

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO AND OPERATIONS REVIEW

DEPARTMENT/PROGRAM PHASE 1 TEMPLATE

Name of department/program: University Core Curriculum

Date:

Introduction

As the school/college reviews and builds out data sets provided by the university, it will also solicit, in a manner appropriate to the organization and culture of that school/college, the information needed from departments or programs for well-informed analysis and recommendations. Such material falls into two categories:

1. Workload and operations information that is held (or largely held) within the department/program rather than the school/college or central university data sources, such as faculty service performed within the department/program.
2. Information, perspectives, and concerns that the department/program believes should be considered as part of the broader review, such as challenges inherent to teaching within a particular discipline.

The questions below reflect the baseline information that meets the criteria above. Schools and colleges should feel free to add to these questions as appropriate. Please note that this template is part of the Workload and Operations phase; each department/program will have another opportunity to provide information relevant to the Portfolio Review.

Department/Program Review

University Core Curriculum—Background and Current Structure:

The University Core Curriculum (UCOR), Seattle University's General Education requirements, consists of 60 credits of Core classes as well as one 3-5 credit capstone class taken in a student's major. The total number of UCOR-designated classes any student will have to take while at SU will not exceed 12, but many students take fewer than 12 courses (based upon AP credit, transfer credit, and particular major requirements). The University Core underwent a major revision beginning in 2010, with the "New Core" being rolled out in the Fall of 2013. This revised Core is distinct from the old Core in a number of ways:

1. It is fewer credits.
2. It is outcomes-based rather than being driven by particular disciplinary areas.
3. It includes a set of 3 required Global Context courses taken at the 3000-level.
4. It is inquiry-driven rather than being a set of introductory survey courses.

The Core revision shifted the focus of SU's general education requirements away from surveys in particular disciplines ("Introduction to Literature," "Introduction to Psychology") and towards an inquiry-based series of classes. Disciplinary knowledge and skills are taught through the lens of particular themes or questions that are meant to reflect the professor's expertise and research interests. Additionally, this inquiry-based Core Curriculum is meant to appeal more broadly to students, offering them choices across categories (Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences) and inviting them into the process of making knowledge through active engagement with difficult questions.

The Core revision was successful in that it increased the number and variety of courses from which students can choose. Further, faculty responded to the revision with a large number of newly designed or revised courses—many of which overtly take on the more difficult questions of our current cultural moment such as environmental degradation, race-based urban planning, or the ethics of euthanasia. The move to an outcomes-based Core further lays the groundwork for meaningful faculty conversation and pedagogical innovation across disciplinary boundaries. However, the large number of courses offered with the UCOR designation each year, and the current operational structure (including the ways in which the Core interacts with departments and colleges), has prevented the Core from fostering the kinds of conversations that might lead to robust faculty participation in and shaping of the University Core.

At present, the University Core offers close to 500 separate classes per year (across Summer, Fall, Winter, and Spring quarters) and on average, those classes run with a utilization rate of 98.74%. These classes come from all undergraduate colleges in the University, though the majority of them are offered by departments in the College of Arts and Sciences. This huge number of distinct classes has significantly increased the complexity of the running of the Core. The Core office has no budget for faculty salaries (relying almost entirely on departmental budgets for UCOR offerings), does not directly supervise any faculty teaching in the Core, and has no mechanism for evaluating and mentoring UCOR faculty.

The University Core Curriculum is now in its third year. For the most part, the capacity of the Core office to accurately predict section need has improved. Students are now familiar with the structure of the Core and, unlike those of us who have been around for a while, do not see it as “The New Core,” but rather simply as “The Core.” Faculty teaching in the Core have experience with its new format, have begun to think about how to improve the teaching of Core classes, and have much to offer in terms of assuring that this new Core remains vibrant and flexible. There is much to be proud of about the University Core Curriculum. However, there are significant areas of its operation that are in need of thoughtful and collaborative revision. The remainder of this report addresses those areas in greater detail.

Responses to Questions:

Please address the questions below and add whatever information deemed relevant to this process.

To the extent that this information is not already available in the template for your school or college, advise regarding the parts of the workload for your faculty not captured by course load and credit generation measures. In particular, if there is any research/scholarship/creative work or service that distinguishes the contributions of the faculty in this department or program from others in the school/college and university, please describe it.

Response:

Not applicable. Because the University Core does not have dedicated faculty, this question is not relevant to the delivery of the Core.

Is there information that needs to be considered as a part of an analysis of the “teaching productivity” of the department or program? Are there differentiators in the kinds of instruction taking place or the population of students being educated that impact the ability of faculty to generate credit hours?

Response:

It is particularly important to note that the average utilization rate for Core classes is 98.74%.

The Summary Data Table given to the Core by the University was revised to indicate the following differentiators not represented on the original data. The revisions address the four main reasons for under-enrolled sections (out of 480 sections, only 17 ran with enrollments below 10). We should note, however, that even with these lower-enrolled sections taken into account, the average utilization rate for University Core courses is 98.44%. That is, on average, Core courses are almost completely full:

- 1) Summer Quarter: During AY 14-15, summer enrollment was still very fluid. Two of the 1000-level sections offered by A&S and the one 1000-level section offered by MRC that had fewer than 10 students were offered in the Summer Quarter. Four of the five 2000- and 3000-level sections offered by A&S that had fewer than 10 students were offered in the Summer Quarter.
- 2) Core Honors: We have excluded Core Honors sections from our revised Summary Data Table (see attached). Four of the 20 2000- and 3000-level sections offered by A&S during AY 14-15 were designated Core Honors. These classes are always under-enrolled, as Core Honors functions as a cohort model, meaning that sections designated as Core Honors are not open for non-Core Honors students. Very often this means that they run at below 15 students.
- 3) Crosslistings: The Summary Data Table provided by the University does not account for crosslisted sections in a way that adequately shows the utilization rate for these courses. Primarily, the data has not lowered the maximum cap for a crosslisted section to account for seats taken by the crosslisting department. Thus, seven of the under-enrolled sections are crosslisted and in those cases, Core was given 20 seats or fewer. In each of these cases, Core used more than its allotted number of seats (resulting in utilization rates above 100%).
- 4) Late Adds to the Schedule: Very often, departments do not add Core courses to the schedule at the designated time. Such late adds are very taxing on the Core office, but we have also found that they often result in under-enrolled sections—especially if they are added after advising has begun or, in very extreme cases, after registration has begun. In AY 14-15, seven of the under-enrolled sections were added to the schedule late, either right before advising, after advising had started, and in three cases, after registration had started.

Again, when Core Honors sections are removed from the data, the average utilization rate for Core classes is 98.74%.

What unrealized opportunities do you see? Are there ways that the contributions of the department/program to the mission and financial health of the university could be improved?

Response:

We suggest two main improvements:

- 1) **Reduce the utilization rate in all Core courses.** Reducing the utilization rate in Core classes (by increasing the number of Core classes offered each term) would help take the pressure off the Core office and would increase the student experience of the Core, improve the teaching of Core courses, and significantly enhance the perception of the Core across the university.
- 2) **Change the way that the Core interacts with departments and colleges.** Shifting more responsibility back onto the colleges to manage the scheduling, monitoring, and adjustment of Core classes would reduce the operational burden currently placed upon the Core office. Such a change would then allow the Core office to do more to improve faculty development, increase conversations around Core pedagogy, and streamline and make more meaningful Core assessment.

The University Core Curriculum was revised in order, in part, to create a more flexible, vibrant, and attractive set of general education courses from which SU students could choose. Additionally, the revised Core was meant to allow faculty more opportunity to be creative in their pedagogy, collaborative in their work around Core learning outcomes, and freer to experiment with disciplinary topics and issues (rather than feeling as though they were locked into broad survey classes for non-majors). Currently, the Core is not meeting those goals from either the student or the faculty perspective. There are two main reasons for this:

- 1) The high utilization rate for Core courses (for AY 14-15, this was an alarming 98.74%);
- 2) The current structure for how the Core office asks for and monitors Core course offerings.

These affect both the student and the faculty experience of the Core and are in need of improvements.

High Utilization Rate:

Effect on students:

Running Core courses at an average utilization rate of 98.74% is highly detrimental to the student experience. The redesign of the new Core promised students choice—a range of attractive, non-traditional courses from which they could choose based upon their interests and/or their disciplinary bent. However, such choice is a chimera when courses are so full that students are faced with choosing based not upon interest, but solely upon availability. Over-full courses allow for almost no movement between sections and allow for no flexibility whatsoever in terms of registering students. We have no cushion to work with to accommodate either student interest, student schedules (including work or family obligations), or shifts in enrollment across the university.

For sophomores, juniors, and seniors, this is resulting in the perception that the Core can not accommodate their interests, and thus, the perception that the Core doesn't much care about their interests. The pressure to find a spot in a Core class has produced a practice of "crisis registration," hardly conducive to the kind of intellectual inquiry that the Core sells to students. For freshmen, this

sense is only heightened. Because freshmen are the last to register, and because they often cannot yet begin taking classes in their majors, they face registration with a true sense of panic and, after one or two quarters, of dread and frustration. They are not able to get the courses they need, much less the courses in which they might have a legitimate interest.

The Core has long run the Core Solution Center during pre-registration and the first week of classes in any given quarter in order to help students find seats in Core classes, but this system is not a sustainable one. First, it removes the Core Administrative Specialist, and often the Director herself, from the Core office for up to three consecutive days at a time—bringing to a screeching halt any work that either the Admin or the Director may be doing at the time. Further, such work should likely be done by the professional advising offices in each college, as advisors are the ones who can best guide students into non-Core classes should a Core class be full. There is often a high need for the Core office to be interfacing with departments during advising and registration, but having at least ½ of the office engaged in directly helping students register for classes means that such communication is delayed. Of course, the need for the Core Solutions Center is predicated at least in part on the fact that Core classes run at such a high utilization rate.

Such experiences of Core registration have begun to give the Core the reputation of not being able to deliver on its promises. Thus, the student experience of the new Core runs the risk of reverting back to the kind of resigned hoop-jumping characterized by the old Core—a set of classes that you simply have to “get through” by whatever means necessary.

For students who register late—continuing students with financial burdens, students who lack the cultural capital to navigate the often labyrinthine registration processes, or for transfer students who register late in summer or after the start of an academic year—this frustration is further intensified as they are trying to register for courses that are full-to-the-brim and are thus forced to either take classes for which they have little interest or to register for classes that they don’t actually need, with the hope that a spot in a needed Core class will open up closer to the start of an academic term. It seems clear to us that such a culture of scarcity can only have negative effects upon retention as continuing freshmen have gone home over Thanksgiving without full schedules, incoming transfer students are put into classes that will need to be changed later, or students are forced to engage in long-drawn-out communications with advisors, faculty members, and the Core office in order to be granted a spot in an over-full Core class.

Effects on Faculty:

For faculty, as well, the culture of scarcity in the Core has begun to erode some of the promises of the Core revision. The idea of creating, proposing, and offering totally new courses in the new Core (a very time-intensive process for faculty), promised, in part, that Core classes would be populated by students who would be interested in the topic of the particular Core section. However, this kind of free-market system only works if students are actually able to choose courses based upon topic. As indicated above, this is not the case when classes run at such a high utilization rate. Instead, students are placed into courses based upon availability—often ending up in a class that might have been their last choice.

This situation has a highly detrimental effect upon the pedagogy of Core classes. First, a professor teaching to a class made up of students who would have chosen a different topic is under increased pressure to perform, to “make up for” the fact that some students in the class would have preferred to be in a different section. Second, research on classroom utilization rates and pedagogy suggests that teaching to a class that is full-to-the-brim (or, in some cases, overenrolled), reduces the effectiveness of the professor’s teaching (not to mention the professor’s ability to respond in meaningful and useful ways to student writing). Third, over-full Core courses mean absolutely no flexibility in relation to shifts in enrollment or unexpected changes in staffing. This lack of flexibility often means that instructors are hired to teach Core classes (very often Core classes being offered to brand-new incoming freshmen) who are un- or under-experienced and who have not been able to find jobs during the regular hiring season. Such a reliance upon last-minute, part-time adjunct labor threatens to undermine the rigor and effectiveness of Core classes, having a negative effect upon both the preparedness of SU students as they advance towards the completion of their degrees as well as their decision to remain at SU. Further, it has a detrimental effect upon faculty morale, as national conversations around the exploitative nature of part-time, “at will” adjunct labor have demonstrated.

Core Interaction with Departments and Colleges:

The University Core office consists of one full-time Administrative Specialist, the Core Director (a rotating faculty position), and a newly approved Associate Director (a ½ time rotating faculty position). In addition to planning for, monitoring, and helping with the registration for Core classes, the Core office additionally oversees the Academic Affairs side of the Learning Community program and the Common Text program. The University Core delivered 480 courses over AY 14-15. That number went up in AY 15-16 with a larger incoming class. The current organizational structure puts the primary burden of planning for and monitoring these sections not on schools and colleges, but on the Core office. This structure is not effective, as the University Core is wholly dependent on schools and colleges to offer Core courses. Therefore, the Core is dependent upon the effectiveness of the organizational structure within these units to provide, schedule, and offer courses in a timely and transparent fashion. The history of the delivery of the Core has been a history of frustration trying to work with departments, particularly in Arts and Sciences, to ensure that courses are forthcoming, that they are in the needed modules, that they have been approved by committees, and that they have qualified faculty teaching them. These efforts have drained the resources of the Core.

Rather than the director spending her time organizing faculty conversations, reviewing curriculum, engaging in meaningful assessment, and assuring the pedagogical richness of the Core (including making sure that the Learning Community program continues to offer the high-impact practices which it should be capable of offering), the director has spent her time chasing after departments to ensure that the necessary number of courses are being offered and that they are scheduled correctly.

Given that the Core has no budget for Core faculty salaries or any budgetary authority over how departments allocate their own faculty salary monies, it is impossible for the Core Director to ascertain the extent to which programs are unable to offer courses because of their budgets or whether work units that should be dedicated to Core course are being used for major courses instead. More recently, the Core Director has tried to encourage deans to take more responsibility for these matters. However, the same problems remain.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that departments are often under tremendous pressure to offer as few courses as possible in any given year—and that they don't often have a full picture of their budgets for an academic year by the time they are being asked to plan for and schedule their courses for that year. So, when the Core reaches out to departments to let them know how many classes it predicts it will need, departments are caught between trying to schedule as few courses as possible, to maintain their own upper-division offerings, and to be sure that lower-enrolled classes in the major can survive in the era of efficiency. The first point, of budgetary restrictions, has three obvious effects on the Core:

- 1) Many departments wait to schedule Core classes until the relative last minute and then often assign NTT faculty to teach those courses. This makes the classes less expensive for departments to offer and frees them to cut those classes if necessary and/or make staffing decisions about them late in the academic year. Very often, these late added classes are the ones that are underenrolled.
- 2) Second, the hyper-efficiency scheduling model and the high utilization rates of Core classes means that if enrollment increases beyond original predictions, the Core Director must then scramble and beg to find a department to add a class at the last minute and must further scramble and beg the Provost's office to find the money to teach that section. This is not only a waste of the Core Director's time it is, more importantly, a method of class planning that leaves newly enrolled students assigned to a class taught by an adjunct hired at the last minute.
- 3) Finally, the always-looming budget cuts often leave departments feeling that when they are asked to cut a class, they must first cut a Core class. Very often, this is done without the approval of either the college dean or the Core Director. Again, when this request makes it to the Core office, it is often stopped, but the Core office must then scramble to find a course to replace the canceled one. This is work that should be done by the colleges.

This last point, about departments using Core courses to maintain the survival of their own lower-enrolled classes in the major, leads to classes required for smaller majors being crosslisted with Core courses—creating thorny pedagogical situations in which a professor is teaching *both* to Core students (often in their first- or second-year) and to majors (who are sometimes upper-division students). This is of particular concern in very small majors in the College of Arts and Sciences.

This pattern of course scheduling further makes it very difficult for the Core Director to obtain an accurate and stable picture of course offerings, given the number of schedule change forms that are processed from the time the schedules are supposed to be posted up until the quarter actually begins. In AY 14-15, the Core office (made up at the time of only the Core Administrative Specialist and the Core Director) processed 419 Schedule Change Forms—a full 30% of the total number of Schedule Change Forms processed across the University.

Because of this structure, the Core office spends an inordinate amount of its time doing the work of planning, scheduling, and monitoring that should be done by colleges and departments. An additional effect of the current structure—which has Core courses existing in a kind of limbo in terms of responsibility and accountability—is a stagnation of meaningful conversations amongst the faculty around effective pedagogy in Core classes. Such conversations (conversations that should also include some oversight of how and whether or not learning outcomes are being met in those courses) are not able to happen in part because of the huge amount of time the Core office spends on planning, scheduling, and monitoring. However, the current structure also puts the Core Director in a difficult position in terms of evaluating the rigor and effectiveness of individual Core classes. Because the Director does not oversee faculty, it is unclear what her role should be in relation to evaluating, providing feedback, and making recommendations to the faculty who teach Core classes. However,

even if the Director were to take on the task of offering such feedback, the huge number of Core courses offered each year and the lack of support in the Core office for doing such work guarantees that such feedback would be piecemeal and lack any consistency or reliability.

What particular constraints or challenges does the department/program face?

Response:

Please see above section for a discussion of the main constraints and challenges of the University Core Curriculum.

Is there anything else you would like to put on the record?

Response:

The revision of the Core was a massive undertaking. The general philosophy behind it—to move to an outcomes-based Core, to increase the vitality of Core courses, to invite faculty to create Core classes that are connected to their own research interests—is admirable and has the potential to be transformative for SU students and faculty. Additionally, the Core is at a crucial time in its development. We have just finished our third year of the new Core and faculty are eager to begin assessing the viability of Core Learning Outcomes, to begin sharing effective and innovative class materials with one another, and to start the work of polishing the new courses they designed and proposed. The Core office is ready to begin the work of facilitating those discussions, as well as the work of making sure that the rigor of Core courses matches the University's strategic plan and speaks to SU's mission.

However, the implementation of the new core was (and continues in many ways to be) an underfunded mandate. While the Core itself shrank in terms of credit hours, the operational burden of running the Core increased both in scope and complexity. At the same time, departments were not given additional resources to offer Core courses, the Core office was not given additional staffing or budgetary support, and faculty development money for the Core remained meager in relation to the kind of pedagogical work that was being expected of those teaching Core classes. Core workshops are offered only sporadically, and when they are offered, they are not well attended. There is currently no orientation or convocation for Core faculty, and no consistent way for faculty teaching in the various Core modules to talk with each other about successful practices, challenges, or strategies for improvement. While university resources have been spent creating new programs in areas seen as more profitable, the foundation of the undergraduate education at SU has remained a relative afterthought. The Core graduates no students, but no student can graduate from SU without the Core. Departments remain ambivalent about the new Core, and uncertain about how their presence in it can shore up their own enrollments in major classes.

In particular, SU is at a fulcrum point in relation to the revision of its curriculum across all colleges, departments, and divisions. The events of the past year—in particular the voices of the MRC student coalition—have forced SU to admit that its process of curricular review and revision has been

inadequate. While the curriculum of the new Core allows for more space for diversity and inclusivity, there is much work to be done to raise those particular issues to the fore in conversations around Core Learning Outcomes. Faculty teaching Core classes need support to revise their curriculum with these issues in mind, to learn how to have meaningful conversations with their students about these issues, and to practice managing those conversations in ways that contribute positively to the campus climate. The Core office, if it is to be expected to lead and manage those conversations, needs the money, time, and space to do so in a way that is sustainable and in alignment with the conversations being had across campus about these issues.

The Core needs more consistent and vocal support from the administration—both in terms of budget and in terms of the place that the Core holds in discussions about strategic planning and future resource allocation. It needs more authority in terms of asking for and getting enough (and high-quality) courses for SU undergraduates. It needs more faculty buy-in for pedagogical revision and revitalization. It needs more space (both figuratively and metaphorically) to be creative, to listen to students and faculty, and to adjust to the changing needs of both in the years to come.