

Core Director's Report to the Faculty
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The University Core Curriculum in the Liberal Arts requires that the Director of the Core Curriculum submit an Annual Report to the Faculty. This year, at the request of Faculty Council Chair Dwight Hahn, I offer this report in written form rather than through oral presentation. I would be glad to speak in person with any faculty member who has questions about the work of the University Core Committee or its director.

The activities of the Core Director and the University Core Curriculum Committee (UCC) during the 2011-12 school year fall into four categories: petitions (faculty and student); policy; assessment; and public relations.

A. Petitions (Faculty and Student)

During the 2011-12 academic year, the UCC examined sixty-one petitions from faculty for their courses to receive Core designations. Thanks to the efforts of Core secretary Linda Munn and my predecessor, Earl Spurgin, this process is now fully paperless and is operating smoothly. (The petition form is at <http://www.jcu.edu/A&S/corenew/facultycourseapproval.htm> and the deadline for Spring 2013 courses is Sept. 7, 2012.)

The processing of student Core petitions is a task best described as Sisyphean. During the spring 2012 semester I handled **558** student petitions. These include transient petitions (the majority), transfer student issues, disability substitutions, honors waivers, and other academic petitions. The volume of petitions is so great that the UCC itself has, for all practical purposes, no role in deciding individual cases; rather, the committee deals with student petitions only when larger policy questions are involved, and the director handles the individual cases. In adjudicating problematic petitions, I frequently consult with department chairs, the FYS director, and Associate Dean Peter Kvidera. I also am in frequent contact with the Assistant Deans.

B. Policy: Online and Transient Courses

At the beginning of the academic year, the UCC's new policy on online transient courses went into effect. This policy, approved by the UCC in Spring 2011, removed the UCC's blanket prohibition against online courses from other institutions counting for JCU Core credit. This new policy does not mean that we accept all online courses from other institutions. In consultation with the relevant department chairs, I myself have denied petitions for online versions of Public Speaking (!), biology and chemistry laboratories, and modern language. Any department chair can continue to deny any petition that s/he feels does not merit JCU equivalency.

Our concerns about the number of students requesting Core credit for courses taken at other institutions led the UCC to propose a new policy limiting the number of such courses. The policy states:

“The UCC recommends imposing a limit on the number of transient courses counting for Core credit. We recommend that after matriculation at JCU, the limit be 18 credit hours of transient courses counting for Core.” This policy was approved by the faculty-wide vote in Spring 2012 and will go into effect for students entering in Fall 2012. Students who entered before Fall 2012 will not be affected.

At the request of Faculty Council, the Committee on Academic Policies drafted a pair of statements about online courses, the second of which applies to the UCC: **“The faculty of JCU endorses the current practice that the University Core Committee determine which sections of JCU courses offered online will be given core designations.”** This statement was approved by a faculty-wide vote in Spring 2012. In response to questions raised at the March general faculty meeting, the UCC discussed whether any additional criteria concerning teaching methods should be created and applied. Upon further consideration of the thirteen criteria listed in the Core document, the UCC decided that those sufficed. The committee noted that Core criteria #2, 3, and 12 address pedagogical rigor and active learning.

C. Assessment

The UCC has taken steps to address deficiencies in the assessment of the Core Curriculum, though we are still a long way from “best practices.” The first step toward improvement was taken in summer 2011, when a team of four faculty from the composition program (Maria Soriano, Mike Piero, Lindsey Stephans, and Jennifer Stutzman) assessed four years’ worth of student writing portfolios, each containing papers that had been collected from EN 111, EN 112, FYS, and the W course. I asked the assessors to file a written report addressing two main issues: (1) whether student writing improved from EN 111 to the W course, and (2) how the process of writing assessment could be improved. Their report indicated that there was in fact notable improvement in student writing from EN 111 to the W course, but that a number of problems with the process hampered the assessment. I would be happy to supply a copy of their report to any faculty member who would like to see it.

In response to suggestions made by these assessors, the UCC made the following adjustments. We discontinued collection of FYS and EN 112 papers, agreeing that it is redundant to collect three papers from the student’s first year. We have discontinued hard-copy collection of any papers, but instead piloted Blackboard-based collection of EN 111 papers (Fall 2011) and W papers (Spring 2012). We plan to expand electronic collection of EN 111 and W papers beginning in Fall 2012. Recognizing a lack of consistent expectations for W courses, we will also henceforth distribute in advance to all W instructors the rubric that the UCC will use for Core writing assessment.

In summer 2012, Maria Soriano will lead another assessment of those Spring 2012 W papers that we have collected in the Blackboard pilot, along with any EN 111 papers that we have from those students. I am very cognizant that the practice of assessment is only meaningful if we “close the loop” by disseminating and using the information gleaned from assessment to improve our practices.

The Office of Assessment and Planning continues to administer semester-end surveys of Core courses, and can supply the data from those surveys to any faculty member who requests it.

D. Public Relations

The director of the UCC is also responsible for explaining aspects of the Core Curriculum—its goals and its practicalities—to various members of the university. In summer 2011 I coordinated the nine panels on the Core that were part of the Taste of Academics sessions for entering students. I also conducted a discussion of liberal arts education and the Core Curriculum for the New Faculty Seminar in Fall 2012. Finally, together with FYS director Ernie DeZolt and Andy Welki, I participated in an hour-long question-and-answer session on FYS and the Core Curriculum with the Student Union in Spring 2012. I have also met individually with countless students who had questions about their Core requirements.

I am grateful to Core Secretary Linda Munn, Associate Dean Peter Kvidera, Dean Jeanne Colleran, and the members of the UCC (Roy Day, Simon Fitzpatrick, Rick Greci, Penny Harris, Kathleen Manning, Maryclaire Moroney, Naveed Piracha, and David Stenson) for all their work on behalf of the Core Curriculum.