Comments on the Core Curriculum at Saint Louis University*

David Crossley
Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences

Introduction

The core curriculum (formerly just the undergraduate curriculum) has been an ongoing debate in academia for over a hundred years. Unlike the curriculum in a discipline, decided by a small group of academics, the core curriculum touches every university department. Generations of scholars and educators have argued over its purpose and content. Because it involves academic territory, passions run about as high here as anywhere in academia. Although liberal arts colleges in the US have been at the forefront of the core curriculum debates, many of the major research universities have also been publicly involved. Here I comment on the situation at Saint Louis University as it has evolved over the past 6 years.

The core curriculum, whatever its origins, is a philosophical framework that springs from both tradition and educational fashion. Almost invariably, it is implemented as a sequence of courses taken by college and university students in their first 2 years. The core curriculum is perceived by the academic administration as expressing a thematic ideal or mission of the institution in general. Whether by design or not, the frequent outcome for students is a group of courses that are intended to complement or support the major discipline.

The importance of the core curriculum depends on the nature of the institution; this is reflected in the core size. As a general rule, teaching institutions (e.g., liberal arts colleges) tend to have a larger core than research universities. In the former the core may provide 50% or more of the total degree credits, whereas it is common at the latter institutions to reduce this to 25% or less.
Models

Two very different models suggest themselves: first, the core as a 2-year general education; and second, the core as a supplement to the major degree. In the former case, especially at liberal arts colleges, the core curriculum is the essential basic knowledge framework for the various degrees. It is elaborately designed to provide a cohesive experience for the students in various aspects of human culture, both ancient and modern. When completed, ideally after the junior year, students are considered prepared to move into an area of specialty, their major discipline. This second phase rounds out their experience by giving them a specific (e.g., biological, historical) viewpoint of the world that can last to the grave.

This model, still widely used by many smaller colleges, was once highly fashionable. It is favored by educators who believe that a highly specialized education, found for example in Europe and elsewhere, produces graduates who lack a necessary appreciation of essential history and culture. In today's often uncertain and rapidly evolving job market, there is certainly merit in a broad education, especially for the graduate who has yet to commit to a career choice. Topics in the core curriculum include many disciplines, from skills such as English composition, mathematics, communication, or language, to art, theater, music, cultural diversity, science, philosophy, theology, history and more. The larger the core, the more elaborate the distribution requirement to ensure that students are getting a “well-rounded education,” and also are hitting the appropriate department courses. The gastronomic equivalent is dim sum.

The second model at many universities, particularly those in the upper tiers of research stardom, reduces the core curriculum to a relatively small number of courses. These invariably include English composition, a mathematics course such as Statistics, maybe a language skill, and perhaps a course in philosophy. Such institutions clearly consider the major discipline as the essential groundwork upon which a degree should be based. The core curriculum may not even be identified explicitly, but courses may be listed simply as “electives.” Frequently there may be little or no distribution requirement at all. The general view
here is that the core curriculum provides both some basic and essential skills that are supplemental to the disciplines and then some variety, be it either simple relief from heavy duty pedagogy, or even just a whimsical set of choices to allow students to experiment. The gastronomic equivalent is the traditional Western meal: a substantial entree surrounded by a variety of complementary side dishes.

The SLU Experience

FYE Task Force

In the Fall of 1996, Father Garanzini launched, under the guidance of Provost Richard Breslin, a Task Force (TF) to deal with the First Year Experience (FYE) at SLU. The TF was to be a consultative and advisory group, reporting to the Board of Undergraduate Studies (BUS), the Strategic Panning Council, the Provost, and the Faculty Senate. The initial charge to the TF made it clear that the faculty was to be fully consulted before any changes were made to the curriculum. This was spelled out repeatedly during the lifetime of the FYE.

Fr. Garanzini launched the FYE at a presentation to the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Chairs in which he clearly identified the core curriculum as one of the potential areas that should be examined. Thus the TF began not only with a real concern about declining retention, but also with a focus on the academic experience of freshmen and how this might be used to reform the SLU curriculum. Provost Breslin encouraged a creative renewal of the core curriculum as a means of further differentiating SLU from similar institutions.

The TF, chaired by Eleanor Stump (Philosophy) and Father J.J. Mueller (Theology), was composed of eight faculty (six of whom had administrative functions), three university resource persons, one student and a secretary. We conducted an extensive series of interviews throughout the 96-97 academic year with representatives of all groups that had direct influence on the lives of new students. We also had two all-day retreats to develop our ideas and responses. Our target completion was May 1997, but the final
FYE report was not made public until December 1997. See http://www.slu.edu/organizations/fye/REPORT.HTM

The TF report made recommendations about issues other than the core, including Freshman Seminars (now called Inquiry Courses), a new Student Union Building, and the need for a Campus Village. But it was the section on the core that attracted the most attention, particularly within the CAS. The FYE report argued for a reduction in the number of credit hours in the present CAS core, achieved by a creative accounting scheme that enabled single courses to satisfy multiple discipline requirements. Though perhaps inelegant, the goal was to reduce the overall credit load of the core curriculum and re-establish a balance between disciplines.

The FYE was an exciting committee on which to serve. We felt that our thorough evaluation of the needs of the incoming students generated several worthwhile proposals (one of which became the SLU2000 New Faculty Initiative). A significant consensus emerged that the core curriculum should reflect three elements at SLU: a strong and distinctive Catholic-Jesuit tradition, a sampling of the liberal arts tradition (courses drawn equally from Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences), and courses specifically emphasizing skills.

The FYE report did not specify courses for a new core curriculum, but provided a framework within which faculty might be able to reach compromise. Unfortunately, some faculty did not like the framework, having decided ahead of time that the FYE should not have been thinking of the core curriculum at all.

Hearing Committee

The University Hearing Committee (HC), chaired by Jean-Robert Leguey-Feilleux (Political Science), continued the work of the FYE. Its charge was to hold public hearings on the FYE report across the University. Though initially Father Garanzini charged the HC to make specific recommendations, its mandate was later weakened to deliver a summary presentation of the various positions.
The Hearings were public forums, staged on a variety of topics at both SLU campuses. Though sometimes sparsely attended, several managed to generate lively debate between the Committee members and faculty. This committee, like the former FYE, was extremely time consuming for its members. Of the three reports produced by the HC, the final one refers to the core curriculum http://www.slu.edu/organizations/fye/hcr2000.html

**A University-Wide Core**

A key assumption behind the FYE was that all schools and colleges were involved. Naturally, therefore, the core curriculum was discussed in a university-wide context. We assumed that a core curriculum would apply to all students (and therefore all units), with the potential for some colleges, particularly CAS, to add further requirements of their own. The HC did not find widespread support for a university wide core, despite the simplicity of the concept. Opinion was divided on this issue between CAS and all other schools and colleges. Perhaps the problem is that many faculty members are used to thinking within their department or college boxes, overlooking the opportunity to recognize the university as the most important unit (“which university did you attend?”).

**The College of Arts and Sciences and the University**

Before the final publication of the HC, the CAS launched its own discussion of the FYE report, both at the level of department chairs and within the Faculty Council.

**Chairs’ Discussions**

The CAS chairs discussed the core curriculum issue on a number of occasions during the 1998-99 academic year and beyond. Efforts were made to identify the possible components of the core that various departments could contribute. While all departments claimed to address critical thinking and
methods of interpreting and understanding the world, there were many areas (e.g., diversity, teamwork, aesthetics) that were identified with more specific departments. The discussion eventually reached an impasse, despite some useful, though at times edgy, exchanges. With relief (for some) and disappointment (for others), we abandoned our efforts at compromise. The issue petered out during the 99-00 year and has not been resurrected since.

**Different Cores for BS and BA Students**

The only issue that seemed to have widespread sympathy within the CAS is the possibility of allowing a smaller core for BS students. A small subcommittee of the CAS Chairs intended to look into this issue, but no conclusion was reached. BS majors now account for only about 10% of all CAS degrees. If we could reduce the core curriculum for BS students, this should have minimal impact on the resources, teaching loads, course enrollments, number of TAs, and so on, for some concerned departments.

**Faculty Senate**

The Faculty Senate has provided some useful information on its web site [http://www.slu.edu/organizations/fs/coresurvey/ref-conv.htm](http://www.slu.edu/organizations/fs/coresurvey/ref-conv.htm). In particular, it gives links to four references: (a) a Spring 1999 article in *Conversations*, (b) the HC report on core curricula, (c) a comparison of the core curriculum course load at selected universities (note that SLU’s core is 63 hours and Notre Dame’s is 33 hours), and (d) a comparison of selected schools at SLU.

Under the leadership of Ellen Carnaghan, Chair of the Academic Affairs Committee, a campus-wide survey was conducted on attitudes towards the core curriculum; the results (December 2000) are posted on [http://www.slu.edu/organizations/fs/resources/CoreSurveyResults.pdf](http://www.slu.edu/organizations/fs/resources/CoreSurveyResults.pdf). The survey is well worth reading and builds consistently on some of the previous findings. Interpreting the results liberally, we find positive attitudes toward a university-wide core, toward supplemental cores for
some colleges and schools, toward a reduction in size to 43 hours (plus or minus, depending on the model), and toward more flexibility and balance in the choice of core courses.

Student Reaction

As reported in the University News, the Student Government Association (SGA) in February 2000 was given the chance to comment on Carnaghan’s report. SGA views were variable; some favored a university-wide core of 30 hours, with supplemental cores for other schools, some said this was a good idea but unrealistic (citing Provost Johnson), and some favored a softer core so that the majors could be emphasized. Unquestionably, as the FYE experience showed, students seem to be more concerned with other issues, such as advising and a new Student Union building, than with the core curriculum.

Decisions

Progress on core reform depends on an agreement as to what the decision process will be. If faculty make the decisions, who will adjudicate the inevitable conflicts? If administrators make the decisions, will the outcome be accepted by the faculty?

Some SLU faculty were suspicious of the administration's motives in setting up the FYE, fearing there was a hidden agenda that would circumvent the faculty's ownership of the academic curriculum. On the other hand, the grass roots approach (e.g., the Faculty Senate report) has produced a number of options or models, but no mechanism for deciding which, if any, to adopt. Faculty, whether individually or collectively in a department sense, ultimately see issues as protecting their own disciplines (turf war). If your department's discipline has gained a course in the core, then you have “won”; if you lose a course, then this is “defeat.”

For comparison, consider strategic planning, an unpopular exercise at any institution. If faculty are asked how their departments should grow and prosper, the inevitable result is self serving. Any department that
did not fight for its share of whatever resources were to be had could not be regarded as doing its job. Yet with the finite resources at hand, hard decisions have to be made by some consensual or voting process that will favor one option over another. As these choices move up the administrative chain they are modified and culled by senior administrators with different mandates to fulfill.

Similarly, in debating the core curriculum, each department will decide what kind of core best suits its philosophy and needs, which will often differ greatly from one department to another. One department may be concerned over losing courses in the core that it relies on to support the salaries of its faculty and graduate students. Another may be concerned over having a visible presence to freshmen to attract students into its majors. Another may be concerned over the fact that it does not have a representative slice of the core curriculum pie and therefore its faculty growth is compromised. Finally a department might be concerned that the core curriculum is too large to permit its majors to have learn the basic knowledge that is essential in that discipline.

An approach that relies entirely on gathering ideas from faculty and distilling them into a workable policy has no guarantee of success. As various conflicting views encounter each other, deadlock will inevitably ensue at some level. Resolving conflicts in a unit such as CAS by a straight vote, especially given the disparate sizes of the Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences divisions, will not be a satisfying procedure if significant groups remain disenfranchised by the outcome. A higher authority has to be involved in leading the outcome towards a suitable compromise that all can accept (even reluctantly).

**Concluding Thoughts**

There has been considerable effort in the past three to four years at SLU to further core reform, and those involved surely expect to build on this. Any attempt to “go back to basics” would probably kill the debate. My sense is that many faculty members can accept a smaller core curriculum for BS degrees, and also that (the Catholic-Jesuit core aside) Science and Social Science courses are considered to be as valid in the core as Humanities courses. Finally, a university-wide core of 35 credits or so is an attractive concept
that could unify all our undergraduates. To achieve further progress will take decisive administration and a willing faculty. A number of steps seem to be required:

(1) The Administration has to decide that revision of the curriculum is an academically beneficial step for the University.

(2) There has to be agreement that some procedure or group can vote legitimately to make changes. These have to be acceptable to the majority of the faculty (because they control the general curriculum of the university), and to the Administration (because it controls the resources). Unfortunately, at SLU there is no academic body that has control over the academic affairs of the university. In my view it is high time that such a body be created--an Academic Policy Committee, if you like--composed of board of trustees members, senior administrators and faculty, that would be empowered not just to make recommendations, but to make binding academic decisions.

(3) There has to be a fresh team, perhaps a core curriculum Task Force, to guide the reform process. Building on the work of the FYE, the HC, CAS activity, and the Faculty Senate, the new group should be given a mandate to make specific recommendations to the appropriate “governing body.”

(4) Major changes in the distribution of courses in the core must also address resources. What are the implications in terms of faculty and course enrollments, and what are the costs in terms of department resources and academic development?

(5) An important criterion is whether a new core curriculum will better reflect our mission and better serve our vision of the future. There is no doubt that many departments would strongly support this.

The consensus therefore favors changes to the present core curriculum. Even though a renewed debate will rekindle the resistance of those for whom the status quo is desirable, there is a sizable community at
SLU for whom reform is desirable, if not urgent. It remains for the Administration to respond clearly and positively to all the effort and discussion over the past 4 years.

*A longer version of this essay appears at:

http://www.eas.slu.edu/People/DJCrosley/coressay.html