

**University of Kentucky
University Studies Program
External Review**

Submitted by the University External Review Committee

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In early February of 2004, the External Review Committee met with Michael Nietzel, then Provost of the University of Kentucky; Philip Kraemer, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education; Connie Ray, Vice President for Institutional Research, Planning & Effectiveness; and Ernie Yanarella, Faculty Senate Chair to address the group's questions and to detail its goals. It was decided that the committee's initial charge would be six fold:

- Explore solutions to the weaknesses highlighted by the University's Self-Study Report.
- Facilitate campus-wide discussions on USP reform.
- Investigate our benchmarks' best undergraduate practices.
- Generate "bold and creative" alternatives to our present USP practices.
- Remain cognizant of the institution's increasing enrollment and its decreasing budget.
- Develop a final report that is as complete and detailed as time and resources allow.

With the departure of Michael Nietzel and the creation of the Center for Undergraduate Excellence, however, the committee's charge was changed to accommodate the institution's new administrative and structural developments. In late July of 2005, the committee's modified assignment was to generate a series of guidelines and/or ideas, in an attenuated document, that would serve as an intellectual springboard for a newly formed Implementation Task Force.

With this new call, the committee saw an ideal opportunity to take the first, and perhaps, most important step in significant reform by articulating what they believe the University's mission and responsibilities are to *all* undergraduates.

Towards this end, the committee generated five core-learning outcomes that are essential in producing 1) an enlightened student body capable of responsibly participating in their diverse and democratic culture, and 2) a progressive and forward thinking university that will become our benchmarks' standard of excellence.

The committee strongly recommends that these five core-learning outcomes serve as the guiding principles in restructuring the University of Kentucky's undergraduate mission. It is the belief of this group that simply adding new courses or subtracting old ones, without a firm commitment to such a foundation, will only produce an increasingly

disconnected, fragmented, and unsatisfying undergraduate experience for both students and professors.

This idea of having the general studies curriculum grow from a collection of focused guiding principles is not a new idea in the larger community of universities. Miami University of Ohio, for example, developed their innovative and successful “Miami Plan” in exactly this way. The specific guiding principles for Miami University, however, are not necessarily the right ones for a public, rank-one research institution like ours. As the state’s flagship institution, we must understand the particular talents of our faculty and the needs of the Commonwealth we serve, and then weave these into both a colorful and profound expression of undergraduate education for all of our students.

In the section that follows, we will briefly discuss each of our five core learning outcomes and supply some examples of courses and/or programs that have been piloted or adopted on campus to help clarify the intent of these goals. The committee underscores the importance of realizing that these examples are not intended to be exhaustive or simple panaceas to our current problems. Instead they are meant only to frame the larger discussion and point to possible areas for future investigation. Finally, when applicable, the committee will recommend courses and/or programs that have been used at our benchmark institutions that have shown tentative promise in fulfilling our learning outcomes. While the committee did not have sufficient time or resources to seriously investigate the logistics of these ideas, we are optimistic about their potential and strongly encourage the Implementation Task Force to explore their feasibility in more detail.

I. The new core curriculum program should better enable all students to understand their place and purpose in their ever-changing world.

Often students who enter our University’s front doors have not had the intellectual freedom or the needed stimulation to understand the complexity of their own society, let alone that of others around the world. A core curriculum, therefore, must empower students to not only uncover the complexity of their own lives but to be curious and knowledgeable about the multicultural world outside of our Commonwealth’s borders. We must also ensure that our students are prepared, intellectually and ethically, to

develop their own informed worldview. Once equipped, they can answer the pressing questions of “who are they,” “what are their rights and responsibilities as citizens of their community, state, nation, and world,” and “how can they be both committed to an ethical foundation and sensitive to multicultural differences.”

A. Specifically, the committee recommends that a new core-curriculum program enable all students to accomplish the following:

- Understand the histories behind their own culture’s social practices.
- Learn about the myriad cultures, religions, languages, and customs in their world.
- Learn from multiple and competing perspectives.
- Develop and apply their own worldview.

B. Some examples of courses or programs at the University that have attempted to address this learning outcome include the following:

- “Ways of Knowing,” “Journeys,” “Communities,” and “Ecology” courses of the Modern Studies Program.
- “Ecology” and “Journeys” courses of the Expanding Horizons Program.
- Global Studies Program.
- The current USP cross-cultural requirement.

C. Suggested programs/courses that should be examined more closely to determine their feasibility and effectiveness:

- The committee recommends that the university earnestly promote and expand its current Study Abroad Program. Every undergraduate student should be strongly encouraged to study for at least one semester outside the borders of the United States, preferably in a non-English speaking country.

II. The new core curriculum program should better enable all students to engage in the process of inquiry and reflection.

The often cited Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University saw the unique opportunities that Research One Universities have to educate their undergraduates:

WHAT IS NEEDED NOW IS A NEW MODEL OF UNDERGRADUATE education at research universities that makes the baccalaureate experience an inseparable part of an integrated whole. . . . There needs to be a symbiotic relationship between all the participants in university learning that will provide a new kind of undergraduate experience available only at research institutions. Moreover, productive research faculties might find new stimulation and new creativity in contact with bright, imaginative, and eager baccalaureate students, and graduate students would benefit from integrating their research and teaching experiences (pp. 7-8).

Inspired by Boyer's ideas, we believe that the University of Kentucky has a unique opportunity to form a symbiotic relationship between our research agendas and our pedagogical commitment to our undergraduate students. While it may be largely the responsibility of our majors to develop this relationship along methodological lines, it is the responsibility of our core curriculum to capture and communicate those facets of inquiry and reflection that motivate and sustain successful research agendas at a Rank One Research Institution. It is in this sense that our core curriculum needs to encourage faculty to bring their research into their classrooms where students can be inspired by their quest for new knowledge, directed by their methodological rigor, and informed by their findings and conclusions. By doing this, we will not only highlight what is special about the undergraduate experience at the University of Kentucky, we will also foster the spirit of curiosity in our students and supply them with the tools and methods they will need to ask and answer the perplexing questions that await them in their post-college lives.

A. Specifically, the committee recommends that a new core curriculum program enable all students to accomplish the following:

- Generate new knowledge by applying research processes and methods.
- Create their own “moments of epiphany.”
- Become life-long learners.

B. Some examples of courses or programs at the University that have attempted to address this learning outcome include the following:

- Freshman Discovery Course.
- Living/Learning Center.

C. Suggested programs/courses that should be examined more closely to determine their feasibility and effectiveness:

- The committee encourages the university to explore the possibility of a Senior Capstone course that would be major specific and would focus on inquiry-based learning. This would also serve as an idea site for program assessment.
- The committee encourages the university to explore the possibility of a Senior Discovery Seminar where any student, regardless of discipline or major, could explore inquiry-based learning in any of the three major areas of knowledge, e.g., humanities, social sciences, natural sciences. Ideally, the topics explored in these seminars would encourage civic engagement and be directed at improving the human condition in the commonwealth.
- Both the Capstone Course and the Senior Seminar might also be effective strategies for bridging the divide that now exists between students’ first two academic years (when USP courses are disproportionately taken) and their later years (when major courses are disproportionately taken).

III. The new core curriculum program should better enable all students to think from multidisciplinary perspectives

The organizational structure of most traditional American universities forces both professors and students into isolated and myopic departments. This Balkanization of knowledge stifles transcendent and intellectually expansive thinking: Lines are drawn,

territories are guarded, and ideas are protected as the sole domain of one group. This committee believes that for bold and creative reform to take place at the University of Kentucky, knowledge must be liberated from the politics of “departmentalization.”

We must stop thinking about what specific “history,” “psychology,” “art,” and “mathematics” courses we want students to take and begin thinking about what we want our students to learn and how that knowledge can best be transmitted. Quite often, the answer to both of these questions rests on the use of multidisciplinary education strategies where big questions are asked and answered from a plurality of perspectives and epistemologies. In accomplishing such a goal, we will ultimately make knowledge vastly more complex, interdependent, and interesting for both students and teachers.

- A. Specifically, the committee recommends that a new core curriculum program enable all students to accomplish the following:
- Synthesize materials from multiple disciplines.
 - Integrate ideas from various disciplines.
 - Apply theories and methods across multiple disciplines.
- B. Some examples of courses or programs at the University that have attempted to address this learning outcome include the following:
- “Introduction to the Social Sciences” courses from the Social Science Honors Program.
 - “Space, Place, and Culture” option in the new Honors Program.
 - “Ways of Knowing,” “Journeys,” “Communities,” and “Ecology” courses of the Modern Studies Program.
 - “Ecology” and “Journeys” courses of the Expanding Horizons Program.
 - Global Studies Program.
- C. Suggested programs/courses that should be examined more closely to determine their feasibility and effectiveness:
- The committee encourages the university to explore multi-disciplinary ways of teaching the traditional USP curriculum. Many of our broad-topic survey courses,

e.g., Introduction to Psychology, Communication, Economics, Art History, could be transformed into classes infinitely more diverse and layered if taught by a well coordinated, multi-disciplinary team of professors. Art historians, literary critics, geographers, family-studies scholars, gender researchers, computer scientists, and neurologists could all lend their unique perspective to the foundational question of what it means to be human in the 21st Century.

IV. The new core curriculum program should better enable all students to meet the new demands and challenges of life in the 21st Century.

In many regards, today's university curriculum looks strikingly similar to that offered a century ago. This is not to say that the study of classical and traditional knowledge has become obsolete. It is instead to assert that political, economic, technological, and cultural changes at the turn of the 21st Century have placed additional demands on our university that we are obligated to meet. If we as a university are to prepare our students to be functioning members of a democratic society, we must give serious consideration to the new types of knowledge and skills they will need to succeed.

- A. Specifically, the committee recommends that a new core curriculum program enable all students to accomplish the following:
- Adapt to the discovery of new knowledge and technology.
 - Evaluate and question changing ethical principles that are derived from new knowledge and technology.
 - Live as participatory citizens in a multilingual and multicultural world.
 - Evaluate the qualities and merit of information.
 - Access, process, produce, and deliver information.
- B. Some examples of courses or programs at the University that have attempted to address this learning outcome include the following:

- Internship programs that serve to enhance in-class lessons with real-world experiences.
 - Study Abroad Program that exposes students to the growing complexity of the world outside the Commonwealth.
- C. Suggested programs/courses that should be examined more closely to determine their feasibility and effectiveness:
- The committee sees an increasing need for the core curriculum to include a media and visual literacy course. Older ways of “making sense of the world” are rapidly becoming inadequate in the face of our society’s ever increasing dependence on media and visual images.
 - All our core classes must more actively engage in ethical discussions that continually adapt to our world’s rapidly changing technological, cultural, corporate, medical, and communication practices.
- V. **The new core curriculum program should better enable all students to discover and examine the ambiguity of human knowledge**

While we as a University want to help students develop their own stable foundation for life, we also want them to be critical consumers of ideas and assertions. In a world where science, theology, business, health, pop culture, and popular consensus regularly make claims with absolute certainty, universities need to prepare and equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to evaluate their merits.

This type of informed skepticism also needs to be encouraged in our classrooms. The committee believes that all undergraduate classes need to not only teach the prevailing paradigmatic “truths” of their discipline, but to train and encourage students to question and evaluate these lessons. Our university should embrace the dictum that, “*All ideas, no matter how well entrenched or sacred, need to be questioned and evaluated.*” Students, once empowered with this ability, can then decide what ideas and practices in their lives to reaffirm, reform, or reject.

- A. Specifically, the committee recommends that a new core curriculum program enable all students to accomplish the following:
- Expose their assumptions to the rigors of investigation and independent thought.
 - Question the ideas presented to them in their classes.
 - Analyze, compare and evaluate different ways of knowing produced by different, and at times, incongruent, knowledge claims.
- B. Some examples of courses or programs at the University that have attempted to address this learning outcome include the following:
- The committee recognizes that many of our best teachers have already elegantly incorporated “critical-thinking skills” into their classes. It is our hope, however, that this skill will also serve as a guiding principle and significant criteria in reshaping USP.
- C. Suggested programs/courses that should be examined more closely to determine their feasibility and effectiveness:
- All our core courses must provide an atmosphere conducive to a free and open exchange of thoughts and ideas.

Conclusion

This report is not intended to be the last word, but only one in an on-going dialogue that addresses our obligation to our undergraduate students. Like others before us, we are committed to the liberal-arts mission for all students who come to the University of Kentucky. For this mission to be fully recognized, however, it must be built on a solid foundation of learning outcomes. Without such a unifying base, our University Studies Program will lack unity, purpose, and commonly shared goals. As one professor reported in the self-study, “*UK should not have a core that is a façade. . . 30 courses under X rubric does not represent a core*” (p. 26).

Building a core curriculum for our university, however, will not be an easy task. As the same self-study highlighted, there will be significant barriers to reform, some of which have derailed previous efforts at undergraduate reform. Some of the most daunting hurdles that the Implementation Task Force will face in engendering change include the following:

- Increasing first-year enrollment.
- Budgetary constraints and inconsistent funding.
- Department and college territoriality over disciplinary knowledge and course offerings.
- College-specific structures that have hardwired TA lines to USP courses.
- Campus and faculty inertia following from years of repetitive practices.
- Professor and administrative anxiety over foundational changes and the unknown of a new curriculum.
- University culture that values research and graduate programs over undergraduate education.

This is not to imply that change will not or cannot happen. This committee, in fact, is extremely optimistic about the future of the University's undergraduate core curriculum given the current administration's commitment to reform and the passion and dedication of our faculty. To help facilitate this change, the committee recommends the following:

- Campus-wide conversations that actively seek out ideas and opinions from all faculty members.
- Strong and influential implementation by a task force that can command attention and respect from the campus at large.
- Strong top-down leadership that can push the faculty out of its inertia and into participatory change.
- Reward system for faculty who commit time and energy towards undergraduate reform.

- Unambiguous and unconditional commitment to *doing no harm* to graduate programs that depend on an intricate relationship with USP for funding.
- Realistic and honest levels of funding. For meaningful and significant reform to take place, funding is a necessity. “Doing more with less” is a pedagogical anathema.

In reviewing our benchmarks’ best practices and our University’s past creative efforts at undergraduate reform, it has become clear to this committee that with bold leadership, an informed and enthusiastic faculty, and reasonable funding, the University of Kentucky is not far from becoming an American public university that our benchmarks recognize and emulate.