

Annual Report from the University Committee for General Education, 2008-2009

The UCGE worked on a number of issues this year. In the Fall semester the committee worked on requests for proposals for Core Discovery (CD) and Integrated Science (IS) courses, developed a strategy for periodically examining courses on the list of General Education courses, and began a discussion of funding of CD courses. In the Spring semester, the committee evaluated submitted proposals for CD/IS courses, and worked on a charge from the Provost to review the UI Core Curriculum. The committee responded to the charge by having discussions with Deans about the Core Curriculum, by reviewing assessment data, having conversations within the committee about several topics of interest, and by considering ways to enhance and assess general education in the upper-division experience at the University of Idaho.

Proposals for Core Discovery and Integrated Science courses: The committee worked in the first months of the year to prepare the requests for proposals for CD/IS courses for next year. Some text in the IS form was modified to better match the wording in the CD form. The request for proposals was issued in November 2008.

Evaluation of Submitted Proposals: Although inquiries came from several faculty members about the proposal process for CD and IS courses, only two proposals were submitted, both for CD courses. The proposals were considered by the committee, and comments were given to applicants, with encouragement to address the comments. One of these two proposals has developed into a CD course for Fall 2009.

Periodic examination of courses on the General Studies lists: The committee decided that the list of General Studies courses should be examined periodically to ensure that courses continue to meet the learning goals of the Core Curriculum. A goal for the future is to create rubrics for course inclusion on the General Studies lists.

Funding for Core Discovery courses: The committee devoted several meetings during the Fall semester to examine the funding mechanism for CD courses. During the Fall semester the committee met with Dean Aiken (CLASS) and Provost Baker about the state of funding for CD courses. The committee also had a number of meetings reviewing funding formulas and enrollments in CD courses, to consider how funding should be allocated. From these meetings it is apparent that views on funding sources for CD/IS vary according to College. Faculty coming from Colleges that have historically offered many general education courses tend to expect other Colleges to become more involved in CD/IS courses, while faculty from the other Colleges tend to feel that they have never had funding specifically for general education, so it is difficult for them to add that function now. Several members wondered if funding could be taken directly from general University allocations "right off the top" so that colleges would not need to provide additional funding. After having had many meetings on this topic, it is evident that the answer must come from higher administrative levels, but it is vital that the University retain its commitment to having a high-quality first-year experience.

Charge from the Provost to review the UI Core Curriculum: After our meeting with the Provost, he sent us a memo charging us to undertake a review of the Core

Curriculum during the Spring 2009 semester (attached as Appendix A). Along with the review we were requested to expand our membership to include representatives from all colleges involved in undergraduate education. The committee decided to begin this process by having the Committee Chair meet with Deans of these colleges. In addition to the request for colleges that did not have representation on UCGE to nominate members, the Chair had discussions with the Deans about the Core Curriculum. The committee also began work on changes to the Function, and Structure and Membership of the UCGE description for the Faculty-Staff handbook, to reflect recent changes in the Core Curriculum and the addition of faculty representatives from all interested Colleges, plus the addition to the committee of the Assistant Director of Institutional Research and Assessment.

Discussions with Deans about General Education: The Committee Chair visited nine Deans (Dean Aiken, CLASS; Dean Wood, COS; Dean Rowland, COEd; Dean Hoversten, CAA; Dean Morris, COB; Dean McLaughlin, CNR; Dean Blackketter, COEng; Dean Hammel, CALS; and Dean Baird, Library) to discuss their views on General Education and the work of the UCGE. Many of these meetings included Associate Deans as well. All of the Deans were very committed to the role of general education in the undergraduate experience, and expressed interest in the work of the UCGE. Along with these meetings, Deans were asked to submit a brief statement of what they expect of the UI Core Curriculum, specifically what skills and/or knowledge a student should have after successfully completing general education courses. Most Deans were able to send a statement, which are included in an appendix to this report (Appendix B).

Committee activities with expanded membership: By the time the UCGE was able to meet with all new members, it was toward the end of March. In our remaining time during the semester, the committee had online discussions on topics of interest, met to review and discuss assessment data, and discussed capstone experiences and ways to facilitate upper-division courses from different fields to work together on topics of interest.

Online discussions: The Committee Chair introduced a list of potential discussion topics, and two of them were discussed in email exchanges. The first topic, on managing the lists of general education courses, elicited many comments on the need to periodically examine courses already on the list, to insure that they remain appropriate. However, although the list of general education courses is long, there was concern that attempts to shorten it may be counterproductive. A second discussion on the freshman experience received several comments stressing the importance of the CD/IS instructor's role as an advisor to first-year students, and the importance of learning experiences outside the classroom.

Review of assessment data: The committee had several meetings with Jane Baillargeon, the Assistant Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, to review assessment data from surveys such as the Graduating Senior Survey and the Non-Returning Student Survey. There were many interesting results from these surveys, and the committee also expressed interest in having the data aggregated in particular ways in future surveys, for example to allow comparison of responses between graduates who took CD courses and students who took the State Board Core. The draft revision for the membership of the UCGE includes the Assistant Director of Institutional Research and Assessment as a UCGE member, as the ongoing work of the committee will benefit greatly from assessment expertise.

Also, Core Director Jean Henscheid formed the Core Curriculum Assessment Group (CCAG) to assess student learning in the Core Curriculum. Several members of the UCGE have joined the CCAG.

Facilitating interactions in upper-division courses: In a discussion about granting capstone status to a Materials Science Engineering course (MSE 454), the committee considered the benefit of having instructors and students of upper-division courses from different majors working together on topics of mutual interest. Several examples of existing interactions of this type were mentioned, and the committee expressed a desire in having a central location where interested faculty in these courses could find topics of mutual interest for collaboration.

Summary: Although the UCGE was unable to conduct a comprehensive review of the Core Curriculum, it is hoped that the steps that we took will further progress in continuing assessment of the UI Core Curriculum.

Sincerely,

Chris Williams
UCGE Chair, 2008-2009

Appendix A (memo from Provost Baker, converted from the original PDF document)

Date: January 21, 2009

To: Chris Williams

Chair, University Committee for General Education (UCGE)

From: Doug Baker

Provost and Executive Vice President

Subject: Review of Core Curriculum

Thanks for inviting me to join the UCGE discussion on core discovery and the core curriculum last semester. Committee members raised important questions and offered suggestions for the committee and university community to discuss as we engage in a thorough review of all university programs. The follow-up meeting we had with Scott Wood, Jean Henscheid, and Jeanne Christiansen underscored the importance of engaging in dialogue and developing short and long term strategies for core curriculum as we shape the future of the undergraduate program.

During this period of introspection, I am asking the UCGE to engage in a review of core curriculum during the spring 2009 semester, consistent with the committee charge to "Monitor, evaluate, and propose changes to the core curriculum." The committee might consider and make recommendations for questions such as:

- ? What is the overall effectiveness and quality of the current core curriculum?
- ? What mechanisms are in place to provide coherence within the core curriculum (e.g., addressing learning outcomes, intentional pathways to build knowledge and skills, program assessment for continuous improvement)
- ? How does core curriculum provide a foundation for and link with the students' major curriculum in departments?
- ? Does our "...distinctive core curricula ... engage students in participatory learning and ... prepare them for the challenges of higher education (Strategic Action Plan, Goal 1, Objective a, strategy 3)?
- ? What can the UI learn from other institutions with distinctive core curricula and best practice implementation?

As we discussed, it is important to engage the university community in discussion as committee members review and evaluate the current core curriculum and, potentially, provide recommendations to improve the liberal arts component of the undergraduate experience. At this time, UCGE does not have representatives from all colleges; the committee may want to invite colleges to nominate a faculty member who can join the committee on an ad hoc basis for this discussion. Additionally, the committee should be aware that Bruce Pitman and Jeanne Christiansen have work groups that are strengthening the first year experience, in coordination with other units across the university.

The thoughtful review of the core curriculum by UCGE will complement the current Program Prioritization and Request for Innovation processes. I appreciate the commitment of UCGE to a high quality core curriculum and your leadership of this developing discussion.

C: Jean Henscheid, Core Curriculum Director

Jeanne Christiansen, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs

Appendix B

Statements from Deans about the Core Curriculum:

It is much easier to write about what I think core curriculum should not be—and that is a hurdle students must jump before they get to the courses that they “really need.” Anyone who has listened to a Barack Obama speech has seen a clear demonstration of the importance of general education to citizens of a democracy and participants in a global community. Educated people are conversant in many areas, including mathematics, science, the humanities, and the arts. The core curriculum should provide students with the vocabulary they need to engage in the discussion of issues with societal importance. The core curriculum should allow students to explore what they value and why and then provide opportunities for them to communicate this vision in various venues. Whatever vocational goals students possess, the core curriculum should help them to understand their place (both professionally and personally) in society and their relationships with others.

The College of Science expects students to emerge from the University of Idaho core curriculum with a good start on the acquisition of such skills as written and oral communication, critical thinking, good study habits, independent learning, etc., which we can reinforce and build on in our majors. We also expect students to emerge from the core having had exposure to ideas from outside their chosen discipline (so that they understand the basic assumptions and methods of at least one or two other fields, ideally in the humanities and social sciences), and how these fit together with mathematics and the sciences. The core should also provide a firm basis for developing good citizenship, which we again will build on in our majors. The core should expose students to a broader cultural perspective. This should include an international component and lead to an understanding of how their life experiences to date and in the future connect with those of people whose life experiences are dramatically different from them. Finally, and most importantly, students should emerge from the core with a love of learning and an appreciation for the value of higher education.

Thank you for asking for my thoughts about the Core Curriculum. I believe this is one of our distinctive offerings and am pleased to be invited to comment.

My perspective on this topic is as a generalist, having focused my career and educational development on a broad approach to learning. I believe that one of the primary purposes of the Core Curriculum is to break the anti-learning cycle that most students have developed in their adolescent years and re-engage the students with a sense of curiosity and learning that will propel them through the rest of their lives. For freshmen, this is a transition period to adulthood. And, during this transition, I think it is important that the students gain skills that they can use regardless of their eventual majors. This is where process of learning should trump content, in my opinion, because it is here where the student should learn how to ask good, insightful questions, learn how to distinguish between opinions and facts, and learn how to evaluate information sources. These are tools that will carry students forward as lifelong learners.

Another area for consideration by your committee might be how to integrate transfer students into this. I have unfortunately heard from many students that they never are engaged with the library after the initial Core Discovery program. I believe that there are opportunities to continue to develop students' critical thinking skills through an examination of research and publications in their major and this might be achieved through a junior level emphasis, perhaps with a writing project or a senior capstone experience. This would furthermore enable us to assess our effectiveness in building educational programming that focuses on our learning goals. I commend your group on its efforts. I recognize that you have challenges before you and many excellent thoughts on how to succeed, and I appreciate your work on this important task.

The CAA expects the Core Curriculum to introduce students to and help them develop skills in reading and writing, calculating, visualization, and thinking and reasoning. It should expose students to global issues of justice, environmental awareness, culture, and arts.

Our desire is that the UI Core Curriculum will be an introduction of a broadly relevant aspect of human thought and endeavor (e.g. agriculture and religion) that is set in a national and international context. The context should involve social, political, historical, economic and scientific considerations. It should emphasize diversity of perspectives. The core curriculum should be well balanced and should emphasize integration and communication of diverse types of information. Additionally, an element of how to address divergent views would also be good. The core should also teach and reinforce writing and communication skills (structure, flow, referencing citations).

The core should also assist students in learning math logic, help them to be able to describe relationships in a math notation, to solve practical problems and give them life skill mathematical abilities. The core should help them to be able to interpret the statistical significance of quantitative information and understand population statistics. Partially as a result of their core classes, students should be open to reason and demonstrate social responsibility, leadership, team work, integrity, honesty, and respect diversity. The social sciences requirements should assist students in understanding components and motivations of human behavior. The humanities requirements should assist students in valuing and appreciating different cultures and creativity. The science requirement should help students understand the interrelationships of natural and biological systems.

I think the following statement represents the expectations for the Core Curriculum:

The Core Curriculum provides learners with opportunities to explore the breadth of human knowledge and develop an understanding of different ways of knowing while also developing the skills and dispositions for the critical use of knowledge in posing and solving the problems they will face as individuals, professionals, and members of society.

From my own field of curriculum studies I would suggest that there has been little change in what is expected from the Seven Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education: <http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/cardprin.html> .

The core should offer a broadening experience in the humanities and social sciences, and be guided by the principle that students learn best when they are studying subjects that excite them. The core should also address the UI learning goals. Courses should be designed around discussion groups but could also include lectures with larger groups of students.