

Revising the Core Curriculum — at 35 Colleges
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Students in the 35 colleges comprising the University System of Georgia take a pretty traditional core curriculum. The systemwide curricular framework, intended to enable more seamless transfer across institutions, requires, for instance, nine semester hours in “essential skills” (English composition and mathematics), six in the humanities and fine arts, and 10 to 11 in science, mathematics and technology. Nice, straightforward, traditional.

So imagine the reaction after two hastily created preliminary models for a new, explicitly interdisciplinary systemwide core curricular framework — intended to better prepare students for a global, 21st century world — were posted online for feedback. One, called “Framing Worldviews in a Global Environment,” includes as areas of emphasis “Addressing Global Issues with Sustainable Responses” and “Understanding Self, Others, and Societies” (instead of, say, one broader area of emphasis included in the current curricular framework — “the social sciences”).

The descriptions of the areas are amorphous, “nebulous,” as one group described it. “Knowledge and Practice of Methods of Inquiry,” for instance, “focuses on understanding of and hands-on experience with the methods of inquiry of disciplines that explore the natural, physical, social, and cultural realms.”

The second model, themed “From Self to Global Society,” includes a focus on “Aesthetics in Cultural Contexts” and “Quantitative Thinking, Self and Society.”

“I think that either of the two proposed models would result in the students learning less,” said George Rainbolt, a professor and chair of the philosophy department at Georgia State University and one of three professors who developed an electronic petition — which now has more than 300 signatures — challenging the process thus far and its (preliminary) product. “With either of the two models, I’m convinced that students wouldn’t be as well-prepared for their majors and wouldn’t be as well-educated.”

The USG Core Curriculum Initiative has come under criticism both for the content of the preliminary models and the process behind their creation. Created almost literally in isolation in a matter of days, they’re the products of a February retreat that involved three systemwide committees of faculty and administrators, from across the system’s institutions, charged with coordinating the curriculum project. Even some of those involved with developing the models question the process and the substance.

“We’ve got these two [models] that were jerry-rigged in about 16 hours that are supposed to guide the system for presumably the next 10 years or so. It’s ridiculous; it’s absolutely ridiculous,” said Walter Evans, a full professor and director of the humanities program at Augusta State University. (He participated in the retreat as a member of one of the committees charged with developing a new curricular framework — and he joined Rainbolt in developing the

petition.)

But many of the reactions are overreactions, said one other participant in the discussions, William Vencill, a professor of crop and soil sciences at the University of Georgia (which, to complicate matters further, has its own revised version of the general education curriculum going in place this fall).

“People are jumping the gun,” Vencill said. The February retreat, he explained, entailed “just some brainstorming if you will. A survey was sent out to all faculty in the University of Georgia System to get their feedback and a lot of people just really overreacted thinking this was going to be the framework with very little discussion, that it was a done deal,” he said.

“There’s just not enough detail to really get upset about from what I can see. They’re really sketchy, preliminary models, just for generating ideas and getting feedback.”

“It was really meant to allow people to think creatively, right at the beginning of the process, about the big issues,” added Dorothy Leland, who is spearheading the USG Core Curriculum Initiative (and who, in her day job, is president of Georgia College and State University).

“We really needed to balance the very preliminary nature of the work with the importance of transparency, and making sure that faculty across the University System of Georgia were aware of the work that was being done and also had an opportunity to weigh in on that work. I chose to err on the side of transparency.”

The Concerns

Jeremiah Alberg, chair of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature and an associate professor of philosophy at the University of West Georgia (and the third professor behind the petition), described his concerns as primarily procedural. As a member of the Curriculum Design and Assessment Committee, he participated in the retreat where, as he described it, committee members were split into groups to create new curricular frameworks.

“To put the best possible spin on it — and I don’t think anyone was trying to do anything devious — I think it really was, ‘Let’s just see, kind of brainstorm, see what we can come up with and then we’ll put it out there for people to comment on,’” Alberg said.

But since the retreat, he said, he’s felt more and more strongly that “the way we were going about it was the wrong way. At the beginning you really need to have faculty involvement. It has to come from the bottom up.”

Alberg, like other faculty interviewed, agreed there’s a need for changes in the decade-old core curriculum. But, “You need to be discussing first what the outcomes and competencies are you’re looking for.... I think what we should be doing at the system level is trying to come to some consensus on some basic learning outcomes and take those back to the universities and let them discuss them in their institutional committees,” Alberg said.

“It’s as if we’re a bunch of automobile mechanics, and we’re told we’re going to decide on the qualities we need for this new car we design. And we’re hauled in there and told first we’re going to design the car; then we’re going to figure out the outcomes,” added Evans, of Augusta State. “And in order to design this car, we’re going to throw out the major [discipline-based] principles that have dominated automobile design for the last 50 years. Maybe it’ll have three wheels or six wheels.”

“The whole thing’s very superficial as far as I’m concerned,” he said. “In my mind, there’s no question that the best way to prepare our students to compete in a global environment in the 21st century is to give them a rigorous education, to have standards as high as they can be, to do everything we can to bring students up to those standards. I think, in my mind, there are people who want some glitzy, Hollywood substitute for the real thing.”

A couple of systemwide advisory committees in particular disciplines also weighed in with some concerns, as did an advisory committee composed of campus deans. A letter from the latter committee’s chair to President Leland expressed concern with “1) the nebulous nature of both Model A and Model B, especially relating to the science and mathematics content, and 2) the process for involving the Deans of Colleges of Arts and Sciences and the [vice presidents for academic affairs] of the two-year colleges, who will be primarily responsible for implementing any changes to the core.”

“[For] the core that we have now, it’s easy to identify, OK, for this section, we understand that a person taking this will have X math classes or X science classes,” explained Bret Danilowicz, chair-elect of the committee that sent the letter and dean of the College of Science and Technology at Georgia Southern University (and a professor of biology).

Whereas under the new proposed models, he said, “It’s unclear if a student could in a sense steer around math and science.”

Danilowicz added, however, that he understands the models are only preliminary, and that the deans in general are supportive of possible revisions to the core curriculum. “The process had to start somewhere and I think very few of us have ever been through a statewide curricular reform process. I certainly have not,” he said.

The committee of deans will be meeting with Leland at the end of the month to discuss the concerns, said Robert Parham, the committee chair and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Augusta State.

The View from the Other End of the Feedback Loop

It’s become apparent “that communication had not been handled very well, and that not enough people had been brought into the process,” said Vencill, of the University of Georgia. “I think many more people are going to be brought into the process, especially people on curriculum committees who are experts in these areas in the various schools.”

Feedback on the proposed models is still being collected. The comments will be available for anyone who's interested in reading them, said Leland, the initiative's leader.

"If feedback is meaningful, then one must listen to and analyze what it has to tell us. If that feedback tells us that, for the most part, our group was heading down the wrong path, then our group will need to consider that and consider alternative approaches," Leland said.

She said she's currently at work assembling campus-based committees, which would include a link to the systemwide committees, as well as representatives from individual institutions' curriculum committees (and, when applicable, general education committees and Teaching and Learning Centers). "I think that will strengthen both the quality of the campus-level conversations and the understanding at the campus level of what this project is about and what it's not about," Leland said.

The timetable at this point, she said, is to develop a new, systemwide core curriculum framework by January 2010. Institutions would then have two more years after a framework is approved to put any needed changes in place.

"Core curriculum revision on a single campus is always somewhat controversial. And the controversies are grounded in different kinds of concerns. Sometimes those are very real and important intellectual debates about what we ought to be doing in our general education programs. Sometimes they're concerns about resources for departments. Sometimes they are concerns about the amount of work it would take for people who are already incredibly busy," Leland said.

"Imagine that spread to a university system with 35 campuses, and in particular 35 campuses where only faculty on my campus know me and know I'm open to making what shifts and revisions I can and that I really do listen and really do try to respond."

— Elizabeth Redden