Response to David Crossley on the University Core
By Frank Nichols

It is just about a year since David Crossley submitted his thorough and balanced review of University Core. As David himself remarks and the First Year Experience committee taught him, few topics generate more passion and divide the faculty more than a core requirement argument. I figure David deserve a decent response.

Turf

Many faculty agree with David that one important factor in these debates, at least within A&S, is the matter of turf. At least those departments with no big piece of the core pie seem to think this is so, whereas departments that currently enjoy a hefty hunk insist their motives high-minded. It’s the nature of a liberal education. It’s Jesuit tradition. It’s to do with the Catholic identity. It’s education for life not just for career. It’s a matter of forming broad-minded, compassionate, literate, responsible, human beings who are also competent in a specific discipline. Of course how to parse those goals in practice within the narrow scope of four college years is the nub of the problem.

Let me get the main point off my chest. When I first came here the A&S core in theology was nine hours. Subsequently it went to six, plus a possible additional three to be taken in either theology or philosophy. Then it went back to nine hours again. An additional aspect of this story is that some fifteen or so years ago the university was in dire financial straits. Many departments were drastically reduced. The administration paid close attention to faculty-student ratios. Why wouldn’t it be natural to defend requirements, and why wouldn’t departments out in the cold try to get more representation?

Though the administration rightly continues to be nervous about budget and about the costs of expanding faculty, I have the feeling that pressure today is somewhat less on faculty productivity measured by course load and more evenly concerned also about academic research and publication. Therefore, it might be more possible today to discuss the core with education goals in mind rather than with departmental aggrandizement at the back of the conversation.

A Generous Proposal

Now here’s my offering toward a more manageable or perhaps more creative core. I would be willing to suggest just one core course in theology, assuming it would still be possible for students to take further theology courses as part of a general core requirement, or provided that theology could cooperate with other departments in some sort of interdisciplinary plan. We in the theology department find that students often admit that they wouldn’t take a theology course if they didn’t have to. But they also very frequently admit subsequently that they are glad they did. Furthermore, our courses are often too large for good discussion. It is also hard for the department to give creative, publishing faculty members time to do research and attend to graduate students because the department has such a heavy teaching burden. We have complained to the
administration for years about this situation. By now it is very clear that the size of our department will not be significantly increased. If a reduced theology core requirement freed us up more, that would be a good consequence, assuming the administration did not use that fact to reduce faculty. Could other core contributing departments do something similar?

Catholic Identity

I don’t think many others in the humanities would agree with me on this. Many would object, What about our Jesuit-Catholic identity? I think this is a serious point. The administration insists that it wants to make SLU a significant research university. David Crossley’s implied argument for a smaller undergraduate core supposes this. But what is the point of becoming a serious research university if it is indistinguishable from all the other, far better, non-religious universities around? And is it even possible for SLU to be a truly research university without this Catholic identity? Who would come here looking for a distinguished research university, when they could get one with a more famous imprint for about the same price, if there weren’t something else that made SLU distinct? Where would the big benefactors be that we depend on, if they didn’t know that there was something different about SLU? Preserving and promoting the Catholic identity of SLU is important for many reasons. It is even essential for becoming a significant research university.

Many within and outside the university assume that making the university Catholic is the business of the theology department. How Catholic is SLU? Well, how many hours of theology do they require? And are the theology teachers Catholics and do they teach real Catholic theology? I think all this is misguided. Though many of our theology faculty are Catholics, some are not. Some of our courses are specifically Catholic, many are more general. All of our teaching is academic and not merely catechetical or homiletic. More importantly, the Catholic identity of SLU does not and should not depend on the theology department alone. For many, many years SLU was identifiably Catholic because of the philosophy department, not the religion department. That was in the days when philosophy here was thoroughly Thomistic. Religion courses were mostly why the Protestants are wrong and how to stay out of hell. Responsibility today for the Catholic identity of SLU should be shared by the whole institution, faculty, administration and staff. In fact it is. No one visiting this campus would be fooled for long into thinking that this is not a Catholic institution. Catholic ideals and interests enter into the rhetoric and practice of many aspects of curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular life here. Not that it could not be better. Just that the Catholic identity of SLU does not depend exclusively on the theology department.

Jesuit Identity

But what about Jesuit identity? Here I am on tricky ground. What Jesuit identity is or should be depends, to some extent, on which Jesuit you talked to last. I think some of the appeals to the Ratio Studiorum and to other Jesuit traditions around the world are somewhat ambiguous. The Jesuit collegios were essentially secondary schools, much
like the classic European gymnasium today. Jesuit “colleges” in Europe a century or two ago trained boys in rhetoric and speech, so we ought to have a core speech requirement at SLU today? It also seems to me that typical European education accomplishes what we try to do in our core in their exclusive, university preparatory, secondary schools. Students get their “bac” by way of a very serious exam, and that includes philosophy. Then they go to university or to professional schools where they get the advanced training that we mostly reserve for graduate and professional schools. In short, the American college is neither the European gymnasium nor the German university. So what’s the point? Figuring out the Jesuit ideal for SLU cannot simply replicate the Ratio nor pretend that we are simply a pure research institution.

Research University

Back to David Crossley’s original plea for a small core, ancillary to a primary area of concentration, appropriate, he claims, for a true research university. As you see, I am open to a smaller core, assuming that other present core stakeholders are willing to make similar concessions. However, I am skeptical about the kind of specialized undergraduate concentrations that David Crossley seems to be advocating. Why is that so important? Do some departments feel their graduates are somehow shortchanged when it comes to competition with graduates of other colleges? Are accrediting agencies in the professional societies? If so, should they have the last word?

During the last core wars, one of the stiffest opposition to a large core came from the education department. An important part of their problem with a large core was their own demand for all sorts of specific courses in education dictated by the state for certification, standards pushed by the University of Missouri School of Education. The education department here was telling the rest of the college that it was too restrictive. The program for each student should be largely dictated by that student’s needs and goals. The irony was that the education department’s objection to the rigidity of the college’s core was presented as an affront to the ideal of flexible goals. But this flexibility contrasted with the rigidity of the state certificate requirements they had to conform to. The education department left the college precisely, I believe, so they would not have to swallow the whole Arts and Science core. Now some in the natural sciences apparently want to escape the college and for similar reasons.

As a contrast to opting out, I particularly admire the physical education department that in recent years gave up trying to do their entire program in the four-year format. Instead, their students get a good general education, with an adequate foundation for a master’s degree and certification with two years of post-graduate education. Shouldn’t all of our students have a similar general education and leave the sort of specialization David Crossley is worried about for graduate school? Isn’t that pretty much what law and medical schools now recommend? Are we in too much of a hurry to specialize?

Conclusion
These are a few responses to David Crossley’s very helpful essay. My main point is that I (are there others?) am quite willing to consider reducing, reconfiguring, being creative about the core curriculum. I think it can be done without surrendering the authentic Jesuit and Catholic character of the university. I don’t think covert or open defense of turf is appropriate or even necessary. And I don’t think that specializations in the natural sciences need to approach graduate school proportions.