

Restoring a Core

How Trustees Can Ensure Meaningful
General Education Requirements



AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI
Institute for Effective Governance

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Launched in 1995, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to working with alumni, donors, trustees, and education leaders across the country to support liberal arts education, high academic standards, the free exchange of ideas on campus, and high-quality education at an affordable price.

ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance, founded in 2003 by college and university trustees for trustees, is devoted to enhancing boards' effectiveness and helping trustees fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities fully and effectively. IEG offers a range of services tailored to the specific needs of individual boards, and focuses on academic quality, academic freedom, and accountability.

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WHY A CORE?

At one time, college students received a broad, rigorous education that developed their knowledge and thinking well beyond the high school level. At the heart of that education was a core curriculum, also called general education: a set of required courses that introduced students, usually in their first few semesters, to the most important events, ideas, and works known to mankind. These courses provided students a common frame of reference often grounded in the enduring questions of human experience: Who are we, why are we here, and what sort of life is most worth living?

Today, however, many students graduate from college with less knowledge about the world, our nation, and our culture than was expected of high schoolers 50 years ago. *What Will They Learn?*, a report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, studied 100 top colleges and universities and found that 83 percent do not require a literature survey. Almost half require no mathematics, 89 percent require neither U.S. history nor U.S. government, and only two require economics. In 2003, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy found that millions of American adults could not even understand narrative texts such as newspaper articles or practical information such as instructions for taking medicine. And in 2006, the

National Survey of America's College Students found that 20 percent of college graduates could not "estimate if their car has enough gasoline to get to the next gas station or calculate the total cost of ordering office supplies."

WHAT IS A CORE?

Many colleges claim that they have a core curriculum. Yet most in fact have abandoned a traditional core in favor of a smorgasbord of narrow and sometimes trendy courses.

In reality, colleges today require students to take courses in several subjects other than their major: the so-called "distribution requirements." To satisfy these, students may take one to three courses in each of five or six distribution areas such as physical and biological sciences, humanities, social sciences, writing skills, math skills, and multicultural studies. But a distribution is not a true *general* education. Students may meet these "requirements" by picking and choosing, often from hundreds of courses, like "Introduction to Popular TV and Movies" at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, "Bob Dylan" at Dartmouth College, and "Floral Art" at the University of Rhode Island.

Without solid requirements, students do not learn what they need to know to be informed citizens, effective workers, and life-long learners. As a trustee, you can change all that.

You are responsible for the academic well-being of your institution, not only its finances. While you must respect faculty prerogatives, there are steps you can take to guarantee that your students benefit from a

rigorous general education. Working with the administration and faculty, you and your colleagues can help your institution adopt stronger and more coherent core requirements by setting out goals for the curricular review. The boards of the State University of New York and George Mason University have done just that, to name only two.

This guide will explain how.

WHAT SHOULD BE IN A CORE?

Surely an educated person ought to be able to participate fully and successfully in our modern economy by having college-level writing and quantitative skills. On top of that, citizens in a democracy should understand their governing system and be aware of their own history. They should know about life-enriching elements of Western civilization—the great authors of English and American literature and of the world, major schools of philosophy and religion, art, and music. They should understand science and scientific ways of thinking and have practiced the scientific method in a laboratory. Today's college graduates should understand such fundamentals as the law of supply and demand and how the costs and benefits of diverse courses of action can be evaluated and compared. Finally, an increasingly global society demands a rich study of different cultures, civilizations, and their languages—giving students insight into others with whom they will interact.

The contents of a strong general education need not be static. There is no reason to restrict the curriculum to only those subjects studied in the distant past since the goal is to ensure that students receive a

well-rounded education. The key is to include fundamental courses that provide a foundation, not only for subsequent coursework, but also for a lifetime of learning.

Yes, the amount of information increases every day. But not all information is equal, and learning is more than just Googling subjects on the internet. Left to their own devices, 20-year-olds will tend towards their own interests. And while trustees cannot—and should not try to—devise syllabi and select reading lists, you can and must make sure graduates are prepared for the world and for work. As a trustee, you can help ensure that your institution provides college freshmen and sophomores with a common language—and a common learning foundation—that revolves around the major fields of human knowledge.

HOW WILL A CORE BENEFIT MY INSTITUTION?

A core curriculum will benefit your institution in at least four ways.

First, a core curriculum sets students on common academic ground. A good set of core courses encourages and deepens intellectual discussion and argument. A good core steers late-night conversations towards what everyone is reading, rather than who just appeared at the last rock concert. Former University of Rochester president George Dennis O'Brien puts the point this way:

[A] coherent curriculum energizes the most underutilized university factor of production: students. Only in a concentrated, cohesive, cohorted curriculum (even if only a portion of

the overall plans of study) can students educate one another. Whether it is Treisman's calculus students or my fraternity brethren struggling with Heidegger, the concentrated back and forth of student conversation is a powerful instrument for creating discriminating judgment.

Second, experience shows that, for the most part, students (and their parents) prefer a high-quality institution with a good reputation. Those that have moved to a strong core have found that many students regard it as an attractive feature. While students at *other* institutions can graduate with a patchwork of narrow and often trendy courses, students at yours will receive something different. You have the opportunity to connect high school and postsecondary instruction through a cohesive and thoughtful curriculum. In doing so, you will give your university a comparative advantage over the vast majority that do not prepare their students in such a way.

A case in point is one of the nation's largest university systems, the State University of New York (SUNY). In 1999, SUNY's board of trustees adopted a resolution requiring a minimum of 30 credit hours in general education for each student covering mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, American history, Western civilization, the arts, the humanities, a foreign language, and information management. Instituting the core was a sharp change from the previous "distribution requirements" approach. Rather than the stagnant or falling enrollments that some had predicted, SUNY experienced a significant increase in the year following the implementation of the core resolution.



Third, developing and teaching a core curriculum encourages collegiality in the professoriate. In 1980, Brooklyn College faculty moved from what Ethyle Wolfe, then a professor at Brooklyn, calls “the cafeteria-style curricula” that “had yielded for many students no more than the lowest denominator of a fragmented liberal arts education” to “a shared intellectual experience.” Specializing in very narrow fields, even the best teachers were uncomfortable teaching broad courses. Brooklyn professors discussed the core and its texts together in seminars over the summer. These discussions brought the faculty together and gave them a shared intellectual experience as they prepared one for their students.

Finally, a core gives students the world. A core curriculum, drawn from the greatest of human experience and achievement, frees students from the tyranny of the moment. Great books are great precisely because they transcend time and place and speak to ageless questions about the human condition. A core curriculum especially benefits those students who, without a core, would never meet the words and ideas that have inspired and comforted so many throughout human history. In college, students can engage, first-hand, with primary documents, moving beyond the two or three paragraphs allotted to George Washington or Rosa Parks or Jimmy Carter in their high school textbook. They can go from studying basic physics to experiencing advanced hands-on work in the laboratory.

A sample core curriculum is outlined at the back of this guide.

WHAT CAN TRUSTEES DO?

There is a reason universities have lay boards. Faculty have expertise in their specialties, but board members are leaders in economic, professional, and civic life. You bring a broad perspective to bear on such questions as what does an educated person need to know and be able to do in today's world. Moreover, you have a fiduciary obligation to ensure that students receive the kind of solid, coherent education they need to succeed in a world that will look very different in ten, twenty, or thirty years.

If you attempt to ensure a core curriculum, you will almost certainly encounter obstacles. You will be told that the “distribution requirements” serve as a core and that choice is essential to make students happy. You will be accused of ignoring students' need for vocational preparation. You will hear that a core will require too many credit hours. You will be warned that a core will prompt inter-departmental disputes over who gets core money or who doesn't have to teach freshmen. You will be pressured to allow remedial courses to count towards the core.

But don't give up! Internal campus decision-making often results in a fragmented and ineffective curriculum. Trustees can help break the deadlock and facilitate the adoption of stronger and more effective requirements. The following are steps you can take to ensure a quality core.

1. Obtain Information. Start at the beginning. Find out what requirements your institution has and how many courses will satisfy those requirements.

- ✓ Is the current curriculum providing a common foundation of knowledge for students to share?
- ✓ Are course options sufficiently selective to ensure students exposure to central areas of knowledge including literature, science, math, American history and civics, economics, and foreign languages?
- ✓ Does the curriculum provide a common foundation on which advanced courses can build?

This baseline data will outline the current state of affairs, inform subsequent board discussions, and provide a foundation for any suggested improvements.

2. Start a Board Discussion. Armed with baseline information, start a broad discussion. Over several meetings, the board or its academic affairs committee should invite experts from outside the institution who can provide a national perspective on core curriculum and examine the institution's existing requirements. Broadly discuss desirable features of a strong general education curriculum. This can occur simultaneously with Step 1.

3. Demand Presidential Leadership. In order to strengthen core requirements, the board and president must work together. The board needs to make it clear that it will depend on the president to provide leadership in ensuring a solid core and charging the faculty to develop criteria for a core. This can occur at the same time as Steps 1 and 2.

4. Insist on Faculty Discussions and Suggestions. To move forward, it is imperative that the faculty discuss the criteria for a strong core curriculum, e.g., what subjects it should include, what skills it should cultivate. They should, in turn, report their findings within a reasonable timeframe set by the board.

5. Adopt a Framework of Essential Subjects and Skills. Once the faculty has reported on its findings, the board or its academic affairs committee should review the faculty suggestions. Using that information, the board should adopt a framework of essential subjects and skills for the core curriculum.

6. Ask for a Specific Curricular Proposal. Within the broad framework adopted by the board, the board should ask the president and faculty to develop a *specific* curriculum to bring back for approval, keeping in mind the key questions outlined in Step 1 as it does so.

7. Take Board Action. The board should review the faculty proposal and approve it, amend it, or return it for further review.

8. Oversee Implementation and Course Adoption. Once the board approves a core curriculum framework, the faculty can develop specific courses to meet requirements outlined. The administration can, in turn, approve them, amend them, or return them for further faculty deliberation. The administration should also inform the board of progress toward implementation. For courses to be offered in September, they must be approved and announced by mid-

spring. The full curricular review process will likely take about two years.

THE END RESULT!

A strong core curriculum takes time and effort. But it goes to the very heart of the academic enterprise. As a trustee, you have the unique opportunity—and responsibility—to ensure that graduates of your institution receive a basic grounding in the major fields of human knowledge. By following these steps, you can make sure students of today are prepared to be citizens and leaders of tomorrow.

CALL ACTA'S IEG FOR HELP.

ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance supplies information trustees can use in making decisions for their institutions, including expert assistance in curricular reviews. Drawing on a broad network of higher education experts, IEG also offers a wide range of services, including orientations and retreats, board management seminars, institutional assessments, and presidential searches and evaluations, at little or no additional charge.

To learn more, go to www.goacta.org or call 202/467-6787.

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SAMPLE CORE CURRICULUM

From *50 Hours. A Core Curriculum for College Students* published by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

18 Hours: Cultures and Civilizations

- I. The Origins of Civilization** – a one-semester course that considers the beginnings of civilization on various continents. 3 hours
- II. Western Civilization** – a one-semester course that considers the development of Western society and thought from Periclean Athens through the Reformation. 3 hours
- III. Western Civilization(continued)** – a one-semester course that considers the development of Western society and thought from the Reformation into the 20th century. 3 hours
- IV. American Civilization** – a one-semester course that traces major developments in American society and thought from colonial times to the present. 3 hours
- V. and VI. Other Civilizations** – two one-semester courses to be chosen from the following: civilizations of Africa, East Asia, Islam, Latin America, South Asia. 6 hours

12 Hours: Foreign Language – a two-year requirement; it is recommended that students fulfill this requirement by taking advanced courses in a language they have studied in high school.



6 Hours: Concepts of Mathematics – a one-year course focusing on major concepts, methods, and applications of the mathematical sciences.

8 Hours: Foundations of the Natural Sciences – a one-year laboratory course that focuses on major ideas and methods of the physical and biological sciences.

6 Hours: The Social Sciences and the Modern World – a one-year course that explores ways in which the social sciences have been used to explain political, economic, and social life, as well as the experience of individuals, in the last 200 years.



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