

State of the Core Report
June 2016
Office of the Associate Dean for the Core
Boston College

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1. Executive Summary

This is the first annual State of the Core Report generated by the new Office of the Associate Dean for the Core on behalf of the University Core Renewal Committee (UCRC), both created in 2015. Because it is the inaugural report, it goes into considerable detail on (1) the Core as a whole—providing a map of Core structures and student patterns—and (2) student and faculty experience of two new types of interdisciplinary courses—Complex Problems and Enduring Questions—offered in 2015–2016 in the first of a three-year Core Renewal pilot program. The report also discusses the activities of the Office of the Associate Dean and the UCRC, and concludes with analysis and considerations. This document has been inestimably aided by the superb work of the Office of Institutional Research, Planning, & Assessment, whose executive summaries immediately follow this one and whose evaluations form the bulk of the Addenda. General conclusions include:

- *Core Structure*
 - Overall stability and perhaps stasis.
 - Considerable variation across departments in class sizes, numbers of Core courses and credit hours, and who teaches the Core.
 - Somewhat more information available for English, History, Philosophy, and Theology.
 - Progress with respect to assessment in advance of the 2017 NEASC accreditation visit.
- *Student Experience*
 - Student appreciation that the Core accomplishes general education, but also evidence that it needs improvement with respect to intellectual engagement and personal development.
 - Most Boston College students complete most Core requirements in the first two years at BC through a combination of Core courses and Advanced Placement/transfer credit.
 - The impact of Advanced Placement credit and study abroad on the Core is not yet fully understood.
- *Core Renewal*
 - Since 2012, accomplishments of Core Renewal include a new Core vision statement, administrative structures, and a 2015–2018 interdisciplinary pilot course program for first-year students.
 - Initial assessment for AY16 pilot courses suggests overall success—they seem to be accomplishing what they are intended to do—as well as room for improvement and continued development.
 - Students in pilot courses expressed the relevance of the classes, their intellectual engagement in them, and the experience of what others will recognize as the Mission of Boston College.
 - Faculty noted overall that these classes were more work but more rewarding than others they typically teach, leading to more meaningful student-teacher relationships and sense of community. Students tended to be “strong, eager, and engaged.”
 - As with any new program, there have breakthroughs and also challenges. Lessons learned in the first year have already been applied to the second year.

For further information, including foundational documents, visit the Core website: www.bc.edu/core.



CORE CURRICULUM DATA ANALYSIS

2015-2016

Executive Summary

Over the course of the 2015-2016 academic year, the office of Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment reviewed and analyzed data relating to Boston College's Core Curriculum. The analyses were presented in a number of reports, which are each described below.

Core Curriculum Analysis Report (October 2015)

This report described number of Core courses and the total student credit hours (SCH) offered between AY2011 and AY2015, including the course's home department and the course size (number of students enrolled). The data showed that there has been a slight decrease (-6%) in the number of Core course sections offered in the last five years, but an even smaller decrease (-2) in the number of SCH taught. As suggested by those numbers, the average size of Core course sections increased slightly (+4%) during that same time. The Core Curriculum Analysis Report also looked at the rank of individuals teaching Core courses and found that Supplemental Faculty taught nearly half of all Core course sections (Part-time faculty taught 28% of all Core sections; Teaching Fellows taught another 20%). Full-time Non-Tenure Track faculty taught about 27% of all sections, and ranked faculty (Professors, Associate Professors, and Assistant Professors) taught the remaining 20% of all Core course sections offered.

This report also analyzed the semesters in which students tended to take Core courses. By examining the records of the Class of 2015, we found that the majority of students complete the bulk of their Core courses during their first two years (or through AP): 87% of the Class of 2015 completed 10 or more Core requirements before the start of Junior Year, and more than half (54%) completed 12 or more in that time. On average, graduates of the Class of 2015 completed 11.5 Core requirements in their first two years. A sizeable portion of the class fulfilled Core requirements by earning qualifying scores on AP exams: 34% fulfilled their Writing requirement through AP; 32% fulfilled Literature; 29% fulfilled Mathematics; 29% fulfilled one Natural Science requirement; and 29% fulfilled one Social Science requirement.

Results from *The Freshman Survey* (March 2016)

Analysis of *The Freshmen Survey* (TFS), which collects a range of demographic data and information about students' attitudes, experiences, goals and values, found that students who participated in the 2015-2016 Core Renewal Pilot Courses differed from all other Boston College freshmen on several measures, suggesting that there is some degree of "self-selection" among this initial cohort. Core Renewal participants, on average, scored higher than their peers on measures of Civic Engagement, Pluralistic Orientation, Social Agency, and Likelihood of College Involvement. These same students, on average, scored significantly lower on measures of Academic Self-Concept, and College Reputation Orientation.

Core Curriculum Dashboard (April 2016)

The Dashboard details the number of course sections, the number of students enrolled in each section, the number of SCH taught, and the rank of the instructor(s) of each Core course section. These data are presented in the Dashboard by Core Area and by Department. This iteration of the Dashboard was provided in an Excel file, and will serve as a prototype for the development of an interactive Dashboard in the future. This report was updated in May 2016 to show the breakdown of SCH by department within Core areas, and to graphically illustrate the data by SCH rather than number of course sections.

Core Curriculum Department Profiles (April 2016)

Department Profiles were prepared for the English, History, Philosophy and Theology departments. These profiles look at Core courses in the context of all courses taught by the particular department. The reports illustrate Core courses as a percentage of all courses taught in the department, and among faculty of the various ranks.



CORE RENEWAL PILOT COURSE ASSESSMENTS 2015-2016 Executive Summary

Nine Core Renewal pilot courses or course pairs were offered in the 2015-2016 academic year: three Complex Problems (CP) courses and six Enduring Questions (EQ) course pairs. 13% of the freshman class enrolled in a Core Renewal pilot course in 2015-2016. Table 1 (Page 2) includes course, faculty, and enrollment information.

Pilot courses were assessed through a series of faculty focus groups/interviews and student surveys at the end of each semester. Major themes and findings are summarized below. Detailed data analysis is provided in the survey and focus group reports.

Strengths

- **Positive overall student response**
 - Students demonstrated agreement with most survey questions, especially those that focused on course content and intellectual engagement.
 - Most students would recommend a Core Renewal course to other first year students.
- **Positive overall faculty response**
 - Faculty were impressed with student engagement.
 - Faculty reflected that they would teach this type of course again.
- **Small class size and restriction to first-year students**
 - Enduring Questions faculty commented that the small class size supported engagement, reflection and the ability to structure robust experiences.
 - Faculty noted that freshmen were uniquely engaged in these types of courses, in contrast to a “check this off the list of requirements” attitude prevalent among upperclassmen.
 - Students identified the small class size as one of the “most valuable” aspects of the course.

Challenges

- **Reflection component requires further definition to ensure consistency of experience**
 - Reflection sessions were given varying levels of emphasis and used in notably different ways depending on the course.
 - Faculty raised the concern that designated “reflection” times imply a lack of integrated reflection.
 - Faculty need further support to operationalize outside facilitators (Mission and Ministry) effectively.
- **High workload**
 - Faculty, TA’s and students all highlighted the level of effort required by these courses, above what is expected for the same number of credits for other Core courses.
 - Students and TA’s noted the significant time required for “outside of class” experiences, including travel and client-facing time for some lab projects.
 - Faculty noted the need for continued financial and structural administrative support for both the design and execution of these courses.
- **Outcomes and experiences differ by course topic**
 - Course topic and faculty have major impact on the student experience and how students evaluate their experience as aligned to several key goals (reflecting on the role of religious faith, gaining analytical skills, being encouraged to think about future plans).

- Experience and outcomes may be less standardized than in other Core courses unless course objectives are centrally defined and calibrated.
- **Sustainability/growth**
 - Finding faculty matches will be a challenge as the program grows. Topics should work together and faculty work styles must also be complementary.
 - Courses should not be interdisciplinary for the sake of being interdisciplinary. CP/EQ courses should fundamentally support the goals of the Core curriculum.
 - “Boutique” factor diminishes as program expands. The self-selection of students into the courses was a factor important to student engagement and success, according to faculty. Likewise, faculty enthusiasm to be part of a novel approach could be diluted as more faculty are recruited to participate to meet demand.

Table 1: Core Renewal Pilot Courses 2015-2016

Core Category	Course Name (Course Number)	Instructors	Semester Offered	# Enrolled
Complex Problems	Global Implications of Climate Change (SOCY150101/EESC150101)	Brian Gareau Tara Pisani Gareau	Fall 2015	74
Complex Problems	Understanding Race, Gender and Violence (HIST150301/SOCY150301)	Marilynn Johnson Shawn McGuffey	Fall 2015	77
Enduring Questions	Truth-Telling in Literature (ENGL170101) Truth-Telling in History (HIST170101)	Allison Adair Sylvia Sellers-Garcia	Fall 2015	16
Enduring Questions	Humans, Nature and Creativity (ENGL170301) Inquiring About Humans and Nature (PHIL170301)	Min Song Holly Vande Wall	Fall 2015	18
Enduring Questions	Reading the Body (ENGL170201) The Body in Sickness and Health (SOCY170201)	Laura Tanner Jane Ashley	Fall 2015	19
Fall Total = 204				
Complex Problems	Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity (HIST1501/ENGL1501)	Maxim Shrayner Devin Pendas	Spring 2016	76
Enduring Questions	Epidemics, Disease and Humanity (BIOL1701) Devising Theatre: Disease as Metaphor (THTR1701)	Kathleen Dunn Scott Cummings	Spring 2016	15
Enduring Questions	Power, Justice, War: The Ancients (POLI1701) Power, Justice, War: The Moderns (PHIL1701)	Robert Bartlett Aspen Brinton	Spring 2016	17
Enduring Questions	Spiritual Exercises: Engagement, Empathy, Ethics (THEO1701) Aesthetic Exercises: Engagement, Empathy, Ethics (MUSA1701)	Brian Robinette Daniel Callahan	Spring 2016	15
Spring Total = 123				

Note: One student enrolled in both a CP course and an EQ course pair in the fall. Twenty-nine students enrolled in pilot courses in both the fall and the spring.

2. Introduction and Background

Resting at the heart of a Boston College undergraduate education, the Core Curriculum establishes broad, foundational knowledge and skills. It looks both to the past traditions of Jesuit education, and, through recent efforts at renewal and revitalization, toward the future of liberal arts general education in the twenty-first century. The Core is a fifteen-course (at least 45-credit) set of general education requirements all undergraduates complete prior to graduation. It is the only university-wide academic program for the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences, the Carroll School of Management, the Connell School of Nursing, and the Lynch School of Education. The Core consists of one course in Arts, one course in Cultural Diversity, two courses in History, one course in Literature, one course in Mathematics, two courses in Natural Sciences, two courses in Philosophy, two courses in Social Sciences, two courses in Theology, and one course in Writing. Twenty-two different Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences departments and programs contribute to the Core with variation in how large a place it occupies in their course offerings.

The present structure of the Boston College Core has existed since 1991. The 1991 Core plan emphasized the pursuit of “coherence,” “introduction to the fundamental concepts and methods of scholarly investigation of the disciplines,” and the Jesuit, Catholic commitment to “the reflective interplay of what one understands and believes with how one acts, especially in the service of others.” Until 2015 the faculty University Core Development Committee approved new courses for Core credit. There were no significant changes to the Core as a whole between the early 1990s and 2012, when a process of renewing the Core Curriculum began. Renewal was warranted out of a pervasive sense that many students and faculty had come to be disengaged from the Core. That process has thus far yielded an integrative vision statement, a 2015–2018 pilot course program, and since July 2015 new administrative structures—the Office of the Associate Dean for the Core and the University Core Renewal Committee (UCRC). The 2014 Vision Animating the Boston College Core Curriculum reaffirmed the importance of BC’s Jesuit, Catholic traditions to the Core and established common, cross-departmental liberal arts learning outcomes. On Core Renewal Pilot Courses—innovative interdisciplinary classes for first-year students—see part 4 (p. 14). On the Office of the Associate Dean for the Core and UCRC see part 5 (p. 23).

Faculty and instructors in the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences teach the vast majority of Core courses. Some Core courses are intended for non-majors with no secondary application; others serve as introductions to or requirements for majors. In some departments graduate students teach Core classes as part of their training and professional formation. The Cultural Diversity Core requirement is unique in its ability to “double count”; it may be fulfilled by a course that also counts for Core, major, or elective credit. The professional schools have some distinctive Core requirements and special programs (e.g., the Carroll School of Management Portico program), and the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences offers some programmatic options for fulfilling the Core (e.g., Honors, Perspectives, Pulse, and now the Core Renewal Pilot Courses).

With a few exceptions (e.g., the First-Year Writing Seminar, Perspectives, and the Carroll School Portico program) students may take Core classes at any time and in any order during their four years at Boston College. They are also able to apply Advanced Placement, International

Baccalaureate, etc., credit toward the fulfillment of most Core requirements (except Philosophy, Theology, and Cultural Diversity, for which there are no AP, etc. equivalents). Furthermore, some students fulfill Core requirements while studying abroad, typically during their junior year. Majors with prerequisites and firm pathways lead some undergraduates to enroll in Core classes throughout their Boston College career, while most students tend to complete most Core requirements during their first two years.

3. Map of the Core

a. Structures and Assessment

Until now we have known very little about the overall shape of the Core, both in terms of how it functions systematically and how students experience it. It is important to note at the outset that in a basic sense the Core “works” in a serviceable way. Departments contribute, classes are scheduled, and students graduate. It establishes a broad-based liberal arts foundation that complements the major. Students, as we will see, generally agree that Core classes introduce them to the basic methods and knowledge of particular disciplines. However, more generally, with no office at the helm until 2015 and thus with no direct administrative oversight and coordination, the Core has drifted over past decades. Departments approach the Core in a variety of ways, and it plays very different roles in their cultures and curricular offerings. The pursuit of greater engagement, deeper integration, and connection to the BC Mission requires better understanding of how the Core actually operates. We need a map of the Core, its structures, and students’ experience of it.

Stability

IRPA was able to distinguish patterns in the overall structure of the Core.¹ Over the past five years (AY11–AY15), the size of the Core has been generally stable, approximate 100,000 credit hours/year. During this time, a slight decrease in the overall number of classes has been accompanied by a mild increase in average class size (4%, from 35.9 to 37.2 students/class, although median class size has held at 26 students/class) (Analysis Memo, p. 26 below). *Stability is a mixed blessing: it reflects coherence and consistency while at the same time indicating possible inertia and stasis.*

Variation in department credit hours

Beyond overall stability, there is tremendous variety in class size as well as in department and instructor contributions to the Core. Of the twenty-two departments that furnish the Core, each year some teach as few as one class and others teach more than one hundred and fifty. Departments that contribute to the following Core requirements tend to teach smaller-sized classes: Arts, Literature, Philosophy, Theology, and Writing. Classes for other Core requirements tend to be larger: History, Mathematics, Natural Science, and Social Science. Because class size varies, that fact that a department may teach more Core courses than another does not necessarily result in more credit hours. Credit hours are the common currency for evaluating labor. For instance, over the past five years, departments in the Social Sciences taught 16% of Core credit hours while only teaching 8% of Core classes, whereas English taught only 9% of Core credit

¹ Appendices 7.a.i. Boston College Core Curriculum Data Analysis Memo, pp. 26–31, and 7.a.ii. Core Dashboard, pp. 32–38. Cultural Diversity courses were not included in this analysis due to their distinctively difficult-to-track profile; nor were 0-credit discussion groups and 1-credit labs, masking somewhat the amount of instructor labor.

hours while teaching 18% of Core classes (Analysis Memo, p. 27). More specifically, the Social Sciences (four departments teaching two Core requirements) provide the largest number of credit hours (AY12–16 average of 16,794/year), followed by the Natural Sciences (four departments contributing 13,765/year), History (one department teaching two Core requirements at 11,418/year), and Mathematics (one department teaching one Core requirement at 10,156). Among Social Science departments, Economics taught the most Core credit hours (6,749), followed by Psychology (4,157) and Sociology (3,946). Among Natural Science departments, Earth and Environmental Sciences taught the most credit hours (5,400), followed by Chemistry (4,515) and Physics (2,945) (Dashboard, pp. 32–33).

Class sizes

During the past five years, 61% of Core classes enrolled 30 students or less (22% enrolled 15 or less), while only 6% of Core classes enrolled more than 100 students (Core Analysis, p. 28). Pulse, Perspectives, and Writing have the smallest class sizes and thus the largest number of sections. History and the Natural Sciences have the largest average class sizes, and with the exception of those that department and cluster of departments, most BC students seem to fulfill the Core in classes with enrollments less than 45/class (Dashboard, pp. 32, 38). *Variation in Core class sizes need not be cause for alarm. There are different models—lecture and discussion—for effective teaching. The principal question to ask is: Is each department organizing its Core courses in ways that balance efficiency and fairness with the overall aims of a general liberal arts education?*

Faculty teaching Core classes

Among the more surprising findings was that in AY11–AY15 only 20% of Core classes were taught by ranked faculty (Full, Associate, and Assistant Professors), whereas 75% were taught by supplemental faculty (graduate student Teaching Fellows, Part-time Faculty, and Full-time Non-Tenure Track Faculty). From fall 2011 through spring 2016 ranked faculty accounted for 30% of Core credit hours because they tend to teach larger courses. More specifically, Teaching Fellows and Part-time Faculty staff the vast majority of Core courses in Writing (86% of credit hours), Philosophy (86%) and Arts (70% across three departments). Ranked faculty teach the highest percentage of Core credit hours in the natural sciences (55%) and social sciences (52%). They teach the lowest percentage of Core credit hours in Theology (9%), Philosophy (5%), and FWS (1%). The 41% of Theology Core credit hours that are team-taught need to be understood better (Core Analysis, pp. 28–29; Dashboard, pp. 36–37). Job classification is obviously no indication of the quality of teaching. Many excellent part-time faculty and full-time tenure-track have taught at Boston College for many years. We know very little about the level and experience of graduate student teaching across the Core, since it varies tremendously from department to department. Again, the numbers above do not include 0- and 1-credit sections. Regardless, linking research-active faculty to undergraduate liberal arts general education should be a priority because students are distinctly served and uniquely prepared when knowledge creation and knowledge transmission intersect directly.

Four Departments: English, History, Philosophy, Theology

Appendix 7.a.iii shows more detailed information on the departments responsible for two-course

Core requirements: English, History, Philosophy, Theology.² Comparison among departments is hindered by the different ways departments organize instructional time, above all with graduate students. Information on chart 1 is for five-year averages between AY12–AY16.

In Philosophy and Theology, Core courses make up the highest percentage of both the departments' total courses taught and total credit hours. In English they amount to about half of courses taught and of credit hours. In History the incongruity between the number of Core as a percentage of total courses taught (28%) and the number of credit hours (62%) results from large lecture courses. Fewer ranked faculty (Professor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor) teach Core classes in History (27%) than in the other three departments, with Theology at the high end with 63%. In all four departments virtually all full-time non-tenure track faculty teach the Core. A majority of Core classes are taught by supplemental faculty in English (68%), Theology (56%), and Philosophy (52%). In History this number is reduced by the greater reliance on full-time non-tenure track faculty (postdoctoral fellows), who teach 41% of Core courses.

Chart 1. Core Percentages in Four Departments AY12–AY16

	English	History	Philosophy	Theology
Core as % of courses taught in dept	52%	28%	72%	61%
Core as % of credit hours taught in dept	53%	62%	77%	74%
% of total fac who teach Core	72%	61%	72%	77%
% of ranked fac who teach Core	47%	27%	50%	63%
Core as % of courses taught by ranked fac	10%	27%	21%	24%
% of FT non-TT who teach Core	98%	86%	97%	97%
Core as % of courses taught by FT non-TT	22%	41%	27%	19%
% of supp fac who teach Core	83%	88%	80%	84%
Core as % of courses taught by supp fac	68%	32%	52%	56%

² 7.a.iii. Four Departments: English, History, Philosophy, and Theology, pp. 39–58. A small number of Literature Core courses are taught by Classics, German Studies, Romance Languages and Literatures, and Slavic & Eastern Languages and Literatures.

There are differences in the average size of Core classes according to department (all large History Cores also include smaller discussion sections of less than 20):

Chart 2. Average Core class size AY12–AY16

	English	History	Philosophy	Theology
Avg Core class size	19.6	99.80	26.0	32.70

For more annual department detail and distinctions by faculty rank, see 7.a.iii, pp. 39–58.

Assessment and E-1-A Forms

The 2007 NEASC accreditation report and the 2010 interim report had observed the need to improve the assessment of the Core. Progress is being made. During the 2015–2016 academic year the Associate Dean for the Core asked departments and clusters of departments that contribute to the Core to revisit the 1991 descriptions of Core requirements in light of (1) the 2014 Vision Animating the Boston College Core, which had spelled out common, cross-disciplinary learning goals, and (2) changes in disciplinary knowledge over the past twenty-five years. Conversations that generated draft restatements furthered reflection within departments on the purpose and value of the Core. When finalized, these descriptions will serve as criteria both for ongoing Core assessment and for the consideration of new Core course proposals. In late May 2016 for the first time, all departments and programs in MCA&S that contribute to the Core submitted E-1-A forms that describe the processes and, if available, results of assessment of Core classes and programs. The previous chair of the University Core Development Committee, Father Arthur Madigan, S.J., had worked very hard to put Core assessment in motion. The AY2016 Core E-1-A forms, which contribute to preparation for the 2017 NEASC accreditation visit, are available on the BC Core website (www.bc.edu/core). Finally, Core Renewal pilot courses discussed below have created an opportunity to build assessment (both of program viability and of student learning outcomes) from the ground up.

Significant progress has been made in Core assessment since the previous NEASC accreditation visit. While a culture of academic assessment remains embryonic at Boston College, we seem to be on the right track. Assessment is only worthwhile, however, if the knowledge generated is useful to departments and programs in curricular planning and execution. There are also certain fundamental and qualitative aspects of liberal arts general education, especially in a Jesuit, Catholic context, that defy immediate measure. We should continue to consider assessment as a means for departments and programs to ask questions about student learning to which they themselves want meaningful answers.

b. Student Experience

From one point of view, the 1991 Core successfully provides basic liberal arts general education. A significant majority of graduating seniors in 2013 (73%) and 2015 (75%) agreed or strongly agreed that the Core conveyed the substance, method, or key concepts of the Core disciplines.³ In 2013 CSON students provided the highest mean score on this question (4.00/5.00), and MCA&S

³ 7.a.iv. BC Undergrad Experience Questionnaire 2013, graphic 1, p. 61, and 7.a.v. BC Undergrad Experience Survey 2015, p. 64.

students the lowest (3.82/5.00). The judgment that the Core has enabled students to acquire “a broad general education” during their four years received the highest overall mean score (4.29/5.00), whereas students viewed somewhat less favorably the idea that their “education would have been too narrow without exposure to the many disciplines represented in the BC Core” (3.67/5.00).

In 2015 fewer seniors believed that the Core had led them to discover “new intellectual interests” (63%) and “to examine previous assumptions and ideas” (61%). Again Nursing students gave the highest mean score (understood key concepts = 5.17/6.00), whereas Arts and Sciences students gave the lowest (examine previous assumptions and ideas = 4.59/6.00). Overall, understanding key concepts of Core disciplines rated higher (4.87/6.00) than discovering new intellectual interests through the Core (4.61/6.00) and examining previous assumptions and ideas (4.60/6.00). Noteworthy is the fact that, in their qualitative comments, students observed that the Core facilitated exploration and personal growth. They also expressed frustration with the perceived structural restrictiveness of the Core.

With help from Student Services, the Office of the Associate Dean for the Core was able to add four questions to the normal student teaching evaluations in fall 2015 for all English, History, Philosophy, and Theology Core courses and in spring 2016 for all History, Philosophy, and Theology Core courses.⁴ The survey yielded a very high rate of return (about 12,000 out of 14,000 student responses, or 86%).

Chart 3. Add-on Questions to Fall 2015 and Spring 2016 Core Student Surveys in Four Departments: Percentage of students who *Strongly Agreed* or *Agreed*.

	Fall 2015	Spring 2016	AY16 Average
After taking this Core course, I understand the basic concepts, methods, and/or content of the course’s discipline.	92%	92%	92%
This Core course helped me think differently about other disciplines.	79%	81%	80%
This Core course helped me make connections and integrate what I have learned elsewhere.	83%	83%	84%
My main reason for taking this course was to fulfill a Core requirement.	87%	89%	88%

Results from student surveys indicate the degree to which they tend to experience the Core more as introductions to particular disciplines and less as a formative, integrated liberal arts experience. We should bear in mind the limitations of indirect assessment according to student “customer satisfaction” modeling. While basic foundational knowledge seems to be established, students clearly take Core courses in order to fulfill a requirement, a fact that contributes to a culture of treating the Core as “boxes to check.” Nor does the Core seem especially successful

⁴ 7.a.vi. Add-on Questions to Fall 2015–Spring 2016 Core Student Surveys.

in stimulating new intellectual interests and examining previous assumptions and ideas. Undergraduates appear to have struggled to integrate Core courses in terms of interdisciplinary dialogue. The relationship of the Core to distinctive Jesuit commitments to the formation of the whole person seems to have been experienced unsystematically. The Core Renewal Pilot Courses are addressing these deficiencies.

In addition to gathering students' impressions, we are beginning to see patterns in student experience of the Core. IRPA determined that, during their first two years at Boston College, 87% of the class of 2015 completed 10 or more Core requirements, and 54% completed 12 or more. Students fulfilled an average of 11.5 Core requirements during their freshmen and sophomore years, which means that possibly over 50% of the courses taken in their first two years were Core (Core Analysis, p. 30). Fulfillment transpires through BC Core courses and/or Advanced Placement/transfer equivalences. Usefully, we are also now able to understand somewhat the timing of Core requirement completion. 97% of students of the class of 2015 completed the Writing Core by the end of their first year (34% AP and 63% First-Year Writing Seminar (FWS)). The Writing Core is clearly designed to achieve this result since classes are restricted to freshmen. Approximately 87% of students complete their Literature and Mathematics requirement by the end of their first year (Literature = 32% AP and 55% Lit Core; Mathematics = 29% AP and 58% Math Core). By the end of sophomore year, most students have fulfilled their Social Science (87%), Philosophy (77%), History (77%), and Theology (76%) Core requirements. Only by the end of junior year did 77% of students complete the Arts Core (Core Analysis, p. 31). *Given the variety of pathways individual students can pursue to completing the Core, and the fact that with the exception of FWS no requirement must be completed by a particular year, it is somewhat surprising that the vast majority of students satisfy most general education requirements in their first two years. Anecdotally, some students and faculty advisers in the natural sciences assert that Core classes must be taken over the course of a student's career, since major requirements and pre-requisites allow for very little flexibility or room for maneuver. The same situation pertains for many students in the professional schools. If possible, it would be useful to know if there are particular patterns to completing the Core according to declared majors (upon entering and at the end of sophomore year). Such knowledge about actual student experience and pathways may prove indispensable in future planning and design of the Core.*

There presently exist no means for an accurate accounting of how many Core requirements students fulfill away from BC—either through Advanced Placement, etc., study abroad, summer classes, or otherwise. At the time they were admitted, the class of 2015 possessed enough AP credits to substitute for 3,811 Core classes. If all those credits were applied—and, again, existing student information systems do not permit exact tallies—then up to 19% of Core requirements for the class of 2015 may have been fulfilled through AP credit. This number would not include Core requirements for which there is no AP equivalent: Cultural Diversity, Philosophy, and Theology. In 2015–2016, the Office of the Associate Dean for the Core received 121 requests for substitutions for the Cultural Diversity Core requirement (92 were approved, 29 were denied). In 2015–2016 Student Services processed 147 study abroad substitutions for Core classes from the class of 2016 alone (Arts = 64, History = 34, Cultural Diversity = 22, Natural Science = 15, Philosophy = 9, Theology = 3, etc.). These numbers do not reflect “pre-approved” classes as listed by the Office of International Programs and determined by individual departments. *The*

Core having evolved organically over time without administrative oversight, we need to understand better how many Core requirements are fulfilled “away” from BC and to make strategic decisions on the question of how many non-BC courses a student can take and still receive a Boston College liberal arts education.

4. Core Renewal

Realizing calls for interdisciplinarity and Core revision in the 2006 strategic plan, Boston College began in 2012 the process of renewing the Core for the first time since 1991. Between 2012 and 2014, BC administrators and faculty envisioned the kind of Core our students need and that fits Boston College’s distinctive mission and identity. There have been several warrants for renewing the Core. Some aspirations of the 1991 Core have never been adequately realized. In particular, calls for students to be the primary agents of integration seem to have yielded poor results. Undergraduates appear to have struggled to integrate Core courses both in terms of multi-disciplinary liberal arts synthesis and with respect to the distinctive Jesuit commitment to the formation of the whole person. Over time, the Core has drifted into a set of department- and cluster-based distribution requirements. Although some students have described being unexpectedly transformed by a Core course, there has been a widespread perception that students have tended overall to treat Core courses as “boxes to check” en route to their major(s). Both student and faculty experience of the Core has been inconsistent, and disengagement has crept into the signature program of Boston College liberal arts education.

With the help of consultants from the design consultancy Continuum, a process of broad consultation and creative planning led to the innovative proposal *Toward a Renewed Core* (2013), which provided an initial roadmap for interdisciplinary courses that model meaningful integrative general education. Then-Dean of Arts and Sciences David Quigley, Dean Andy Boynton of the Carroll School, and Professor Mary Crane, Thomas F. Rattigan Professor of English and Director of the Institute for Liberal Arts occupied principal leadership roles in this process. This effort was followed in 2014 by *The Vision Animating the Boston College Core Curriculum* (2014), developed by a committee chaired by then-Interim Dean Father Gregory Kalscheur, S.J., which explicitly grounded Core Renewal in the Jesuit worldview and the principles and practices of the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius Loyola. The Vision Statement identifies common learning outcomes that cut across and unify Core requirements rooted in different departments and clusters of departments. Together, the 2013 curricular proposal and the 2014 vision statement provide the direction for two kinds of interdisciplinary Core courses offered exclusively for first-year students during a three-year pilot period in 2015–2018:

Complex Problems courses are large team-taught, six-credit classes that address a contemporary problem of vital significance. They meet three times a week for joint fifty-minute lectures, once a week for a seventy-five-minute lab, and once a week for a two-hour Reflection session.

Enduring Questions courses are linked pairs of distinct three-credit classes of 19 students taught by a faculty member from a different department. Although they meet separately during normal course times, both classes are linked by a common topic and set of questions as well as share some readings and assignments. Four times during the semester

the students and both faculty gather for Reflection sessions.

The Model

Core Renewal Pilot Courses reflect current research on student learning, and they intentionally pursue the opportunities presented by Boston College's Jesuit, Catholic traditions and identity. Interdisciplinary approaches to liberal arts general education model high-level connections between different disciplines and methods, and among students, teachers, and the broader world. Deep learning—as opposed to surface learning—can occur when students are motivated by themes they care about. Complex Problems classes thus address topics of vital, contemporary concern, and Enduring Questions classes examine themes of perennial human significance. In 2015–2017 initial Complex Problems topics include climate change; race, gender, and violence; genocide; creativity and innovation; theater and politics; and film and social problems. Enduring Questions courses have examined and will examine truth-telling; humans and nature; epidemics and theatrical representations of disease; ancient and modern views of power, justice, and war; spiritual and artistic exercises; love, gender, and marriage; the good life; black intimacy; materiality; and adoption, among others. Faculty teach methods, content, and skills more effectively when students are motivated by deep engagement with the topic. Complex Problems labs embrace the emergent pedagogy of problem- and project-based learning, which asks students to produce knowledge as a further means of engagement and integration. Complex Problems and Enduring Questions Pilot Courses intentionally call students' attention not only to what they are learning but to how they are learning and why it matters. Such “metacognitive” ability—the capacity to be aware of how one is learning and that there are varying ways to approach perennial questions and difficult problems—yields long-term benefits.

The innovative Reflection component of the pilot courses enables students to bring together what they are learning with who they are and with what is happening outside of class. Jesuit education has always sought to integrate students' intellectual, affective, and spiritual lives as well as to unite student personhood with meaningful action in the world. In Core Renewal Pilot Course Reflection sessions students are urged to consider how and why learning is relevant to their lives outside the classroom. Examples of this co-curricular programming include teaching students concretely how to reflect through the Ignatian Examen or meditation, inviting speakers from the community, requiring students to attend on-campus conferences and events, taking field trips, and organizing career panels. One class on the body in sickness and health brought students to the Nursing School to demonstrate a birth simulator—an experience that stimulated true conversation. A class in Music attended a BC hockey game in order to observe and listen to the melodies of crowd, ice, and action.

In one Core Renewal class, the faculty organized their reflection sessions around what they called Purposeful Ongoing Discussion, or PODs. Led by upper-class students and each comprised of fifteen students from a Complex Problems class on climate change, the PODs met weekly for peer-to-peer discussion of class material and how it related to students' lives. These groups also achieved a valuable secondary effect: providing first-year students with student mentors who could ease their transition to college. The POD program was developed in collaboration between the Complex Problems faculty and the Office of Mission and Ministry, modeling the kind of connections to which Core Renewal aspires. Altogether, Reflection sessions aim to break down the artificial “fourth wall” of the classroom, leading students to see

Core education as essential to who they are becoming—in the other classes they take, in campus life, and beyond.

Through reflection, labs, classroom instruction, and interdisciplinary collaboration, Core Renewal Pilot Courses establish the kind of unifying integration that has long been a hallmark of Jesuit education: guiding students toward the mature discovery of who they are meant to become as well as leading them to act in the world for others. Core Renewal Pilot Courses explicitly express the Mission of Boston College by embodying our definition of the educated person; they form a substantive and holistic program of general education; and they integrate Core requirements in ways that exemplify engaged liberal arts learning at a Jesuit, Catholic university.

The Pilot Experiment

In 2015–2016, 326 first-year students took these 3 Complex Problems and 6 pairs of Enduring Questions classes. In the 2016–2017 academic year, 747 seats will be available in 5 Complex Problems and 11 pairs of Enduring Questions courses.⁵ Over two years this initiative will involve 44 different faculty from 17 different MCA&S departments and two other schools (CSON and CSOM). Faculty who teach the pilots receive a \$10,000 stipend and Complex Problems courses count for two courses of a faculty member's normal teaching load (each Enduring Questions course counts for one normal course). In the fall semester faculty submit applications, either in pairs or individually, for classes to be taught the next year. The following spring faculty participate in a series of pedagogical workshops designed to introduce them to the paradigm of Ignatian pedagogy, to acquaint them better with their partners and to the challenges and opportunities of team teaching, and to provide a forum for early development of syllabi. These workshops have been produced in coordination with the Center for Teaching Excellence. A workshop for graduate student Teaching Assistants responsible for Complex Problems labs was also held in August 2015. Promotion of the courses has been aided immensely through the efforts of the Office of Marketing Communication, which produced video interviews with Core pilot faculty and created text materials to be sent to incoming students. Preparation in 2014–2015 for AY16 pilot courses was coordinated by Professor Mary Crane (English), Director of the Institute for Liberal Arts, and Professor Julian Bourg (History), a role they continued in 2015–2016, respectively, as Chair of the Core Renewal Subcommittee of the University Core Renewal Committee, and as Associate Dean for the Core.

a. 2015–2016 Core Renewal Pilot Course Analysis

Our first efforts at appraisal have been focused on program viability—What is working? What should be adapted as we move forward? A distinctive survey was administered to all students who took pilot classes, and focus groups were held with the faculty and teaching assistants who taught them.

i. Students

Demographics and the Freshman Survey

In 2015–2016 more female first-year students took Core pilot courses than males. Female representation in the pilots was also higher than their proportion in the freshman class. The same dynamic held for AHANA students' ratio to white students. Education and Nursing students took

⁵ 7.b.i. 2015–2016 and 2016–2017 Core Renewal Pilot Courses, pp. 85–87.

pilot courses in greater relative numbers compared to Management students. The vast majority of enrollments were from the Morrissey College (fall 2015 = 74.9%, spring 2016 = 76.4%). While proportionally fewer varsity athletes took pilot courses, more students with a “low” admission rating (7–10) did so.⁶ The Freshman Survey indicates that students who enrolled in Complex Problems and Enduring Questions courses had a higher sense of civic engagement, pluralistic orientation, social agency, and likely college involvement than students who did not take these classes. On the other hand, pilot participants tended to have a *lower* sense of academic self-concept (academic and mathematical ability, intellectual self-confidence, and drive to achieve) and worried *less* about college reputation.⁷ *The high-level of female and AHANA participation in the pilots is encouraging. Designed in part to involve first-year students in holistic academic engagement, these classes initially seem to be reaching populations who need them, for instance, those with low admission rating and low academic self-concept. More needs to be learned about the different experiences of professional school students, how their curricular obligations may impede pilot participation, and what distinctive Core classes might be designed to involve them in Core Renewal (for instance, Nursing students may have had a high rate of participation in fall 2015 because one Enduring Questions class was taught by a Nursing faculty member).*

Core Pilots Surveys and Course Evaluations

Associate Dean Bourg and Professor Crane worked with IRPA to create a survey instrument for Core Renewal Pilot Course students in order to generate information unavailable on regular course evaluations.⁸ Completed at the end of the semester in addition to course evaluations, the survey was intended to ascertain the extent to which the pilots fulfilled the aspirations of the 2012 Toward a Renewed Core plan and 2014 Vision statement and also to investigate questions raised in the community about intellectual rigor, the appropriateness of interdisciplinary courses for first-year students, etc. According to the summary reports, students “were positive on nearly every measure” and tended to strongly agree that distinctive learning, knowledge acquisition, and reflection took place. They gave highest ratings on the 6-point agreement scale to the following statements:

Fall 2015

[EQ ONLY] I explored enduring questions that are central to understanding human life.	5.74
[EQ ONLY] The questions discussed were of interest to me.	5.69
[CP ONLY] I gained a greater understanding of a complex contemporary problem.	5.48
I gained knowledge that will be useful to me in the future.	5.45
I learned how these two disciplines relate to each other, and differ in their approaches.	5.41

Spring 2016

[EQ ONLY] The questions discussed were of interest to me.	5.60
[EQ ONLY] I explored enduring questions that are central to understanding human life.	5.57
[CP ONLY] I gained a greater understanding of a complex contemporary problem.	5.45
This course was intellectually challenging.	5.41
I would recommend that other first-year students take [an EQ pair of courses] OR [a CP course].	5.35

⁶ 7.b.ii. 2015–2016 Core Renewal Pilot Student Demographics, pp. 88–91.

⁷ 7.b.iii. Freshman Survey Results for Core Pilot Participants, pp. 92–100.

⁸ 7.b.iv. Fall 2015 Core Pilots Survey Summary Report, pp. 101–119, and 7.b.v. Spring 2016 Core Pilots Survey Summary Report, pp. 120–40.

Students furthermore reported that, among other factors, they found themselves challenged to think in new ways, would be able to explain the significance of the problem/question they studied to someone who had not taken the course, and felt that they had gained and improved analytical, reading, and writing skills. They judged that pilot courses required “more effort” compared to other Core courses. On a five-point scale from “much less effort” to “much more effort,” students in fall 2015 gave an average rating of 3.96 and those in spring 2016 a rating of 4.11.

Questions with the lowest scores on the 6-point agreement scale were:

Fall 2015

I considered the role of religious faith in approaching [EQs] OR contemporary problems [CPs].	3.78
My main reason for taking these courses was to fulfill core requirements.	3.48
I think I would have benefited more from these courses if I had taken them later in college.	3.02

Spring 2016

I was helped to move toward making a decision about a major in one of these fields.	3.95
My main reason for taking these courses was to fulfill core requirements.	3.95
I was helped to think about a future career path.	3.88
I think I would have benefited more from these courses if I had taken them later in college.	3.25

The pilots show clear success in getting students to approach learning on a problem- or question-based model. Engagement and relevance figure prominently. Similarly, the pilots struck students as intellectually challenging and as opening the door to interdisciplinary connections early in their collegiate experience. The fact that these classes were to be recommended to other first-year students is a good sign. On the other hand, the consideration of the role of religious faith received lower ratings. Especially because several classes had explicitly introduced religious and faith questions into their syllabi, we considered the possibility that the phrasing of this question may have skewed the results (were students being asked about their religious faith? about the religious faith of the people they studied?). Ratings for the consideration of religious faith did improve in the spring 2016 semester—the first in which a pilot course was taught by a Theology faculty member. Nevertheless, moving forward, we will need to be more deliberate about “the role of religious faith” on at least two levels: first, expanding the number of pilot courses taught by faculty whose scholarly expertise is in theology and religion, and second, continuing to develop expansive programming that takes a broad and inclusive view of Jesuit mission. Likewise, programming can be developed together with the Career Center that invites students as they arrive at BC to consider the relationships between liberal arts education and vocational discernment. The two other lowest rated questions can be understood differently. We want students to be taking the pilots because they are interested in them, not because they are trying to fulfill requirements, and the judgment that these classes would have been more beneficial later in students’ time at BC can only be verified in the future.

In their qualitative comments to the Pilot Course Survey, students noted that Complex Problems and Enduring Questions courses were challenging, interesting, and stimulated their thinking. Overall they highlighted the innovative format of the courses, the dynamic impact of two faculty members collaborating or teaching together, the engaging and relevant nature of the course

topics, the value of course content as well as of the analytical and problem-solving skills acquired, the pilots' transformative effect on future planning, and the meaningful relationships established with faculty members and peers.

More general trends in student comments include the following. Students looked forward to class, found themselves challenged, considered course material outside of class time and beyond requirements, and grasped the value of approaching questions and problems from multiple perspectives. The knowledge gained was “relevant” to a student’s “entire life.” Faculty members’ passion for teaching subjects they care about was evident and appreciated. Students developed closer relationships with their Core pilot teachers and peers than in other classes, which generated a sense of community. Labs in Complex Problems classes and Reflection sessions in all Core pilots reinforced course content and enabled deeper levels of integration. Students described the classes as “eye-opening,” were moved by what they studied, and inspired to “make the world a better place.” Exposed to unfamiliar topics and knowledge, to materials and performances that might not otherwise have encountered, they discovered new intellectual interests and passions. Perspectives were changed in ways that led students to reimagine their future plans—the very essence of a transformative experience.

Student criticisms of the pilots tended to track those often made of undergraduate courses (too much reading and heavy workload, questions of organization, difficulty of discussion in large classes, etc.). Helpfully, students pointed out that some of the labs had inconsistent projects and workloads, that discussions in large classrooms were difficult, that some reflection sessions repeated experiences during instructional time, and that the courses took up a lot of time. Some of labs were not as organized as they might have been, and some of the Reflection sessions were less valuable to students than had been hoped. Some Enduring Questions pairs could have better coordinated and linked their readings and assignments.

Qualitative comments by students on the pilots are extremely helpful. They articulate in the form of testimonials the ways that the classes seem to be achieving what they are intended to do. Students appear capable of engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue without having “mastered” single disciplines beforehand. They identified areas—labs, Reflection sessions, and Enduring Questions linkages—in need of continuing development. Faculty who have not previously taught freshmen-only classes before probably do need further encouragement to adapt workloads and expectations. We were pleasantly surprised that one somewhat unintended structural factor—for scheduling reasons, several of the Enduring Questions met five days a week—ended up meaningfully facilitating students’ experience as a cohort.

On the regular course evaluations, when compared to the average scores of the departments in which the pilot faculty teach, all the 2015–2016 Core Renewal Pilot Courses received higher mean scores in the categories of “intellectually challenging” and “effort required.” With one exception, all the pilots also received higher mean scores than department averages on the “course overall.”

ii. Faculty

2015–2016 Core Renewal pilot faculty and graduate student teaching assistants (the latter in Complex Problems courses) participated in a series of focus groups and interviews facilitated by

the IRPA. “According to focus group and interview participants,” the fall 2015 report concluded, “the issues and course topics were very relevant for first semester freshmen, and these intense courses set the expectations for what college courses will be like and provided groundwork for how to engage with difficult questions. All faculty valued the experience of team teaching, interdisciplinary teaching, and teaching in the Core. Faculty commented that they would love to teach a course like this again.”⁹

Those teaching fall 2015 pilots underscored the connection between pilot classes and the BC Mission. They were able to “slow down” and dialogue with their students on their experience of newly arriving at college. Interdisciplinarity brought to the fore the distinctive characteristics of particular disciplines, encouraging contemplation on the virtues and limits of different ways of knowing. By teaching problems and questions that they themselves care about and that are often tied to their research, faculty observed that the pilots departed from the model of formulaic, general introductory classes and tended to resemble the rigor of upper-division electives—although adapted for the needs of entering freshmen. Some teachers seemed to intuitively embrace the Jesuit approach of an experienced guide leading a less-experienced person to engage the world and listen to their deepest desires. Faculty were also surprised by the depth and range of student sharing, sometimes finding themselves unprepared for such intensity. The themes, content, format, and time commitments of the courses prompted such personal disclosures and relationships. Fall 2015 teachers said they would have benefitted from more training and preparation on how to navigate student disclosure: what is appropriate for them to handle and where other units of the university should step in. The small class size of the Enduring Questions and the Complex Problems labs (and PODs) created a strong sense of cohort solidarity among the students, which had positive and negative consequences. On one hand, it gave new students a community of belonging during the turbulent transition to college; on the other hand, it sometimes created “group think” that made students reticent to criticize one another’s positions, thereby undermining academic possibility. Faculty were pleased with student performance and engagement, which they judged at a higher caliber than other first-year courses some had taught. As one teacher stated, “By week three or four, you wouldn’t know they were first semester, first years.” Students were said to have successfully navigated the challenges of engaging two different disciplines.

Fall 2015 faculty all observed the particularly high workload in these courses. The classes themselves have many moving parts, and team-teaching takes particular time and energy. One person described the pilot semester as the least productive ever in terms of research. Enduring Questions teachers said it would be useful if they visited one another’s classes more regularly. The Complex Problems teachers recommended that the two-course equivalency credit be continued. Faculty also made useful suggestions regarding the spring pedagogical seminar, labs, reflection, team-teaching, post-pilot follow-ups with students, and logistics.

Spring 2016 Enduring Questions faculty similarly emphasized the bonding and esprit de corps that developed among students in small classes.¹⁰ Exceptional student engagement was a by-

⁹ 7.b.vi. Fall 2015 Core Pilots Focus Group Report, pp. 141–59. TAs and POD leaders are also discussed in that report but not here.

¹⁰ 7.b.vii. Spring 2016 Core Pilots Focus Group Report, pp. 160–81. TAs are also discussed in that report but not here.

product of this dynamic. Faculty also emphasized the distinctiveness of first-year students. As the report noted, “freshman are more ‘open to surprise and don’t know what college is or should be,’ which allows for a more ‘expansive’ experience.” One colleague was able to compare the pilot course with another Core class he/she was teaching at the same time. Students in the pilot class seemed more thoughtful and reflective, in part due to the absence of upper-class students. At the same time, teaching freshmen poses its own challenges; first-year students are learning how to learn in a college setting, and certain skills, background, and experience cannot be assumed. Enduring Questions faculty wondered how well students were making connections between the two classes, and open-ended assignments raised some concerns, but overall most “felt that the students were strong, eager and engaged.”

There was significant variation in how Reflection sessions were viewed: some instructors treated them as extra class time, others pursued “outside the class” activities beyond the scheduled Reflection time block, several had students keep journals, etc. Faculty’s critical reflection on the Reflection sessions—what the term “reflection” means, what those sessions are intended to do, how that time can be structured, and so forth—will be crucial for ongoing programmatic development. Similarly, questions raised about the substance and value of interdisciplinarity should continue to inform future planning. The issue of departmental support or resistance to Core Renewal emerged. Junior faculty had particular concerns about how participation in the pilots might affect their standing in departments and the process of tenure and promotion, and they also seemed more open than senior colleagues to applying the experience and lessons of the Core Renewal pilot experience to other classes they teach. As in the previous semester, spring 2016 teachers also made useful suggestions regarding the spring pedagogical seminar, space, registration, TAs, advising, the involvement of non-academic staff, and the costs and benefits of expanding the program beyond its initial small-scale, “elite” composition.

Core pilot courses by and large seem to be accomplishing what they are intended to do: advancing engagement with the Core. They provide a unique interdisciplinary experience for entering first-year students, stimulating them intellectually while providing opportunities for integrating academic learning with life outside the classroom. Concerns as to whether freshmen would be capable of engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue were generally assuaged by the high level of student preparedness and performance. The Reflection dimension is still in development. There is a need for greater clarity over the meaning of “reflection” and what Reflection sessions should be doing. A principle virtue of the Enduring Questions classes is their small size, and moving forward it remains to be seen how many 19-person courses can realistically be regularly offered. Faculty and graduate student teaching assistants commented that these courses were more work than others they had taught, but also that they were more rewarding. The Complex Problems classes in particular are labor intensive, and faculty concerns about time commitments need to be taken seriously.

Challenges, Changes, and Prospects

After the first of three years piloting Complex Problems and Enduring Questions courses we have learned a number of lessons that have already led to changes, and we can begin to lay out prospects for future program development. It will take time to institute sustainable, ongoing renewal, involving both particular kinds of classes and more general revitalization and coordination. One of the challenges of Core Renewal Pilot Courses has been to bring faculty

together in a university culture that is department-oriented. Matching faculty together is not self-evident, and considerable energy has been required to solicit proposals and find viable partnerships. Professor Crane's notable efforts in this regard need to be singled out for specific praise. A developmentalist approach whereby most proposals are cultivated and encouraged has been helpful: supporting innovative and experimental new ways of connecting the Core to students and to mission. One of the unintended benefits of Core Renewal has been to stimulate dialogue and experimentation around the Core and teaching across campus, confirming that in some quarters there is pent up energy among the faculty eager for expression. It remains to be seen over time how expansion of the program intersects with faculty and student interest and availability. It should be noted that securing enough graduate student Teaching Assistants was a *particular* challenge that will continue to hamper the pilots. The way that departments handle supplementary labor differently makes a unified, multi-departmental program difficult to implement.

Several actions and changes have been made based on evaluations of the first year of Core Renewal Pilot Courses:

- In order to further understanding of and possibilities for project-based learning, in June 2016 a team of pilot faculty, Center for Teaching Excellence staff, and the Assistant Director of the Core attended a three-day nationally recognized workshop on that theme at Worcester Polytechnic Institute.
- Because we found that AY16 faculty were sometimes limited in what they wanted to do with their students by the restrictions of the typical classroom, a flexible room for project-based lab sessions is being created in Carney Hall that will be available for the fall 2016 semester. This room will have moveable furniture, cushioned carpeting, and sufficient whiteboard space to enable faculty and students to engage in creative and innovative activities.
- The spring 2016 pedagogical workshops for AY17 faculty were redesigned in light of frank feedback from AY16 faculty. Emphasis was placed on concrete and practical training, and more space was given for faculty partners to work together. Enduring Questions faculty were encouraged to develop/revise their syllabi in order to strengthen links between their courses. The POD experience was presented as a model, and one spring 2017 Complex Problems class plans to work with Mission and Ministry to use it. Faculty were required to complete their syllabi in May 2016 prior to receiving stipends, since we learned that, for classes with several moving parts, it is all the more necessary to begin early.
- As we move toward matching faculty pairs for AY18, we are compiling descriptions of successful lab assignments and reflection sessions in order to provide colleagues with concrete examples in order to generate further ideas.
- In step with the general implementation of E-1-A forms, in 2016–2017, a sample of pilot courses will link stated learning outcomes with the direct assessment of student work.
- In coming years we will follow the Core pilot student cohorts to assess how these classes have helped shape their education.

5. Office of the Associate Dean for the Core and University Core Renewal Committee

In July 2015 the University Core Development Committee, in existence since 1991, was replaced by the University Core Renewal Committee, chaired by the Associate Dean for the Core, a new position also created at that time. In March 2016 an Assistant Director of the Core, Dr. Charles Keenan, was hired. Administrative organization of the Core in AY16 essentially moved from zero to one. The Office of the Associate for the Core:

- Organized logistics, assessment, and reimbursements for AY16 Core Renewal pilot courses; facilitated applications, scheduled courses, and designed spring 2016 pedagogical workshops for AY17 Core Renewal pilot courses in collaboration with the Center for Teaching Excellence. Hosted Core Town Halls to inform the community of progress in Core Renewal. Organized lunches and events to solicit faculty participation in the pilots. Worked with the Office of Marketing Communications to develop promotional materials for the Core pilots (videos, direct mailing, registration handouts) as well as a brochure on the Core in general. Led August 2015 Teaching Assistant training for graduate students teaching AY16 Complex Problems classes. Planned for the same in August 2016.
- Worked with Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment to assess the Core overall and the Core pilots in particular. Added Core-specific questions to certain Student Services student evaluations.
- Facilitated the rewriting of Core requirement descriptions by departments and clusters of departments that contribute to the Core, updating the 1991 language in light of the 2014 Core Vision statement and changed realities of the twenty-first century. Managed the process whereby departments submitted E-1-A assessment forms.
- Facilitated conversations with faculty and students on the Cultural Diversity Core requirement (widely viewed as among the least coherent requirements) toward its possible reshaping.
- Put in place new policies and procedures that regularized deadlines for students seeking Core substitution credits and for faculty seeking approval of new classes for non-pilot Core credit. Reviewed student applications for Cultural Diversity substitution credit (121 requests were made in AY16). Served as a first point of contact for inquiries about the Core.
- Overhauled the Core website. www.bc.edu/core.
- Created an inventory of Core courses—the first in many years. Master lists were reviewed with departments and Student Services to resolve inconsistencies.
- Developed Core Pedagogical Innovation (CPI) grants to stimulate experimentation, further integration with mission, and deepen student engagement in non-pilot Core courses.
- Presented on the Core at the new faculty orientation, Admitted Eagle Days, Excellence in Teaching Day and Center for Teaching Excellence events, Student Services administrative workshop, etc.

The University Core Renewal Committee met eight times during the academic year.¹¹ The UCRC possesses three subcommittees. The Core Renewal Subcommittee oversaw initial review

¹¹ 7.c. University Core Renewal Committee Minutes, pp. 182–99.

of AY17 pilot course applications, assessment of AY16 pilot courses, and development of AY17 pilot course. The Curriculum Subcommittee met four times to review applications by faculty seeking Core credit (non-pilot courses); thirty-five courses were submitted for new non-pilot Core credit in AY16 (previously, reviewing such course applications was the sole task of the University Core Development Committee). The Assessment Subcommittee reviewed draft Core requirement description rewrites and monitored progress of E-1-A forms for NEASC assessment. All subcommittee work was presented to the UCRC as a whole for discussion and decision.

6. Analysis and Considerations

As it has developed since 1991, the Core is relatively stable but also in some respects static. It has functioned over time. Students graduate having met its requirements, and departments staff the necessary courses. Although Core classes form a crucial part of some departments' identities and course offerings, there is a widespread sense that the Core has not been the most dynamic aspect of a Boston College liberal arts education: students often seek to "get it out of the way" en route to their major(s), and some faculty feel more passionate about teaching that relates to specific expertise than to survey-style general education. Disengagement is a specter haunting the Core. A second point is that the Core embodies variety, which can be experienced both as flexibility and as inconsistency. Students can fulfill many requirements through Advanced Placement or study abroad and, with a few exceptions, can take Core classes at any time during their four years at BC. Students seem to have very different experiences of the Core. One anecdote has it that a particular student managed to take only Philosophy and Theology Core at BC while fulfilling all other eleven requirements through AP and away from campus. Thirdly, the Core is thus somewhat chaotic. Until this year, no consistent listing of all classes approved for Core credit had existed. Oversight had been previously limited to the approval of new Core classes, which retain approved status permanently. Departments have long taught the Core with very little university-wide dialogue about the value and meaning of liberal arts general education in a Jesuit, Catholic institution. The Core having drifted for many years, there are clear challenges in bringing programmatic coordination and integration to the signature liberal arts curriculum of Boston College.

The process of Core Renewal has been designed to address this state of affairs. The Core Curriculum is now in transition, and ongoing renewal holds great promise for answering the needs of students in the twenty-first century and revitalizing academic connections to the Jesuit, Catholic identity of Boston College. Core Renewal presents a singular opportunity to engage faculty in the mission and community of Boston College. Engagement will require meeting faculty "where they are" and valuing what is important to them. Results of renewal since 2012 include: the 2014 Vision Statement, the new Office of the Associate Dean for the Core and University Core Renewal Committee, and the 2015–2018 pilot courses. Initial evaluations of the pilot courses are very promising, and new administrative structures hold similar potential. Renewal is and should be a gradual process. The approach to the Core pilots thus far seems wise: starting slowly, trying new things, building gradually, and learning along the way. Since the Core has developed organically over time, there is probably some risk in bringing too much change too quickly. The Core needs to be approached holistically: from prospective students and their parents all the way through alumni and development. We can do a better job explaining and promoting the Core to prospective and current students, parents, the BC community, and the public.

Among the principal challenges is to develop collaborative relationships among faculty in a university culture based largely on departmental identity and life. Although 17 different MCA&S departments contributed/will contribute to the Core in AY15–AY17, participation had been most high in English, Sociology, and History. Mathematics, Physics, and Psychology, for instance, have not participated (nor have Communications and Computer Science, although they do not normally teach in the Core). The insistence by the Philosophy and Theology departments that their Core courses follow a one-year continuation sequence may pose certain logistical challenges for Enduring Questions and Complex Problems classes as they move forward. It will be important to include the natural sciences in interdisciplinary Core classes; many natural science Core classes tend to serve as introductions to the major, and there may be ways to better serve the needs of non-majors for general scientific literacy. The pro's and con's of junior faculty, Professors of the Practice, and part-time instructors teaching Core Renewal classes should be explicitly addressed. Other questions that have been raised include: Will Core renewal expand to involve students in their 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years? Should faculty who teach pilot courses normally be expected to teach the class more than once? Should students be required to take a certain number of Core courses (e.g., nine of fifteen) at Boston College, and if so, how would Admissions and Student Services facilitate this rule?

Some experiments during 2015–2016 were less successful; for instance, Core Pedagogical Innovation Grants fell flat through insufficient faculty interest (and probably poor promotion). Other issues were not addressed in 2015–2016 due to time, energy, and staffing constraints; for example, review of Office of International Programs courses pre-approved for Core credit. Indeed, the relationship of the Core, almost entirely housed in MCA&S, to other parts of the university needs to be better understood and deliberately engaged. One thinks of the professional schools, Advanced Placement, First-Year Experience and Orientation, the Honors program, non-academic staff in Student Affairs and Mission and Ministry, and so forth.

Looking forward, possible considerations include:

- Both a postdoctoral program and teaching assistant graduate fellowships managed by the Office of the Associate Dean for the Core that would ensure adequate staffing for Enduring Questions and Complex Problems classes.
- A May or June 2017 retreat for faculty participating in the pilots that would (1) enable reflection on their experience and on undergraduate liberal arts education in a Jesuit, Catholic context, and (2) reward faculty by offering them several days of quiet writing (along the lines of the Mission and Ministry Villa retreat).
- A year from now in June 2017 a plan for a sustainable, post-pilot program should be articulated in the annual State of the Core Report. In particular, target enrollments, staffing needs, and the intersection between Enduring Questions and Complex Problems courses and other key elements of the Core (Pulse, Perspectives, the natural sciences) should be made clear.
- To the Boston College community: What do we want to know about the pilot courses in 2016–2017 and 2017–2018?