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Noted Academics Urge U. of Chicago to Preserve Its Core Curriculum

By [ROBIN WILSON](#)

Ten prominent scholars from around the country are asking the University of Chicago to halt a plan to revise its core curriculum, labeling the changes "dangerous" and "disturbing."

The group, which calls itself Scholars for the University of Chicago, is concerned about a reduction of courses in Chicago's famous "Common Core" curriculum that is to take effect in September. The scholars offered their views in letters to Chicago's Board of Trustees, which met Thursday. The scholars include Saul Bellow, a professor of English at Boston University; Gertrude Himmelfarb, a professor emeritus of history at the City University of New York; David Riesman, a professor emeritus of social sciences at Harvard University; and James Q. Wilson, a professor of management at the University of California at Los Angeles. They all have either attended or taught at Chicago, and their effort was coordinated by the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**, an association in Washington that is known as a champion of the Western canon.

Under a change approved by the faculty last year, Chicago will reduce the number of courses in its core from 21 to 18. The reductions will come in courses classified as "humanities, civilizations, and the arts" and "science and mathematics." For students who test out of a three-course language requirement, the core could slip to a total of 15 classes.

"In recent years, as other institutions succumbed to the temptations of mediocrity, the University of Chicago stood firm, upholding a standard for excellence in the liberal arts," the scholars wrote. "If Chicago now falters, other colleges will be encouraged to lower their standards as well."

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Because the trustees were meeting Thursday at Chicago, none of them could be reached for comment.

In addition to changing the curriculum, the administration at Chicago wants to enroll 600 more undergraduates, for a total of 4,500, over the next several years. To insure that Chicago will attract students not only because of its long-standing academic reputation but because of what students can do when they aren't studying, the administration has been busy trying to make the campus more appealing. The university has renovated the student center and increased the number of student clubs, and it plans to build a new athletics center.

The efforts to increase the undergraduate population and change the Common Core have created quite a stir. Some students and faculty members have spoken out against the efforts, and **alumni** have established a World-Wide Web site to decry them. They charge that Chicago is watering down its core to make way for a greater number of undergraduates who will not be as academically talented as previous students but may be more able to give money to the university after they graduate.

Their view is shared by Jerry L. Martin, the president of the council that had urged the 10 scholars to speak out against the changes. "They want to attract not only more students, but less-brainy students who will make more money and give to the university," said Mr. Martin. "They want fewer physicists and more businessmen."

But John W. Boyer, dean of Chicago's undergraduate college, said there was "no connection" between the reduction of core courses and the effort to increase the student population. "This is still a very challenging place," he said. "We have no gut courses. It is still a place where there is no place to hide."

Mr. Boyer pointed out that the university had not changed its curriculum since 1984, and said it was time for a review. He said that although Chicago had shaved a few courses off its core, it intended for the remaining classes to be more "rigorous." Students, he said, had lately been stringing out the core requirements into their senior year, defeating the purpose of a core. By decreasing the number of classes in the Common Core, Chicago hopes that students will fit in all of the core courses

during their first two years.

"Historically, the people who created general education really felt it worked best for younger students," Mr. Boyer said in an interview. "What we wanted to do was to make it stronger by making it more intense."

Mr. Boyer said the curriculum change would take effect in the fall, regardless of complaints about it. "It's a done deal," he added.

Background stories from *The Chronicle*:

- ["U. of Chicago Students Have Fun Making a Point,"](#) 4/9/99
- ["U. of Chicago Students and **Alumni** Protest Planned Rise in Enrollment,"](#) 2/26/99
- ["'U. of Chicago Social Life' May No Longer Be an Oxymoron,"](#) 11/15/96

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