

Minutes of the meeting of the University Core Development Committee, Wednesday, November 2, 2011.

The committee met at about 2:05 p.m. in Gasson 105.

Present were Nasser Behnegar, Patrick Byrne, Clare Dunsford, Judith Gordon [substituting for Darren Kisgen], Laura Hake, Arthur Madigan, Suzanne Matson, Patrick McQuillan, Catherine Read, and James Weiss. Also present were Donald Hafner, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, and J. Joseph Burns, Associate Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education.

The minutes of the meeting of October 17, 2011 were unanimously approved.

Arthur Madigan introduced the main topic of the meeting: review of the undergraduate core. This includes both the assessment of the current core, to be overseen the UCDC, and the discussion of the future of the core, to be led by Mary Crane and the Institute for the Liberal Arts.

James Weiss that much has been published on core curricula in the last 15 years. Citing a review article by Andrew Hacker in the *New York Review of Books*, he urged that Mary Crane and Donald Hafner should engage consultants to help in the review of the core and that the UCDC should agree on a list of books that we should read.

Discussion then turned to the issue of what exactly the UCDC is being expected to do with respect to core assessment. The answer seemed to be that we are not to assess the core directly but rather to review with departments what they are doing to assess their core programs. Patrick Byrne asked how the departments are coming with their E1A forms in this respect. He further pointed out the need to communicate with the departments about what they were expected to do by way of assessment. He suggested that for this first round of core assessment departments be asked to pick one aspect of their core that they found needed attention and to work on that. In a similar vein, Suzanne Matson underlined the need to be clear with departments about what they were expected to do and when they were expected to do it. Citing Barbara Walvoord, she suggested that departments be asked to pick one strand from their core programs and to work on that. She related a conversation with Paula Matthew, director of the Freshman Writing Seminar, about the goals of that program and how to assess it. Patrick Byrne thought that writing might be the easiest of the core learning goals to begin with. He recalled earlier UCDC discussions with the Natural Science departments about the practice of writing in science courses.

Patrick McQuillan raised a question about governance: to what extent is the core controlled locally by departments, and to what extent is the core centrally controlled? James Weiss distinguished between Suzanne Matson's approach, which was to focus on something feasible and manageable, and his own proposal, which he presented as somewhat more labor-intensive. He recalled how some of the core

course proposals that the UCDC receives from departments show little awareness of the general core goals. Sometimes the UCDC responds by taking a stricter view of the core goals, sometimes by taking a looser view. Recalling a discussion with Susan Shell about proposals from Political Science, he suggested that we might ask departments to say to what extent their core courses meet the seven general core goals. Nasser Behnegar reported that he had discussed this matter with Susan Shell, and that she had pointed out that no one from Social Science was a member of the 1991 Core Task Force. Given the diversity of methods in social science, it seems better to focus on matters of substance rather than on issues of methodology. Here Patrick Byrne recalled that there had been no philosopher on the 1991 Task Force.

Returning to our approach to the departments, James Weiss suggested that we might approach the department chairs and the undergraduate directors and ask them who needs to be involved in the assessment process. Patrick Byrne saw merit in James Weiss's proposal, but cautioned that we should by no means suggest that we were turning over to departments the task of determining what the core and its requirements mean.

At this point, around 2:25 p.m., Donald Hafner entered the meeting. Arthur Madigan identified an issue that had surfaced in the earlier discussion: the need to clarify the expectations being placed on the UCDC. Donald Hafner responded as follows. The original mandate of the UCDC in the 1991 Report is quite comprehensive, including the power to recommend changes in the core to the provost. The UCDC has the power to tell departments that they need to help us with assessment of the core. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) has told Boston College that we need a comprehensive assessment plan. NEASC's demand meshes with Boston College's practice of academic program review. Last year administration made it clear to departments that they needed to submit assessment plans (E1A forms), but administration did not at that time make the point that these forms need to include plans for assessing their core offerings. The Assessment Report Development Committee (ARDC) is currently working on a questionnaire to elicit students' aggregate perception of their Boston College education, but the piece by piece assessment of the core is a separate matter. Departments cannot simply decide for themselves what the purpose of their core offerings is. Approvals of courses for core credit are not *in perpetuum*; they are renewable licenses. While grateful for the UCDC's recently developed core cover pages, Hafner noted that these had not yet gone out to the departments. To this extent we are somewhat behind where we ought to be. He is now looking at a schedule for departments to submit their plans for assessment of their core offerings.

At this point, around 2:35 p.m., J. Joseph Burns entered the meeting. Patrick McQuillan asked Donald Hafner about assessing the seven general core goals across the board. He replied that he did not want to block departments from going beyond these stated core goals. Patrick McQuillan reformulated his question: what about departments that do not want to go beyond the core goals? Hafner replied that the UCDC could rephrase or expand on the core goals, suggesting what such

departments could be doing in their core offerings. Nasser Behnegar asked whether the UCDC could deliberate about, say, the goals of the Social Science core. Hafner thought that this raised a broader question: how to handle the situation in which departments are not covering issues of methodology or methodological debates.

Suzanne Matson asked whether all core courses have to meet all the core goals: does mathematics, for example, have to teach writing? Donald Hafner thought that what mathematics has to do is to instill clarity of thought. James Weiss indicated that he preferred “expression” to “writing” in the statement of the core goal. Hafner replied by noting that the UCDC has the power to suggest changes in the formulation of the core goals.

At this point J. Joseph Burns passed out worksheets with the department assessment plans. He took as a positive example the plan for the assessment of the Writing core requirement. The goals of the Writing requirement require interpretation. Assessment of Writing requires both student responses, which are relatively easy to collect, and samples of student work — examinations, essays, papers, etc. — which a department then evaluates in terms of the Writing core goals.

Returning to matters of schedule, Donald Hafner pointed out that the university has to present NEASC with a fifth year report in January 2013. To compose this report, the president will need to have assessment plans, including core assessment plans, from the departments by June 2012. The departments have not yet been told about this. He did not think it was workable to insist that the departments actually have carried out assessment of their cores by June 2012, but he thought it was reasonable to ask for their assessment plans by that date. He thought that some departments might already have plans for collecting and reviewing samples of core work. He was not sure how much additional work departments would have to do to come up with their plans.

Suzanne Matson asked whether the time for reporting on assessment plans had been moved up from October 2012 to June 2012. Donald Hafner allowed that it had, and cited Father Leahy’s need to complete the report to NEASC by January 2013.

J. Joseph Burns passed out copies of the assessment plans for the Natural Science departments. He saw an opportunity at what he called the front end, i.e., the point at which the UCDC has to decide whether to approve courses for core credit.

Returning to an issue raised early in the meeting, Patrick Byrne asked whether the UCDC’s E1A form, submitted last June, was acceptable, or whether the administration was now looking for something different from the UCDC. The June E1A form envisioned a division of labor between the UCDC and the departments. The recent faculty forum had left some unclarity about whether the UCDC was now expected to do something more than what was envisioned in the E1A form. Donald Hafner replied that Provost Garza’s remarks at the faculty forum pertained to the discussions on the core to be led by the Institute for the Liberal Arts rather than to the work of the UCDC. He also said that it would be good to send the UCDC’s cover

sheets to the core faculty, and the E1A form as well. Patrick Byrne then recalled that our E1A form envisioned a three year cycle of meetings with departments to discuss their core offerings. He asked whether we should put those meetings off for a year. J. Joseph Burns observed that our E1A form was accurate. He urged us to assess both the general core goals and the more specific area goals. He then distributed a Capstone survey of student responses to questions about the general core goals, pointing out that departments could also ask these questions of students in core courses. He indicated that the results of the Capstone survey would be made available to the UCDC.

Responding to a question from Suzanne Matson about the how and when of assessment, Donald Hafner said that it would be appropriate for the UCDC to defer to our department colleagues about the means that they take to reach the core goals. Returning to his question about the cycle of meetings with departments, Patrick Byrne suggest that what we need to a good faith effort to meet NEASC's goals. He suggested that we begin the three year cycle of meetings with department's in September 2012. Byrne and Hafner agreed that the departments would have to submit their core assessment plans by June 2012. Byrne also thought that the UCDC should make it clear to departments that we understand the number of demands that they are being asked to meet. Hafner thought that the departments would feel more comfortable about drawing up assessment plans once they see the UCDC's cover sheets. J. Joseph Burns spoke in favor of raising the visibility of the general core goals, asking the departments to address them and to find ways to measure their degree of success in reaching them, and moving the goals to the front end of the assessment discussion.

It was agreed that Arthur Madigan would circulate to the UCDC a draft of a letter to the departments. There was discussion of who should send and sign the letter, and a suggestion that the provost and the chair of the UCDC might jointly send and sign it. [After the meeting it was decided that there would be two letters: one sent by Donald Hafner as Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and another from Arthur Madigan as chair of the UCDC.]

Donald Hafner reminded the group that we are responsible both for recommending core courses to the dean and for recommending changes in the core to the provost. James Weiss drew attention to a significant shift: whereas the UCDC had historically reported to the Dean of Arts and Sciences, it now appeared that we were supposed to report to the provost. Clare Dunsford pointed out that the 1991 Report makes the dean the titular head of the UCDC. Donald Hafner pointed out that while the core is delivered by the College of Arts and Sciences, the existence and powers of the UCDC come from the provost. He related a conversation with Robert Newton (the prime drafter of the 1991 Report) in which Newton had said that the original intention was for the UCDC both to evaluate course proposals and to propose changes in the core.

With thanks to and from our visitors, the meeting adjourned at about 3:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by

Arthur Madigan, S.J.