

Getting at the Core

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Georgia May Be Headed for a New "Core" Curriculum

By Ashley Thorne and Peter Wood

The University System of Georgia has caught the pendulum swing that is bringing back the idea of a structured core curriculum to American higher education. Is it time to celebrate the restoration intellectual coherence or at least common sense? Let's not be hasty. Having a "core curriculum" may sound more sensible than leaving freshmen to channel surf their way through college, but what if the new "core" is just a codification of today's fashionable ideas?

That's where the University of Georgia seems to be headed. Our attention was drawn to this by Inside Higher Education's recent article about proposed changes to the core curriculum in the thirty-five Georgia public colleges. Members of the University System of Georgia Core Curriculum Initiative came back from a February retreat with two new curriculum proposals in hand. One is named "Framing Worldviews in a Global Environment," and the other, "From Self to Global Society."

Georgia already has what it calls a "core curriculum" in its 36 colleges and universities. It isn't really a core, but a system of distribution requirements that the USG rhetorically inflates into a "core curriculum." In a true core curriculum, students take the same courses and read the same books, so that they share a common base of knowledge. Distribution requirements, by contrast, ensure only that the individual student has studied a little of this and a little of that. Collectively, students end up taking a myriad of different courses to meet their distribution requirements. This approach may have its own merits, but it misses the two main features of a true core curriculum: the requirement it poses on the college to decide what really constitutes the core of its undergraduate degree programs, and the benefit it confers on students who, as they advance to higher level courses, build on a common intellectual experience.

In any case, while USG's current model falls short of a true core curriculum, it does present an accessible combination of math, science, English, the humanities, and fine arts. The changes proposed by the Core Curriculum Initiative scant these subjects in favor of course areas such as "Addressing Global Issues with Sustainable Responses" and "Quantitative Thinking, Self and Society." To be clear, the new model is no more of a true core than the old one; rather, it remains a set of distribution requirements.

Programs with themes like sustainability (paired with social justice), personal identity, and global society are burgeoning in American higher education. No one could accuse USG of being behind the times. But being up to the minute with university trends isn't always a good thing, and USG's proposed curricular metamorphosis looks distinctly like a change for the worse.

Like the cases we've been seeing with residence life staff, the Core Curriculum Initiative, which is composed of a mixture of faculty and non-faculty members, took it upon itself to revolutionize what college students get taught. The initiative's tagline is, "Strong Foundations for a Global Future." But there is nothing foundational about its projected areas of study. They simply package the trendiest ideas in higher education and sweep aside the notion that some ideas, some books, some disciplined ways of thinking are indispensable to a student who aims to achieve a "higher education."

But perhaps this underrates the intellectual ambition of the USG Core Curriculum Initiative. Maybe its members think that it is time that concepts such as global society, sustainability, worldview, self, and environment are indeed foundational. We use that word—foundational—advisedly. For the last quarter-century, the prevailing doctrines of post-modernism held that nothing is foundational. Influential thinkers such as Rawls, Rorty, Foucault, and Fish have made anti-foundationalism the presiding concept of their views. In this sense, the USG Core Curriculum Initiative really is registering a seismic shift in higher education. They speak of a "global future" that actually has "strong foundations," and invite us to think that at least some of those foundations are intellectual.

That's a welcome step, but can concepts such as global society, sustainability, worldview, self, and environment cut the mustard? "Society" is all by itself a fraught concept, wrested over by the heirs of Durkheim and Weber, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski. It can, of course, be fired off like a starter pistol, which makes a loud sound, issues a whiff of smoke, but shoots only blanks. And we fear that's how the USG Core Curriculum Initiative has armed itself. There is nothing wrong with asking college students to come to grips with an idea such as "global society," but to make any real headway with such an abstraction, students would need to think through some other things first, e.g. what is a "society"? In the world of an old-fashioned core curriculum, we might approach that by reading Plato's Republic, or Hobbes' Leviathan, or Tocqueville's Democracy in America.

The same sort of cavils could be raised about all the terms that loom large in the USG proposal. They may well deserve study as important elements in today's debates, but are they the "foundation" of an education that will enable students to participate in those debates? Or are they just a way to skip over the real fundamentals? Maybe USG will explain that its core curriculum is really just good marketing. It will offer good substantive courses packaged under the slippery language of contemporary ideology because the ideology sells to today's waiting-on-the-world-to-change students. If so, it is a perilous path. The curriculum will inevitably become what it says it is. The chances of reaching intellectual depth by going down the road of intellectual glibness are nil.

In the interest of transparency, the USG Initiators posted their proposals. They probably didn't expect as much "constructive criticism" as they received. Some Georgia professors, incensed that they were not included in the procedure, have reacted in protest. They have set up a website, www.georgiacorecurriculum.org, and on it is a petition against the Initiative's plans. To date, the petition has 380 signatures – and the number grows larger by the day.

Some of these signatures represent faculty members who approve of such core curriculum transformation but felt left out and wanted a piece of the playmaking. Others stand against “Strong Foundations” to defend objective university standards from the parasite of ideological agendas.

The writers of the plan have responded with the disclaimer that these are preliminary, tentative, malleable constructions which are far from final. Yet, according to an academic advisor at the University of Georgia, coming up on April 29th, a presentation will be given on the new core, along with training on how to advise for it.

There are many proposals in contemporary America to reform higher education. In a broad sense, here at NAS, we welcome them all. All of the would-be reforms arise from the growing recognition that something is seriously amiss with our colleges and universities. If reform is going to come it has to begin with that recognition, and we take the USG proposals in that spirit.

That said, we think USG could do a lot better. Discarding the facile anything-goes postmodernism of our age is an excellent first step. The next step should be a genuine effort to discover the real intellectual foundations on which a college education should be built. The USG Core Curriculum Initiative hopped from one environmentalist platitude to another on their way to indoctrinating Georgia students on their “global citizenship.” The UG [sic] faculty’s distaste for this pseudo-core is encouraging. We hope USG seizes the opportunity to pursue an intellectually worthier curriculum.