

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Core
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All of the above contributed generously to this Committee's conversations.

I. Committee Charge

The Ad Hoc Committee on the Core was charged by the College in May 2006 to “explore and recommend to the College of Liberal Arts faculty as to what constitutes a sound social science and humanities core for the general education curriculum; to explore in particular these questions: For what should this core stand? What should be the main mission of the core?”

II. Mission of the Core Social Sciences and Humanities: Education for the Public Good

The SSH Core stands for the transmission, expression, critical assessment and development of knowledge that addresses main issues of universal human concern. A focus on universal human concern is, in short, education for the public good, and this is the ultimate mission of the social science and humanities core of the general education curriculum of the College of Liberal Arts.

First and foremost, education for the public good entails facilitating and developing critical reflection on the socially-constructed world for the social benefits of that world. The core social science and humanities coursework shall provide for critical reflection on matters outside of personal career and individual character development, and outside the technical requisites of academic disciplines. Thus, this is not reducible to the development of a set of “skills,” such as communication skills, critical thinking skills or citizenship skills. For, these abilities are not to be understood as ends in themselves; they must serve a purpose.

Main issues of universal human concern are not narrow, topical phenomena. Extensive and on-going debate is required to determine what constitutes issues of universal human concern, but these may serve as examples: conflict, inequality, power, self-identity, culture and production.

III. Ensuring the Mission: Guidelines for Core Courses

To accomplish the proposed mission, we offer the following Guidelines for Core Courses:

1. Non-Specialized Course Content

Non-specialized courses do not serve as a preliminary to a program of specialized learning. They provide theories and methods dedicated to application for issues of the human condition first and foremost, and lend themselves easily to synthesis with other standpoints.

2. Unique Standpoints

Courses will be of unique standpoints; they will offer ideas, truth claims, theories, approaches or perspectives that are unique to other fields. As such, they offer students the opportunity to transmit, express and assess accumulated unique knowledge, and they offer students the opportunity to develop and apply the unique, dynamic knowledge for the public good.

Multidisciplinary courses that combine two or more unique fields are redundant; they concern material better provided by introductory courses in each of the unique fields they combine, and are not appropriate for the social science and humanities core.

Interdisciplinary courses that create new and unique standpoints out of two or more existing fields are not redundant; they are trans-disciplinary and are appropriate for the core.

A Note on the Social Science-Humanities Division

While consensus is clearly absent regarding the nature of and distinction between the social science and humanities, even an imprecise division provides two distinct forms of broad inquiry, even while some aspects are shared between the groups: one that concerns analyses of human organizations and human relations, and one that concerns artistic and ethical analyses. Assessing the human condition intelligently and critically demands the synthesis of both forms of inquiry.

IV. Implementing the Mission: Theme-Based, First-Year Experience

Given these guidelines, the Ad-Hoc Committee recommends the following core curricular model: A three-course cluster serving a particular theme, and a fourth “stand alone” course that is already part of the existing list of core courses.

We find this alternative method of implementing the core preferable as it will not only utilize individual core courses, but importantly, will offer students a first year core experience. In this plan, all RIT students will take, in their first year, a linked sequence of three courses. The sequences must include a mix of disciplines, from both the humanities and social sciences. The clusters will be focused around a common theme or idea, generated by the faculty who come together to form the cluster. Clusters could combine existing courses, or they might include new courses. Given the Committee's recommended mission and course guidelines, the themes must address one or more main issues of the universal human condition, and the courses in the theme must satisfy the course guidelines.

The cluster should encourage sustained, systematic, intellectual activity on the part of students. The cluster should provide a clear opportunity for all students to grapple with the ways in which different disciplines examine and assess the same topic.

The anticipated benefits to such a curriculum are numerous:

- * All departments and programs in the College would be allowed, and indeed encouraged, to participate in such a curriculum and offer courses in the clusters. This is the College's core curriculum and the entire College would be committed to it equally.

- * It gives students a breadth of intellectual experience at the core level, which will then be nicely balanced by an upper level depth in a liberal arts concentration or a minor.

- * It provides an experience of serious, sustained year-long inquiry for students and faculty alike.

- * It provides for both student and faculty choice.