

University Core Development Committee

October 17, 2000

McMahon Conference Room

1:30-3:00 p.m.

Minutes

The Core Committee invited a group of eleven students, all seniors, to talk about their experiences in their core courses. The students who participated were recruited by Richard Cobb-Stevens through random phone calls. The discussion was lively and informative, with students offering what they thought was positive and negative about the core. Their observations are summarized below, along with some of the committee members' questions.

Positive aspects of the core

- At least 7 students said that a core course led to a new academic interest or even to their major. Many students liked the idea of a core, and several mentioned Perspectives; for one it led to a Philosophy major and for another it led to a Faith, Peace and Justice minor.
- Employees appreciate the core's educating students in how to read and write.
- Two students mentioned that the Writing core led to their being published in Fresh Ink.

Negative aspects of the core

- There is a lack of parity between science core offerings, e.g., Physics and Chemistry & Society (mentioned by at least two students).
- The level of a core course is sometimes downgraded by forced participation, e.g., Drawing for Fine Arts core.
- The "perception" of the core is a negative in itself: students see it as "wasted" classes, to be gotten over as soon as possible. This can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- The core is "taught at you," with large lecture classes and no interaction. However, another student disagreed, noting that his large lecture History class was one of his best.
- Some students asked for a "recommended," not "required" core, perhaps substituting a course in your major for a math or science course if you didn't like those subjects. Another student suggested that students be allowed to take any course in a subject to fulfill the core in that subject, not just designated courses.
- History core choices are limited to European history (noted by at least three students); also philosophy and theology core courses are centered on the western world (this student could not get into Religious Quest).
- The writing core came in for several negative comments, with students noting that it was a "freshman self-help class," on eating disorders, for instance. They wanted more consistency in the syllabus across sections. One student noted that he had learned more about how to write in his history core class than in his writing class; he also felt it was a self-help class, which had some benefits, but learning to write was

not one of them. Another student said First-Year Writing Seminar was valuable as a small-group experience among her other, larger classes, but said her high school English class had been more rigorous; as a result, she was “turned off to” the department. One positive comment came from a student whose experience in FWS led to her applying to a graduate school writing program.

- The language proficiency requirement, while not part of the core, was mentioned by some of the students in a critical way. One student seemed both to fault the requirement for not setting the bar high enough, but also for being a requirement at all. Another student also noted that those who pass the requirement by standardized tests are not necessarily proficient; she did not take language because she tested out, and now regrets it after studying abroad and noting Europeans’ knowledge of other languages.

Miscellaneous observations

- A student in CSOM objected to having to fulfill the double core of CSOM and the University.
- Academic advising was described by one student as “horrible” and “non-existent,” and several students suggested that a system of peer advising by seniors ought to be tried.

Student Suggestions

- creating different levels of core courses, e.g., 1, 2, and 3, with the top level being the most specific to the discipline, or creating levels based on whether you were in the major as Biology does (Survey of Biology for non-majors, and Intro. Bio. for majors)
- including students on the core committee

Questions posed by committee members at the close of the session included the following. When asked whether there was a difference between the level of teaching in their core courses and courses in their major, students gave divergent answers. One student thought his core teachers were more engaging because they made a greater effort to present what was new material to the students. Another student thought his teachers in upper-level courses were better, though he did have some good core teachers. He suggested that teachers of the core look at their courses as recruitment vehicles for their fields. Yet another student noted in regard to the level of teaching that the same core course varied greatly depending on the teacher. This elicited the observation that the teacher is more important than the course description in choosing a core course.

When asked why none of the students had mentioned the social science core as problematic, students almost uniformly replied that this was because there were so many choices to fill that core requirement.

Submitted by Clare Dunsford