A Proposed Model for the Structure/Delivery of the Core of Common Studies

Executive Summary

In this proposal, we advocate for a tiered framework. Tier 1 (Foundational Knowledge and Skills, years 1-2) involves five components: Human Nature, Scientific Research and Human Understanding, Writing and Communication, Mathematical Reasoning, and Theological Inquiry. Tier 2 (Exploration and Discovery, years 2-3), has four components: Intercultural Awareness (U.S.), Intercultural Awareness (Global), Logic and Empirical Discovery, and Ethical Discernment. Tier 3 (Integration and Action, years 3-4) includes three elements: Argumentation and Communication, Citizenship and Community Engagement, and Action and Evaluation.

This proposed structure for a new Core is based on evidence from on-campus surveys and listening sessions, including faculty views of possible learning outcomes; guidelines of the Core Revision Charge document; and Marquette’s stated Mission, Guiding Values, and Strategic Plan. It provides an early foundational experience, increases integration, combines sequence and flexibility, and provides students the chance to connect the Core more deeply to the entirety of their Marquette experience.

Description of the Model

Our working group, comprising faculty and staff from departments and offices across the university, met several times to develop a proposed structure for Marquette’s revised Core of Common Studies. These meetings led to broad agreement about a structure that corresponds to select ideas from core curricula at other universities, evidence from on-campus efforts such as the Core Revision Process surveys, guidelines from the Charge document and, most important, Marquette University’s Mission, Guiding Values, and Strategic Plan.

Our group considered a variety of ideas and frameworks but settled relatively quickly on several central principles for a new Core structure, each of which had implications for the design of our proposed Core structure:

- The new Core should include an early, foundational experience.
- The new Core should involve significant connections among its courses.
- The new Core should combine sequenced requirements and thematic-based flexibility.
- The new Core should create opportunities for students to dig deeply into topics and be connected to other components of their Marquette experience.

With learning outcomes, especially as delineated in Survey 2, in mind, our group’s proposed model aims at developing critical/creative thinking, ability to communicate, intercultural awareness, compassion, ethical citizenship, and spiritual discernment. Ultimately, our tiered framework aspires to a developmental experience for our students, which is both incremental and holistic, as well as firmly grounded in the Jesuit ideal of integration of knowledge.
An Early Foundational Experience

We believe students should have a shared Core experience, within the constraints of the scheduling process and college-level requirements. This does not necessarily mean a shared “first-year experience,” with a uniform initial encounter. Rather, we propose foundational requirements with a confined set of course options. The limitation on course options is important to create a somewhat common student experience. The constraints also make possible better connections among Core instructors. If one has a clear sense of the topics with which students grapple in foundational courses, it is easier to engage those topics in later stages of the Core.

Greater Connections among Courses

Consistent with the Charge document, we view integration as necessary in the revised Core. A strong theme of our working group’s discussions was how the current UCCS employs relatively unconnected parts and how students would benefit from greater connections. Indeed, if it is important for students to experience models of integration and interdisciplinarity, we believe that the Core is an excellent place to start. Such increased interconnections will require a change in focus for regular faculty and other Core course instructors. If we are serious about integration, a Core course cannot be taught in the same manner as it would be if that course were not in the Core. This kind of change requires incentives for instructors to consider team teaching and ways for instructors to work together across courses they are teaching individually.

Members of our group were intrigued by the use of a common acronym for Core courses at other universities. Such an approach sends a strong signal that Core courses are different from other courses, and it could aid in facilitation of cooperative approaches to instruction. It might also make it easier to administer awards from a dedicated “Core faculty development” account.

Sequence and Flexibility

The Core experience will be greatly enhanced if students can see how the requirements complement one another and are part of a well-thought-out whole. Consequently, we rejected the idea of a distributional approach, which provides fewer structural incentives for connecting Core components. We instead believe that the new Core should involve three distinct stages of student development -- Foundational Knowledge and Skills; Exploration and Discovery; Integration and Action -- with the latter two each building on the previous stage.

Consistent with the Charge document’s stress on the importance of Core feasibility across all of Marquette’s undergraduate colleges, however, we also understand that Core requirements must be flexible enough to work into student schedules regardless of their home college. Consequently, we also rejected a strict sequential approach, in which sets of requirements would be mapped into a specific semester (or even year) of a student’s career.

Bringing these ideas together, we propose a tiered approach for the new Core, where the stages of a student’s experience are loosely sequential, allowing students to fit Core requirements into their schedules along with college, major, and elective courses.
Depth, and Connecting the Core to Non-Core Components of the Marquette Experience

One of our group’s concerns was how, too often, students experience course work at Marquette as more about breadth than depth. This is certainly the case of the UCCS’s distributional approach. In many cases, even the existing practice of disciplinary capstone courses often fails to achieve depth, instead providing a superficial overview of disciplinary material (i.e., the capstone becomes an upper-level, disciplinary survey course). The group was therefore reluctant to propose a capstone component, but rather sees the third tier, Integration and Action, as a place where connections across the Core and connections between the classroom and local (and global) action can be strongly encouraged.

Depth and integration should be complementary goals, which is why we believe the new Core should embolden students to make more and deeper connections within and across Core courses. Such connections are necessary but insufficient. Integration should also extend beyond the classroom doors, so students see the Core as a key part of an interconnected Marquette experience rather than as a set of course requirements they need to check off as they go along. Accordingly, we call for a required service learning component, as part of the third tier, Integration and Action.

We also support other ways to connect Core courses to activities on campus, including a series of thematic on-campus events in a given year, programming from Student Affairs, and greater integration between volunteer activities and the Core even if not a specific service learning activity. In short, the increased integration and sense of connection between the Core and the rest of a student’s experience requires a culture shift on campus among not only instructors but also students and other members of the campus community.

Details of the Proposed Model

Our tiered framework is designed to have as few as 36 credits of coursework. Tier 1 (Foundational Knowledge and Skills) would involve five required components: Human Nature, Scientific Research and Human Understanding, Writing and Communication, Mathematical Reasoning, and Theological Inquiry.

In keeping with the compromise between sequence and flexibility, Tier 1’s requirements should be completed during a student’s first or second years. Ideally, these would be completed before any of the required components of the second tier are completed, but we acknowledge the need for this to be more of a strong recommendation than an absolute requirement.

The requirements for Tier 2, Exploration and Discovery, should be completed during the second or third years. Tier 2 includes four components: Intercultural Awareness (U.S.), Intercultural Awareness (Global), Logic and Empirical Discovery (a team-taught course), and Ethical Discernment.

Tier 3 (Integration and Action) includes three components: Argumentation and Communication, Citizenship and Community Engagement, and Action and Evaluation. Tier 3’s requirements would be fulfilled during a student’s third or fourth years. One Tier 3 course should expressly integrate a student’s Core and major experiences, and one must include a service learning component.
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Integration and Action (Years 3-4)

Exploration and Discovery (Years 2-3)

Foundational Knowledge and Skills (Years 1-2)

Action & Evaluation
Citizenship and Community Engagement
Argumentation and Communication

Logic and Empirical Discovery
Intercultural Awareness (U.S.)

Ethical Discernment
Intercultural Awareness (Global)

Writing and Communication
Scientific Research and Human Understanding
Mathematical Reasoning
Theological Inquiry

Human Nature