Proposed Revision of the University Core of Common Studies

What follows are just some thoughts respecting a proposal for the Revision of the Core.

The first question is: Should we have a Core of Common Studies? It’s possible, though highly unlikely, that the Core will be scrapped. We take the probability of this to be almost zero. The very fact that we are tasked with providing suggestions for revising the core strongly suggests that the university is committed to a core. But the possibility needs to be mentioned.

Assuming that there will be a core, we identified what we regard as (1) desiderata and (2) the parameters that constrain their implementation. Given (1) and (2), our task was to propose a general structure for the core that, in our judgment, maximally secure the desiderata within those parameters.

To that end, we made a checklists of desiderata and constraints.

Desiderata:

(1) Overarching: A transformative education, that is, one that will enable and encourage a student to leave MU a better and committed person for, it is hoped, the rest of his/her life;

(2) Almost Overarching: Integrative education, that is, greater integration among courses and among courses and experiences;

(3) High on the list: a core that reflects the University’s mission and Jesuit identity;
(4) High on the list: A core that fosters engagement in the community and a commitment to social justice;

(5) High on the list: A core that is responsive to the fact that the typical college graduate will have three different careers during his/her lifetime;

(6) High on the list: A core that does not hamper or make more difficult the acquisition of the knowledge necessary for mastery of his/her major area of study;

(7) High on the list: A core with specific learning outcomes objectives, but ones involving the overarching cognitive skills that having three careers in a lifetime necessitates;

(8) High on the list: A core in which outcome assessment is not onerous or burdensome, and is seen as part of the learning process itself;

(9) High on the list: A core that reflects the uniqueness of a Marquette education, one that emphasizes distinctive features of our university (including, for example, our urban setting).

There are no doubt more desiderata than the above; and even less doubt different people will assign different weights to the elements on the list.

Constraints:

(1) Sheer number of students: MU has about 8,000 undergraduates, which makes securing a number of items on the above list in any meaningful form a daunting task;

(2) Eight different colleges: The sheer number of colleges with their vastly different educational structures and requirements and educational structures, which, again, makes securing a number of items on the above list in any meaningful form a daunting task;
(3) A freeze on the total number of Core credit hours;

(4) In all likelihood, limited resources for the development of significant new courses, programs, faculty, and so on, to support the Core, or to revise existing ones within the Core---but this may not be the case;

(5) An item that is also a desideratum: A Core in which outcome assessment is not onerous or burdensome, and is seen as part of the learning process itself.

Again, there’s probably a lot more to consider than the above.

Given the above, and given that our task is to formulate a proposal which recommends and argues for an “improved organization/structure of the Core of Common Studies,” came to agree a few, but we think important, recommendations.

First, we think that Constraints (1) and (2) make anything except a Distributional Core unrealistic. The overarching structure we currently have, in other words, is unavoidable at MU. This may well be regrettable, but it is a fact we have to live with.

Second, in light of the other constraints, we need to make due with the resources we have, and adjust within them.

Given the above, the major and very important recommendation we have is that the student’s academic experience be “bookended” with a Core Understanding Course/seminar, preferably during Freshman year, and a Capstone project or course, preferably during Senior year. The
generic sense of the “bookending” is to introduce Freshmen to the concept of a core of knowledge, skills, dispositions and behaviors that should “expand like a balloon” during their time at MU. Because this expansion will, using the balloon analogy, separate disciplines from each other the more that depth and specialization occurs, the Capstone will direct students to make a personal statement regarding how the core of knowledge, skills, dispositions and behaviors have become parts of their own personal and professional repertoire, and foster integration. Our thought is that a capstone project, course, or experience with, for example, a concentration on Ignatian pedagogy as a subtending theme, would require that the learner draw upon on all of their learning at Marquette, including both major and liberal arts courses, to present an understanding of Jesuit values from an intrapersonal, interpersonal and worldly perspective. We regard this as staying, or as much as is possible staying, within the constraints, but helping to achieve a number of desiderata, especially (1)-(4), but others as well.