

The Core Curriculum: Tradition and Innovation

Remarks to the Academic Affairs Committee Boston College Board of Trustees

February 2, 2001

1. Introduction

For the past nine years I have served as Director of Boston College's Core Curriculum. The document I have just distributed (Final Report: Task Force on the Core Curriculum, 1991) sets forth the goals of the core curriculum. My colleagues on the committee often refer to this founding document as our constitution. It articulates an ideal. Our task has been to put the ideal into practice.

The philosophical principle that has served as my guide and sometimes as a consolation in moments of frustration is a distinction first made by Max Weber in his writings on social and political issues: the distinction between what he calls an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility.

Ethic of conviction: an ideal goal expressed by some prophetic voice. For example:

- the sermon on the mount
- the dream of Martin Luther King
- the goal of "dignity, diversity, freedom and justice for all"

Ethic of responsibility: this is the ethical attitude (or style) we need within the complex practical realm of real but limited possibilities.

- In this realm, we must deal with conflicting aspirations, misunderstandings, turf wars, personal and cultural conflicts.
- Here the ideal goals begin to seem remote and unrealistic. The problems often seem too complex and even intractable. Here we do not so much need prophetic voices as prudential judgment. Indeed, we know from history that prophets often do not adapt well to the exercise of political power.
- In the practical domain every situation is unique and fresh. Situations are too dense and complicated to be resolved by direct application of our ideal goals. In this realm, we become thoughtful and effective agents not by direct implementation of our ethic of conviction, but by muddling through in the light of that remote but guiding goal, by slowly and tentatively learning from mistakes, and by gradually developing what Aristotle describes as a practiced ease in sizing up situations and a flair for acting in those situations gracefully and rightly.

I believe that the Jesuit tradition has survived and flourished for 450 years precisely because the Jesuits have known how to translate their ethic of conviction into an ethic of responsibility.

Given the Machiavellian connotations often associated with the term 'Jesuitical', some might say that the Jesuit tradition has on occasion put more emphasis on the pragmatic than the ideal. This, I believe, is a caricature, based perhaps on a certain disdain for the realm of responsibility by purists in the realm of conviction.

In what follows, I propose to refer briefly to the early history of Jesuit core programs, then to the more proximate history of the core curriculum at Boston College. Finally, I will summarize in a general way, but with occasional anecdotal asides, some of the complex and tension-laden problems that call for our responsible practical judgment in implementing our own ideal description of a contemporary core program.

2. Jesuit Core Programs: A History of Tradition and Innovation

a) Early History

Our core program is the product of a long tradition beginning in 1595, the date of the founding of the original Jesuit *collèges* in Europe. The centerpiece of Jesuit education was a common curriculum that emphasized the study of the defining works of the humanities, the exact and natural sciences, and later the social sciences. In other words, the original Jesuit core curriculum was a "great books" program, roughly comparable to contemporary undergraduate curriculum at institutions such as St. John's Annapolis. Many of our Honors Programs would be the closest examples in contemporary Jesuit colleges and universities.

Here is a description of an early version of the Jesuit core curriculum of 1995 taken from the autobiographical reminiscences of a distinguished graduate of one of these colleges, René Descartes:

- "I was educated in one of the most celebrated schools in Europe ... I learned that the study of languages is necessary to understand the works of the ancients; and that the delicacy of fiction enlivens the mind; that famous deeds of history ennoble it and, if read with understanding, aid in maturing one's judgment; that the reading of all the great books is like conversing with the best people of earlier times; ... that poetry has enchanting delicacy and sweetness; that mathematics has very subtle processes which can serve as much to satisfy the inquiring mind as to aid all the arts and to diminish human labor ... "

-Note that the early Jesuits seem to have taught their students to write well.

Like many a subsequent student in Jesuit colleges, Descartes went on to make some forceful - and eerily familiar - criticisms of the curriculum.

- Many courses are not sufficiently contemporary: "Conversing with the ancients is much like traveling ... when one spends too much time traveling, one becomes at last a stranger at home; and those who are too interested in things which occurred in past centuries are often remarkably ignorant of what is going on today."
- Other courses are not practical enough: "I was especially pleased with mathematics, because of the elegance of its proofs, but I did not see its usefulness."

- Some courses do not deliver the goods as advertised: "Moreover, we sometimes read not the great thinkers of the past – but the notes about the great thinkers provided by the least accomplished of our teachers."
- Some courses deliver more than what they promise: "Philosophy taught us [students] to talk with an appearance of truth about all things, and thus to make ourselves admired by the less learned."

As you know, Descartes went on to write his own philosophical treatises and to transform the subsequent history of mathematics by inventing modern analytic geometry. John Stuart Mill later referred to Descartes' *Geometry* as "... the greatest single step ever made in the progress of the exact sciences."

The Jesuit institutions of the seventeenth century responded positively to Descartes' criticism of their program. It was not long before they were teaching his new geometry and discussing his *Discourse on Method*. Subsequently, they added courses in theater, music, and all of the new sciences. The Jesuit theater productions were immensely popular and were notable for their technologically advanced stage effects.

This tradition of self-criticism and adaptability guaranteed the remarkable success of Jesuit colleges in Europe right up to the 20th century.

b. Recent History

Early twentieth century core programs in Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States were less distinguished. The curricula tended to mimic seminary programs that emphasized philosophy and theology requirements at the expense of literature, fine arts, and the social sciences. On the other hand, students acquired excellent skills in rhetoric, memory, logic, and good writing. The teaching of the sciences was effective but unfortunately limited by inadequate laboratory facilities.

After their expansion following the Second World War, the Jesuit colleges and universities adapted rapidly to the needs of the post-war period. While maintaining the best elements of the liberal arts tradition, our institutions strengthened neglected components of the undergraduate curriculum, introduced new departments, and eventually were able to offer a wide range of options to their students. At Boston College, for example, it was during this period that our Schools of Nursing, Education, and Management came into their own as integral components of the university. Once again the Jesuit spirit of tradition and innovation had manifested its vitality.

More recently, Jesuit colleges and universities have been concerned about several forces that have conspired to weaken the coherence and credibility of traditional liberal education.

- The gap within traditional Arts and Sciences programs between the cultures prevalent in the natural sciences (and to some extent the social sciences) and the humanities seems to be getting wider. Many science majors find it difficult to relate to literary and philosophic works, and many humanities majors are allergic to mathematical thinking.
- Lately, we have also begun to realize that we have not been listening to many voices within our own tradition and have often assumed a chauvinistic and condescending attitude towards other traditions.

- Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the ever expanding need for specialized competence in almost every field has encouraged the proliferation of narrowly focused and highly technical graduate and even undergraduate programs.

As a result, many recently hired faculty have had little opportunity to enjoy the benefits of traditional liberal education which, whatever its limitations, had provided a common intellectual heritage.

How then can we preserve a core tradition when many faculty have themselves never been educated in such a tradition?

The establishment of the new core curriculum at Boston College has been fundamentally an effort to address each of these new problems - once again in the spirit of combining tradition with appropriate innovation.

3. Structure of the Current Core Curriculum at Boston College

After considerable discussion and debate during the two years preceding the publication of the Task Force Report on the Core Curriculum (1991), the following core requirements were agreed upon:

two courses in Philosophy
 two courses in Theology
 two courses in History
 two courses in the Social sciences
 two courses in the Physical sciences
 one course in Literature
 one Writing Seminar
 one course in Mathematics
 one course in Fine Arts
 one course in Cultural Diversity

The faculty task force concluded that effective core courses ought to share the following common features:

- discussion of perennial questions
- incorporation of culturally diverse perspectives
- development of an historical sense of the discipline
- emphasis on the methodology of the discipline
- inclusion of a strong writing component
- concern for the moral significance and practical direction of students' lives

The Task force also emphasized the following:

- Ideally, there should be coordination between departments so as to create as integrated an experience as possible.
- Courses should be taught either by experienced faculty or by younger instructors who have participated in a serious training program supervised by a senior faculty member.
- Courses should be the product of extensive departmental reflection on appropriate contents and methodologies. These might well differ significantly depending on whether the courses are designed for majors and or for non-majors.

Finally, it was decided to give authority over the new core curriculum to a standing committee, the University Core Development Committee (UCDC). Committee members are: the Dean of Arts and Sciences (Chair), the Director, seven elected faculty representatives - Arts and Sciences (4), Education (1), Nursing (1), Management (1). The committee was charged with the following tasks:

- to review and evaluate all core programs and courses (along with the syllabi of all instructors),
- to encourage the creation of new courses and new inter-departmental programs,
- to seek outside revenues for the development of new initiatives.

4. Practical Implementation

Everything I have described above belongs to the ideal domain of the ethic of conviction. What has actually happened in the practical domain, the realm of the ethic of responsibility?

a. Early Years

Our committee initially met with representatives of every department and made appraisals of all existing core courses. We found a mixed picture. There were some well established programs that had already designed their course offerings in a manner generally congruent with the ideals described in the Task Force document. For example, the Perspectives and Pulse Programs (offered jointly by the Philosophy and Theology departments) were established interdisciplinary core programs cited nationally as models of innovative undergraduate instruction.

Other programs clearly needed rethinking. Indeed, some departments had essentially been offering a choice of electives rather than courses specifically designed as core courses.

Gradually the committee worked to achieve the following reforms:

- Consolidation and improvement of already existing well-organized and effective core programs.
- Restructuring of core courses in those departments that had not yet clearly articulated criteria regarding content and methodology of core courses as compared to electives. For example, the department of Theology reorganized and consolidated its core offerings into four well conceived options: Biblical Heritage, Introduction to Catholicism, Introduction to Christian Theology, and The Religious Quest.
- Establishment of tutoring programs in the Mathematics department.
- Provision for extensive tutorial programs in the Academic Development Center.
- Development of more rigorous core courses in science and mathematics for non-science majors. Funding for four years of summer faculty seminars on this topic was provided by the Gerschel Foundation and by a joint grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation.

- Establishment of Freshman Writing Seminars: small classes (15 students per section) with an effective instructor training program.
- Development of university-wide and departmental training programs for teaching fellows.
- Creation of a broad spectrum of courses (totaling 120) designed to fulfill the new Cultural Diversity requirement.

Permit me to dwell for a moment on how we went about encouraging and monitoring the development by departments of the these 120 Cultural Diversity courses.

Early meetings in 1992 with department representatives revealed that we had quite a few (perhaps 40) courses on the books that already seemed to fit the description of a cultural diversity course given in the Task Force document.

I remember, however, a period of panic, when we began to realize that departments might have to cut back on their other electives in order to meet the demand for these new courses, and that we would need a many more courses than we had anticipated given that professors ordinarily do not want to commit themselves to teaching the same course every semester.

During a public discussion following a progress report that I delivered to the faculty, several colleagues suggested forcefully that we would never be able to have an adequate number of Cultural Diversity on line in time for the planned introduction of the new core program in 1993. But the departments in fact proved to be incredibly responsive and responsible. We received many more proposals than we needed. Moreover, we were able to set the following rigorous criteria for the acceptance of these proposals.

- The principal focus of each such course must be devoted to introducing the student to a non-Western culture or a culture heretofore neglected within the dominant American culture.
- We would look not just for a course that offers a competent academic presentation of some aspect of another culture - say of Islamic Art or Chinese Philosophy - but also for a course that is specifically designed to compare that culture with our own and to broaden our students' attitudes towards that culture.
- The cultural diversity courses must meet same criteria as all core courses. They therefore must:
 - deal with perennial questions
 - develop an historical view of human knowledge
 - acquaint students with the methodology of the discipline
 - include serious writing requirements
 - reflection on ethical issues and relationship to students' lives

b) Recent Years

Our committee now meets regularly with department chairs, student representatives, and core faculty. At regular intervals we also review syllabi for every section of every course, and evaluate teacher-training programs for new faculty and teaching fellows.

The committee members also meet regularly with randomly selected groups of students. These focus groups provide us with a reliable sense of where problems or tensions may be emerging.

Students may have complaints about a particular instructor, about the number of required courses, or about not being able to get into the section they wanted, but they agree unanimously (We have never heard a dissenting voice) that the core curriculum broadens their horizons and even enriches the study of their major fields of interest.

Indeed, the most frequent comment that we hear from these groups of students is that in retrospect they acknowledge that without the core requirements their interests might have become too narrowly focused.

d) A Postscript

We hope to address following topics in the immediate future:

- Increased coordination between departments.
- Grade inflation and lack of rigor in some areas.
- Tendency in some departments to offer the same core courses for majors and non-majors.
- Ways of encouraging continued and even increased participation of senior faculty in core instruction.
- Need for additional and more imaginative interdisciplinary ventures.
- Need for development of a greater sense of community among faculty teaching in the core.
- Creative ways of exploiting the University's extensive technological resources in the teaching of core courses.

In this brief presentation, I have confined myself to touching upon the high points in the development of our present core curriculum. There is more to be said and much more to be done. We do feel, however, that significant progress has occurred. Descartes would, I think, look with approval upon our efforts.