

The New Liberal Arts Core Curriculum

Over the past three years Colgate has re-examined its commitment to general education and to the structure of its current core program. This process has actively involved students, faculty, and administrators. In this process, Colgate has enthusiastically reaffirmed its commitment to general education but has also acknowledged the need to make changes in the current program. Any curriculum, including a core curriculum, must be responsive to evolving scholarly trends, the development of new forms of pedagogy, and the changing interests and needs of students. Thus, after a decade of experience with the present curriculum, Colgate is revising the core program.

The philosophy behind general education, the practical value of general education, and the goals of general education at Colgate have been clearly articulated by the General Education Review Committee (see Appendix A, the section of GRC Report on the role of general education). The current revision process has been guided by those ideals. The present document proposes a new program under the title of the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum.

On a practical level, the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum is designed to reinvigorate student and faculty interest in the core curriculum, to encourage innovative pedagogy, and to enhance the educational experience of students. Each of the components of the core program is designed to address questions of identity, culture, and knowledge. One component focuses on continuity and change in the West. The courses in this component investigate aspects of the development of Western identity and culture by examining the classical roots of Western traditions and by considering modern ideals and sources that have helped to shape contemporary Western identity, values, and ideals. These courses enable students to address the question of “who am I?” by exploring how contemporary Western culture has come to be what it is. A second component, which involves minor revision of Tier II, examines cultures that are distinct from the Western traditions. Thus, students’ understanding of Western identity and experience is enhanced by an investigation of a distinctly different culture from Africa, Asia, or the Americas. The third core component involves Scientific Perspectives. Modeled after the structure of the current Tier II courses, these courses explore the issue of what it means to be a person living in a world that has been significantly shaped by science and technology. These courses focus on the process of science as a way of coming to know one’s world. Common events and activities will be organized to promote the integration of the components of the program. The new program also includes optional courses that are available to students seeking Distinction or High Distinction in the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum.

The new program is designed to be more flexible than the current program. In the current program, students take four courses in a fixed order (GNED 101, 102, 200s, 300s). In addition, all incoming students enroll in a First-Year Seminar in their first semester. In essence, there are five required courses taken in an invariant order. In the new core, students may elect to take any of the four required core courses in any order. Students will be expected to complete the four core courses by the end of their sophomore year.¹

¹Exceptions may be made for students completing certain programs (for instance, pre-medical study) and for students with special individual circumstances.

Some sections of each of the four core courses will function as part of the First-Year Seminar requirement. Students passing these specially identified First-Year Seminars will fulfill both the First-Year Seminar and that particular core requirement. Like other First-Year Seminars, these will have limited class size, a special relationship between students and faculty (including academic advising), and orientation opportunities. Normally, all First-Year Seminars will carry distribution, concentration, or core credit. The University will continue to encourage the pedagogical innovation and experimentation that have traditionally characterized the First-Year Seminar requirement. A significant variety of non-core First-Year Seminars will continue to be offered.

Optional courses for students seeking Distinction in the Liberal Arts Core will be open to students who have completed their core requirements. Overall, the Liberal Arts Program would:

- (1) require student completion of a four-course core program: two courses in *Continuity and Change in the West* (Component A), one course in *Cultures of Africa, Asia, and the Americas* (Component B), and one course in *Scientific Perspectives on the World* (Component C). These courses may be taken in any order.
- (2) continue to require student completion of a six-course distribution requirement comprising two courses from the Humanities, Social Science, and Natural Science and Mathematics Divisions. None of the courses taken for core credit can count towards the distribution requirement.
- (3) offer an option for earning Distinction in the Liberal Arts Core.
- (4) allow for the integration of First-Year Seminars and core courses.
- (5) reaffirm the commitment to the development of students' skills, including writing.

Descriptions of the courses that comprise the suggested core curriculum follow. A copy of the legislation that initiated the current program appears in Appendix B.

Component A: Continuity and Change in the West

This component of the core curriculum will consist of two nonsequential courses exploring Western identity, culture, and traditions from ancient to modern times. Maximum student/instructor ratio should be 25 to 1.

Colgate University believes that every person educated in the West must engage the richness and complexity of the Western past. This component of the core program will require that students come to grips with major sources of those Western traditions and institutions that continue to shape contemporary life. In keeping with the intellectual mission of a liberal arts institution, students will confront a wide range of significant works and, in so doing, confront the wellsprings of that educational system itself. The two courses represent different ways of approaching Western traditions: one addresses the problematics of Western origins, while the other establishes a dialogue between the present and the modern past. Yet both courses raise the question of what

it means to be a person living in a Western society — the first by examining the complex origins of Western identities, the second by questioning what it means to be a *modern* Western individual. These courses also teach students those skills of analytical writing, close reading, and critical thinking that they will need in the University and in their later lives. This component of the program aspires to cultivate habits of mind that will enable students to approach significant issues from a variety of perspectives. These courses challenge students to find their own place in a tradition which they will sustain and redefine as they live their lives.

The careful study of particular Western works is essential to gaining a satisfactory sense of Western traditions and, ultimately, an appreciation of the meaning of a university education. Each of these two courses will center on a set of common primary texts or artifacts. All these works will be carefully chosen for their intrinsic interest and the light they shed on issues of ongoing importance. In establishing a largely common curriculum, this aspect of the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum aims to foster the academic life of the University by creating a community with a shared experience of intellectual engagement.

Core 151: Western Traditions. In this course students will learn about the beginnings of Western thought and its resonance through the ages. They will confront the complexity of Western culture and the impossibility of either embracing or rejecting it reductively. The staff will choose a core of at least four common works drawn from the ancient world. These works will offer productive connections among themselves, but they will also give students grounding in an era crucially formative of Western traditions. In addition to these works, “response texts” will be chosen by individual instructors to provide a variety of perspectives on Western culture. It is possible, indeed likely, that there will be some degree of overlap and commonality in the response texts chosen by instructors. Each of these selections will respond to, complement, or challenge at least one of the common texts. For each common text, there will be at least one response text. Through the juxtaposition of these materials, students will gain an enhanced appreciation of the common texts as well as a sense of both the continuity and the diversity of Western traditions. All of these materials will allow students to engage two questions that are central to understanding the past: does the past continue to speak to us today? to what extent are the ideas and values of the past significantly different from our own?

Response materials for Core 151 may be selected from any time period and will represent a variety of ways of engaging with primary texts. The following is a list of categories into which response texts may fall:

- Translation of the primary text into another medium
- Subsequent reworking of the primary text
- Precursor to the primary text
- Analog of the primary text that treats the same issues and concerns as the original
- Recent analysis and/or criticism of the primary text
- Non-Western counterpart of or commentary on the primary text
- Contemporary expansion or refutation of the primary text

Core 152: The Challenge of Modernity. The nineteenth century marked a crucial turning point in the West. Revolutions in technology and thought transformed Western culture; in some sense they created the language we speak and the modern world we inhabit. This course explores the distinctive features of modernity, asking students to put their own experience as inheritors of modernity in perspective by juxtaposing works from a core period of modernity with works of contemporary reaction and response. The staff will select at least four works from this core period (e.g., 1830-1914) that address some of the following issues: developments in science and technology; social and political changes stimulated by industrialization; transformations in visual media and communications systems; the consequences of urbanization; encounters with non-Western cultures; the human consequences of rapid change; the ongoing power of the past and tradition; the exploration of the recesses of the self; the reconsideration of questions of freedom and justice. Although the texts may change from year to year, they will always address a range of issues central to the continuing development of modernity. These works will be juxtaposed with three or more “response texts” produced during the twentieth century; individual instructors may choose to include one or more response texts or contextualizing works from any relevant period. Approximately thirty percent of these core and response materials may involve instructor choice. In this course students will gain a clear sense of the problem and promise of modernity for contemporary life.

Component B: Cultures of Africa, Asia, and the Americas

Purpose and Content

Colgate reaffirms its commitment to the idea that a liberal education should include an exploration of a culture that is distinct from and differs in substantial ways from the "Western tradition."²

The study of one of these cultures should achieve three distinguishable but interrelated goals:

- (1) an appreciation of the individual culture for its own sake, in ways that will expand the student's awareness and understanding of the world's cultural diversity;
- (2) the development of a comparative frame of reference to encourage students to reflect from a different perspective on issues of enduring or widespread significance, on their own lives and identities, and the society in which they live;
- (3) to understand how the particular culture they are studying is related -- historically, politically, and economically, as well as culturally -- to other cultural areas, including "the West," in a world that is increasingly integrated.

The central purpose of these courses, which will be reflected in each one's content, will be consistent with the goals of the entire core curriculum, namely, to contribute to the student's skills, critical acumen, and breadth of understanding, including an appreciation and a measure of skepticism regarding a variety of beliefs, values, and conventions, including one's own. Broad questions of cultural history and social identity, as well as contemporary global issues, may be raised in these courses and related to the particular culture being studied.

²The cultures of North American Indians, for example, would be considered to be distinct from the “Western tradition” as this is conventionally defined.

Organization and Staffing

Each course will be taught by a faculty member with a special interest in and knowledge of the culture. While the specific content and pedagogical structure of each individual course will reflect the nature of the culture being studied and the predilections of the person teaching it, all the courses will be interdisciplinary in approach and materials, and the staff will strive in all appropriate ways to build commonality among the courses and to be aware of how their courses may relate to the whole Program. For example, staff meetings should consider the use of common readings and events that will be relevant to more than one course or to topics in other components of the core program, and team-teaching and guest lecturing will be encouraged when appropriate. A variety of courses will be offered every semester by the staff of this component, and maximum enrollment in each course will be 25.

Component C: Scientific Perspectives on the World

Purpose and Content

The modern world is inextricably entwined with science. Increasingly, the conduct of human affairs requires a basic appreciation of the ways in which science works and the capacity to integrate that appreciation within a comprehensive understanding of the world. This component of the core curriculum thus addresses the issue of what it means to live in a contemporary world that has been largely shaped by science and technology. It examines the historical and contemporary influence of science on the individual and society and is designed to encourage a critical appraisal of the relevance of science to the contemporary experience. These courses ask students to understand the impact of science on broad issues that are of interest to all informed citizens, not just specialists.

This proposed core component is designed to help students develop a critical understanding of science and the role of science by engaging such basic questions as: What is the nature of science? What are the strengths, and also the limitations, of the perspective which science brings to the social, biological, and physical worlds? How does scientific knowledge evolve? By addressing these questions, and others like them, the student will develop a greater capacity to integrate scientific perspectives into a comprehensive understanding of the world. As with the other components, this tier aims to foster the intellectual life of the University by creating a community with shared ideas and perspectives.

The present General Education Program has included some material related to science, and the present distribution requirement addresses our expectation that students have a working knowledge of at least some areas of modern science. However, neither the present program of Tier courses nor the courses available for satisfaction of the distribution requirement focus sufficient attention on either the unique nature of scientific inquiry or the importance of science and technology to the modern experience. It is these two areas which are presently most lacking in our curriculum, and which should become the primary focus of new scientific perspectives courses.

Common Goals

While the learning of some basic science facts and the cultivation of quantitative literacy are certainly desirable, and to some degree inevitable in any course devoted to the study of science, the central goal of each of these courses will be to illuminate the process, value, and limits associated with scientific perspectives. The content of each course would range from an examination of particular aspects of a scientific discipline to major questions of how science and technology have contributed to and shaped the world today. As in other courses in the core, each of these will provide a classroom experience in which critical capacities basic to all fields, skills of writing, arguing, analyzing, criticizing, and questioning, can be given explicit emphasis and development.

Each of the courses must, therefore:

- (1) acquaint students with the scientific method, provide a forum for comparing and contrasting this method with other approaches for gaining knowledge of the world, and assist students in appreciating the role of quantification in interpreting scientific inquiry.
- (2) foster student awareness of the manner in which scientific knowledge evolves; acquaint students with the value as well as the limitations of a scientific perspective on the world; and increase students' capacity to integrate scientific perspectives into a comprehensive and critical understanding of the world.
- (3) support initiatives for all staff development and thus contribute significantly to the interaction of faculty across departments and divisions.

In addition, Scientific Perspective courses should provide an illustration of the application of the scientific method through an active learning, problem-oriented experience for students. These courses should also involve a link to at least one other core course; this link may be achieved through the use of relevant shared texts, ideas, or themes. (For example, an historical context for scientific inquiry could be studied in relation to science topics or related issues taught in *Continuity and Change in the West* core courses.) Scientific Perspectives may address the trends and consequences of the issues studied and analyze the different, perhaps competing, approaches (e.g., technology, social policy) for responding to those consequences.

Organization and Staffing

The Scientific Perspectives courses, like all other core courses, should be as interdisciplinary as possible in approach, materials, and faculty. Even though such courses will be taught mostly by individual area specialists, there will be regular staff meetings to discuss common issues pertaining to Scientific Perspectives and how it relates to the whole Liberal Arts Core Curriculum. These staff meetings would contribute to the coherence of the program and would ensure continuing interaction among faculty. The development of periodic university-wide events, particularly those that help to integrate Scientific Perspectives with other components of the core program, should be encouraged. For example, films, lectures, and exhibits pertaining to science, and the relation of science to the contemporary experience, might be organized. Emphasis might be given to selected areas in particular Colgate calendar years (Energy, Bioengineering, Impact of Technology, Environment, etc.), in order to focus the attention and interest of the wider University community as well as the students enrolled in the courses.

Although separate sections of Scientific Perspectives would not share a common syllabus, clustering of sections, team teaching and guest lecturing would be encouraged. Moreover, a small collection of readings would be developed which individual instructors would use either as background to be incorporated throughout their course or as a full component integrated with the rest of the course. Such readings might be especially useful for staff members not from the Division of Natural Sciences and Mathematics.

Staffing for the program would not come only from the Division of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. There are a significant number of members of the other divisions whose interests and expertise would make them excellent candidates to teach a Scientific Perspectives course, either alone or as part of a team.

As with other components of the core program, some sections of Scientific Perspectives could also function as First-Year Seminars. In addition, certain courses, whose purpose is not solely to satisfy a core requirement, may be approved ("asterisked") to satisfy the Scientific Perspectives requirement. Such approval for Liberal Arts Core credit would normally entail some restructuring of any existing course to meet the goals of this program. These asterisked courses are not intended to be a permanent feature of the program but are a necessary response to limited institutional resources. The viability of this aspect of the program will be evaluated after five years.

Component D: Distinction and High Distinction in the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum

The establishment of programs for Distinction and High Distinction recognizes the curricular importance of Colgate's core program. It would also recognize and reward students' achievement of excellence in liberal arts. Students will be eligible for Distinction and High Distinction if they achieve a B+ or better average in the four core courses and have an overall graduation GPA of 3.00 or better.

Distinction

A limited number of upper-level interdisciplinary courses focusing on major contemporary concerns will be offered in the core program. These courses may be team taught by faculty from more than one department; they will be open to all students who have completed the four-course core requirement. Students interested in pursuing distinction must complete one of these courses. In addition, these students must earn a grade of A- or better in the course and complete a major interdisciplinary project that has been approved to qualify for Distinction.

Rationale. The four-course core program grounds students in an interdisciplinary approach to fundamental issues of human identity, knowledge, and society. These upper-level courses in the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum would enhance this experience by offering an advanced integrative examination of particular topics of relevance to the contemporary world. These courses would also provide a capstone experience for students.

Course Structure. These courses will take an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach. Instructors in the courses will be encouraged to reach back to the four core courses for readings, topics, and approaches. Current Tier III courses, especially courses that also serve Colgate's interdisciplinary programs, would be natural candidates for this component of the revised program, but the development of new courses would also be encouraged. In keeping with the upper-level nature of the courses, enrollments will be limited to 15 students per faculty member in team-taught courses and 20 students per faculty member in single-instructor courses.

High Distinction

The goal of the program for High Distinction is to complement honors programs in departments and programs by asking students to reflect on the broader, interdisciplinary contexts of their honors projects.

Each spring semester, thirteen students engaged in concentration honors projects will be invited to participate in the Liberal Arts Core Seminar. Preference may be given to those students who have completed Distinction in the Liberal Arts Core. Through readings assigned by the seminar instructor, students will explore the methodologies of their own and other disciplines. Each student will also write a substantial interdisciplinary paper relevant to the student's departmental honors work. This requirement may be satisfied in one of the following ways: (1) by extending the departmental honors project (a) to explore interdisciplinary perspectives on the project's topic or (b) to examine the social implications or historical foundations of the project; (2) by self-consciously considering the generation and evaluation of knowledge in the concentration; (3) by collaborating with one or more members of the seminar to explore themes common to the students' departmental projects.

Students will present their work in the Liberal Arts Core Seminar and will critique each other's work. They may also work together on a collective project such as the organization of a conference or colloquium. The final versions of the students' projects will be presented in a public forum open to the university community.

Students who successfully complete the Liberal Arts Core high distinction project and earn a grade of A- or better in the seminar will receive High Distinction in the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum.

Implementation

This program will be implemented in the 1996-97 academic year and the new Liberal Arts Core Curriculum requirements will first apply to the graduating class of the year 2000. Five years after the initiation of the program, there will be a systematic review of the viability and effectiveness of Component C (Scientific Perspectives), Component D (Distinction and High Distinction), and the integration of First-Year Seminars and core courses. In addition, First-Year Seminars will be continuously monitored to ensure a breadth of offerings that appeal to both students and faculty. The Liberal Arts Core Curriculum as a whole will be reviewed ten years after it is fully implemented.

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