

Prepared by Susan Keefe, Paul Gates, Tina Hogan, Dave Haney, & Jim Barnes  
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## CRITIQUE OF THE CORE CURRICULUM

This critique is informed by the Task Force's reading and discussion about general education, its focus group research conducted in September, and the information it has been gathering from units on campus. It will be put on our website.

I should mention that there are many positive things about the current core curriculum and the education provided by the faculty and staff at Appalachian State University. We are mindful of the fact that our faculty put much effort and thought into their courses, and we are here to honor that important work as well as to point out the problems. I also have to say that I (Keefe) was a member of the previous task force on general education (1987-1990) and so I am critiquing my own work here!

As our task force has done its work, the problems in our current core curriculum have become increasingly clear. These problems can be grouped in at least four areas: the core's curriculum, the instructional staffing of core courses, the administration of the core, and assessment of the core curriculum.

It should be noted that while this critique constitutes an emerging consensus in the Task Force, but it has not been formally adopted by a vote of the Task Force as a whole. Furthermore, while the Task Force has not yet agreed on educational goals, the critique points out how ASU is deficient on many objectives identified as important in the national conversation on general education.

### I. Curriculum

#### A. Menu is basically unchanged since the 1960's

This was an era when ASU was still a Teacher's College with less than 5000 students and was not yet a part of the UNC system. New ideas and approaches have developed since then but have not been added (see F).

#### B. Courses are largely introductions to disciplines rather than offering an integration of knowledge

1. As introductions to disciplines, these courses tend to exclude interdisciplinary approaches by definition. The exceptions on our campus are found in Watauga College and the Honors Program, relatively small and isolated academic units.

2. As we discovered from our focus group research, the core curriculum check sheet is perceived as poorly designed with no clear rationale for the educational goals. The check sheet becomes an end in itself (students and advisors attempting

to check off requirements) rather than communicating educational goals for empowered learners.

C. The curriculum lacks a unifying theme or themes.

1. There is no clearly articulated set of goals and learning outcomes that might be assessed.
2. As we discovered in our focus group research, students and faculty are often unenthusiastic about the core courses that may seem like hurdles to jump before moving on to what is “really important”: the major.

D. Core offers a large menu of course options, but in reality only a few courses make up the “de facto core.”

1. There are 45 social science courses listed but a majority of CAS students take only 8 of these; there are 113 humanities courses listed but a majority of CAS students take only 15 of these (see Table 1). This is also evident in the large number of sections of these particular courses. Are these the courses we think are the most important for students to take?
2. Due to the greater number of sections and scheduling options with these courses, students, faculty, and departments are locked into this self-perpetuating “de facto curriculum.”

E. Designators are problematic

1. Designators apply to a limited set of skills and knowledge. For example, reading, analysis, information literacy, and critical thinking are important skills that are not addressed by the current designators.
2. Some of the Designators (e.g. Computer) appear to be outdated as written.
3. Designators are an overlay on the core curriculum, and students may be driven to select a course based on the designator rather than the underlying course content and perspective. In other words, the designators can drive student enrollments. Again, are these the courses we think are most important for students to take for general education?
4. Designators lack regular oversight. The Core Curriculum Council approves a course designator initially but there is little regular review.
5. Faculty development for designator courses has been problematic. New faculty may be assigned to teach a course after the designator was approved and may feel unprepared to teach it (e.g. faculty going to the Writing Center to prepare to teach W designator courses).

## F. What is missing in the core?

Much has been written in the last 20 years about best practices in general education (see publications by AAC&U). ASU's core curriculum does not appear to meaningfully incorporate many of these:

- interdisciplinary courses
- global studies
- international study abroad
- service learning, internships, experiential learning
- freshman seminar
- writing across the curriculum
- ethics, civic involvement, development of personal responsibility

## II. Instructional Staff

A. Fulltime staff is advocated for quality education. Yet, the majority (56%) of SCH in core is taught by non-tenure track faculty, mostly part-timers (see Table 2)

1. Of the three departments who make up 37% of the core's SCH (Math, History, English), the average core SCHs taught by NTT faculty is even higher—nearly 59%.

2. In the English Department, of 110 sections of freshman writing taught in fall, 2005, only 11 were taught by fulltime faculty (90% taught by part-time faculty or TAs).

B. Focus group research showed that NTT faculty members often have an incomprehensive understanding of the goals of the core curriculum

1. Their thinking tends to be focused on a single course rather than how it contributes to the core.

C. Staffing is insufficient for certain curriculum objectives

1. W-designator courses are taught in sections of 35 (e.g., English literature surveys). National best practices advocate sections of 18 students (N.C.T.E.)

D. Focus group research also indicated that part-time faculty may identify less with the institution and its core curriculum

1. Part-time faculty members tend to identify more with their particular department rather than with the university.

2. Part-time faculty members often teach at ASU in addition to holding several other jobs in and outside of academia.
- D. Part-time faculty are employed without benefits
1. This makes it difficult for those faculty members who teach our core courses to do their job.
  2. This makes it difficult for the university to lead by example in ethical issues (which may figure significantly in the core).
- E. Part-time staff often lack office space, may not have regular office hours, and may not be available for mentoring or advising students.

### III. Administration

- A. Administration of the core curriculum is complicated and uncoordinated
1. The flow chart and Faculty Handbook indicates that the Core Curriculum Council and AP&P are required to be chaired by two different administrators. However, AP&P currently is chaired by a faculty member and the handbook is in the process of being changed.
- B. There is no thoughtful coordination of the core curriculum and the Office of Assessment
- C. The Core Curriculum Council and AP&P are reactive rather than proactive
- D. No one has responsibility for curriculum development and providing vision for the core curriculum as a whole

### IV. Assessment

- A. Specific learning outcomes for the Core have not been articulated

The first step in the assessment process is the articulation of specific learning outcomes that convey what the institution expects students to gain from the core curriculum. At this point, Appalachian does not have clear learning outcomes for the Core. Learning outcomes are obviously essential for knowing what to measure. How does the University demonstrate effectiveness if we do not know what to measure? In addition, learning outcomes are important so that individuals across the University, including students, faculty, advisors, administrators, and parents, all have an understanding of the rationale behind the Core. Learning outcomes would

communicate to students that the general education requirements are more than just a checklist of courses.

B. Most evidence in support of the Core is based on student self-report.

Among other surveys, Appalachian administers the National Survey of Student Engagement, the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, as well as sophomore, senior, and alumni surveys on a regular basis. These surveys ask students to report on their gains in certain areas of the curriculum. This information is important, but not as reliable and as valuable as direct measures of learning. The little direct assessment evidence that is available regarding the Core shows significantly smaller gains than self-reported by students. (See [http://www.appstate.edu/www\\_docs/depart/irp/assessment/reports/index.html](http://www.appstate.edu/www_docs/depart/irp/assessment/reports/index.html) for some results.)

C. No one is responsible for assessment of the Core.

Returning to the discussion on the complicated structure of the administration of the Core, ultimately there are many people who are responsible for the Core. However, someone needs to monitor the assessment process. The Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning has collected much of the available data, but this office is obviously not in a position to make necessary changes to the curriculum. Information needs to get to the decision-makers – the Core Curriculum Committee, deans, departments, and faculty. Currently, the Core Curriculum Committee approves courses to meet Core requirements, but no one monitors whether courses are meeting the goals of the Core after they are approved. Someone needs to be making decisions regarding appropriate assessment measures, ensuring appropriate changes are made to the curriculum based on evidence gathered, and collecting documentation of the assessment process so the information is available when needed.

D. There is little evidence of decision-making based on assessment results.

Who is using the assessment data that is available? Are changes being made to the curriculum based on evidence gathered? This is the most important step of the assessment process and the one Appalachian probably struggles with the most. The University needs to do a better job “closing the loop,” meaning that after data is gathered and disseminated, necessary improvements are made to the curriculum, then the curriculum is reassessed. Documentation of these efforts is essential so that Appalachian can show stakeholders and accreditation bodies that the University is dedicated to quality enhancement and evidence-based decision-making.

E. Failure to meet recommendations from *Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Student Achievement in College* (AAC&U, 2005; available at [http://www1.appstate.edu/orgs/gen\\_ed/resources/LibEdOut.pdf](http://www1.appstate.edu/orgs/gen_ed/resources/LibEdOut.pdf) )

First, Appalachian lacks faculty feedback on whether Appalachian is achieving its learning goals, via the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) for example. The FSSE is an indication of the learning goals emphasized by faculty on the campus. When used along with the NSSE, the University is in a position to compare faculty and student perceptions of the curriculum and address any gaps.

Second, there is no system in place to collect and analyze evidence of student gains over time. AAC&U (and other sources on good assessment practices) recommends multiple measures over time, which demonstrate learning gains in various instructional settings. Related to the need for direct evidence of learning, the University needs to promote authentic assessment. Although the previous practice of having a “Focus Day” (where students had time off from classes to complete assessments) was a good start in the right direction, this assessment method did not encourage students to put forth their best efforts when completing tests. Course-embedded assessments or samples of student work throughout their academic careers are better, more authentic ways to demonstrate student gains over time.

Third, Appalachian is missing some important elements of the assessment framework. The University should communicate learning outcomes to students during orientation and throughout their first-year experience so students understand the importance of the general education curriculum. Learning outcomes should also be incorporated into academic advising so students can make some connections between their choice of how to fulfill the requirement and the expected outcome. Conducting milestone assessments would also aid students, advisors, and faculty in monitoring student progress in achieving those expected learning outcomes. Finally, another recommendation to consider is the use of capstone or culminating experiences to demonstrate student accomplishments and provide a place to conduct assessment.

TABLE 1. MOST COMMON CORE CURRICULUM COURSES, SPRING 2006

<u>SOCIAL SCIENCES</u>		<u># Sections</u>	<u>% grads CAS</u>
PSY 1200	Introduction to Psychology	12	48%
SOC 1000	Introduction to Sociology	10	24%
SOC 1100	Social Problems in American Society	8	7%
PS 1100	American National Government & Politics	10	15%
ANT 1215	Cultural Anthropology	7	14%
GHY 1010	Introduction to Physical Geography	4	7%
GHY 1020	World Regional Geography	6	5%
ECO 2030	Principles of Economics-Price Theory	13	7%
<u>HUMANITIES</u>			
<b>Fine Art:</b>			
MUS 2011	Introduction to Music	6	33%
THR 2011	Introduction to Theatre	12	27%
ART 2011	Art Introduction	15	25%
<b>Literature:</b>			
P&R 2010	Old Testament Literature	10	14%
P&R 2020	New Testament Literature	8	13%
ENG 2010	English Literature	5	11%
ENG 2020	English Literature	6	8%
ENG 2310	American Literature	3	8%
ENG 2320	American Literature	5	10%
<b>Other:</b>			
ENG 2170	Introduction to Film	5	13%
P&R 1000	Introduction to Philosophy	6	14%
P&R 1020	Religions of the World	5	11%
P&R 2000	Social Issues & Ethics	6	9%
SPH 1040	Intermediate Spanish I	10	8%
IDS	Interdisciplinary Studies Hum SS		8%

Note: Data on number of course sections were taken from Spring 2006 except for SPH 1040 (Fall 2005). Data on number of College of Arts and Sciences graduates were taken from Spring and Summer 2005; courses were listed if taken to fulfill a core curriculum requirement by 40+ students out of a total of 653 CAS graduates.

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Table 2. Student Credit Hours by Department\* and Tenure Track Status for Core Curriculum Courses for Academic Year 2004-05

Sum of SCH Department	Tenure Status	
	Non-TT	TT
ANT	52.08%	47.92%
ART	62.66%	37.34%
BIO	64.05%	35.95%
CHE	17.57%	82.43%
ECO	21.29%	78.71%
ENG	64.04%	35.96%
FCS	71.37%	28.63%
FLL	78.70%	21.30%
GHY	33.76%	66.24%
GLY	47.40%	52.60%
HIS	57.33%	42.67%
HLE	94.85%	5.15%
I D	0.00%	100.00%
IDS	58.58%	41.42%
MAT	54.53%	45.47%
MSL	100.00%	0.00%
MUS	30.40%	69.60%
P S	21.21%	78.79%
P&R	56.12%	43.88%
PHY	52.75%	47.25%
PSY	69.38%	30.62%
SOC	66.04%	33.96%
T D	70.17%	29.83%
TEC	41.81%	58.19%
Grand Total	56.24%	43.76%

\*Shown as home department of course

Note: Table prepared by IRAP from 2004-2005 Master Course file, including all lecture and lab courses meeting the main Core Curriculum requirements (not including course designators)

## Who is Responsible for the Core Curriculum?

