but in order to provide what we sincerely feel is a schedule of studies better fitted to the talents and previous education of our current students, more consonant with the present trend in higher education to place more responsibility upon the individual student for self-direction in his education, and better adapted to the realistic needs of today’s undergraduates as regards preparing for graduate education.

What’s striking here is Walsh’s sense that moving toward a core at Boston College was a way of preparing students for the nation’s best graduate schools, of supporting the free choice of undergraduates, and most notable, a way of making Boston College more like elite private universities.

Fr. Walsh and the faculty of the 1960s developed an extensive core curriculum that marked a major change from the earlier undergraduate experience. There was a sustained battle over the theology requirement in the late 1960s as the credit hours required of all students dropped first from 12 to nine and then eventually to six (where it remains).

A University Committee on Liberal Education (U.N.C.L.E.) emerged in 1969–70, hoping to clarify issues of governance and further advance a coherent core vision for the entire University. Despite its wonderful acronym, U.N.C.L.E. disappeared soon after its creation, but not before instituting one transformational legacy in the form of the PULSE program, Boston College’s service learning core offering that combines courses in philosophy and theology with extensive service in Boston-area social service settings.

Twenty years later, between 1989 and 1991, Boston College faculty and students engaged in a sustained process of reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the 20-year-old core. Some irrational features of the existing core were quickly identified. For instance, there was a requirement in either math or the arts. Cultural diversity was identified as a major gap in the core (reflecting a national focus at the time on this aspect of higher education curricula). In 1991, a new 45-credit core was approved, and the University Core Development Committee (UCDC) was created to oversee and support core course development. While there was some initial experimentation and innovation in the early 1990s, the UCDC came to serve as the curricular gatekeeper, and the next campus-wide conversation about the core and the University’s broader mission would wait until the current renewal process began in 2012.

David Quigley is provost and dean of faculties at Boston College. He was co-chair, with Andy Boynton, dean of the Carroll School of Management, and Mary Crane, director of the University’s Institute for the Liberal Arts, of the Core Renewal Committee created in 2012. His essay is drawn and adapted from a talk given at a Boston College roundtable in fall 2013 and published in the University journal Integritas.

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