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“The SUNY Core Curriculum in Context”

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Once upon a time, Old Westbury students could satisfy their U.S. Society, History, and Culture requirement with a course on mental health. Binghamton, Buffalo State, and New Paltz¹ required all students to take phys ed—a requirement they could meet with courses on rock climbing, bowling, and badminton—but did not require them to study math or literature. Albany and Geneseo students could entirely avoid English composition, foreign languages, and math. Fredonia’s requirements were so watered down that *every* course offered in natural science, math, arts, humanities, and social science counted as core courses.

Educational standards throughout the SUNY system were inconsistent—and were at times worryingly low. General requirements were so loosely defined that a vast array of narrowly specialized and trendy courses took the place of broadly focused, substantive coursework in key fields. On ten of SUNY’s sixteen four-year college and university campuses, students could avoid taking *any* courses in more than half of the following core subject areas: history, literature, philosophy, foreign language, arts, English composition, math, and science.

Back in the 90’s, if someone had asked the New York State Board of Regents the critical question, “What do SUNY students know?,” the answer would have been a resounding and disappointing “Not much.” As the Board itself acknowledged in 1995, “Too frequently, today’s curricula permit students to build schedules that completely avoid academic areas they find uncongenial. Such catering to individual preferences may result in graduates being illiterate in fields essential for constructive participation in modern life.”²

But all that changed on December 15, 1998, when the SUNY trustees voted 10-3 to raise academic standards throughout the system. Exercising its authority under the New York Education Law³, the board decreed that by fall 2000, all SUNY baccalaureate degree candidates would be required to complete a rigorous core curriculum centered on natural and social sciences, mathematics, foreign languages, Western and world civilizations, American history, humanities and the arts, information management, critical reasoning, and communications.⁴ Responding to the fact that many SUNY students could (and did) graduate without foundational coursework in essential subjects, the creation of the core was a historic moment for SUNY—and, as we’ll see, for American higher education.

¹ Empire Foundation for Policy Research: *SUNY’s Core Curriculum: The Failure to Set Consistent and High Academic Standards* (1996), p. 16

² *Ibid.*, p. 1

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁴ http://www.suny.edu/student/academic_general_education.cfm

Providing curricular coherence within and across schools while giving each campus the freedom to key requirements meaningfully to its own unique institutional culture, the core addressed the pragmatic problems posed by a vast and diverse statewide system. Today, the SUNY core is a central component of the SUNY identity—a unifying and elevating academic commitment that integrates SUNY’s vast network while still allowing each school to maintain a distinct educational and academic identity.

That’s pretty remarkable—especially when we consider how much of SUNY’s identity is presently in flux.

Last year, the New York State Commission on Higher Education recommended sweeping changes to the SUNY system.⁵ Warning that New York is “falling behind” other state flagships, the Commission found that SUNY was failing in its mission to educate and to produce knowledge; it also found that funding for world-class research and faculty were lacking, as were adequate access and support for SUNY’s diverse body of students. Advocating major investment in research, hiring, infrastructure, financial aid, and college readiness programs, the Commission urged that “such changes are needed if New York is to remain competitive in the 21st Century, a time when education is more important than ever for the intellectual, cultural and economic wellbeing of our citizens.”

Not much about the SUNY system escaped the Commission’s criticism. The message was one of urgently needed overhaul across the board. One thing, though, was significantly absent from the Commission’s scathing assessment: the SUNY core curriculum. Amid urgent calls for change and alarming predictions of imminent decline, the core is just about the one thing that has *not* been flagged as a problem.

That should not surprise us. The core is a SUNY signature. Over the past ten years, it has been correlated with rising enrollment and rising admissions standards—both signs of heightened academic quality and increased educational prestige.⁶

Looked at in this light, the core seems to be a no-brainer. But it was not always thus. It seems strange to think of it now, but immense controversy surrounded the board’s creation of the core. In fact, the establishment of the SUNY core marked one of the more tumultuous episodes in recent SUNY history.

While the nation watched, the SUNY faculty (the tenured ones, anyway) locked horns with the trustees.

In late 1998, just days before the trustees voted to approve the proposed core, for example, provost Peter Salins told the *New York Times* that “we need a tight new set of requirements,” noting that “The issue is not so much the content of the general education curriculum but how seriously the campuses take it. ... In science, students can fudge even that, because there are courses that don’t cover basic knowledge and aren’t rigorous.

⁵ http://www.hecommission.state.ny.us/report/CHE_Final-Report_200806.pdf

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/02/nyregion/02sunny.html> and

<http://www.craigslist.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090115/FREE/901159970>

They're very specialized and they're gut courses.”⁷ The *Times* also quoted opponents of the proposed core. They included trustee Arnold Gardner, Binghamton president Lois DeFleur, and Vincent Aceto, then-president of SUNY's faculty senate. Voicing concerns about costs and institutional autonomy, critics of the proposed core worried that the board was overstepping its authority in potentially devastating ways. There should have been more discussion, they argued. There's no way to pay for this, they claimed. Aceto told the *Times* that at least ten SUNY presidents were opposed to the core—but were afraid to speak up for fear of their jobs. He did not name them—and his claim hung heavily in the air.

The *Times* article captures, in a journalistic nutshell, the essential tensions that surrounded the idea of a system-wide SUNY core.

On the one hand, the board's actions—and the public comments of Salins and others—contained more than a whiff of accusation. They strongly suggested that the faculty and administrations of SUNY's sixteen four-year campuses had been academically irresponsible—so much so, in fact, that deliberative discussion and collaborative, consensual change should be put aside in favor of swift corrective action from above. On the other hand, the core's critics all but ignored the legitimate issues of educational quality that the board sought to address, focusing instead on concerns about proper procedure and resource allocation. If the board looked to some to be over-involved in curricular matters, the faculty came off as cavalier.

Meanwhile, the media had become a player in the drama, ratcheting up the already considerable strain. When SUNY faculty leader Aceto told the *New York Daily News* that “This one-size-fits-all mentality will not work for SUNY” because “We're not making widgets,” the *News* opined: “One can only guess what they were making when degree requirements varied so wildly from campus to campus and college presidents had virtually no accountability.”⁸

Once the trustees approved the core, things got so tense that for a time it looked as though the SUNY system—which was already struggling with soaring tuition, disappearing tenure-track lines, and severe cuts in state support—might implode. At one point, the SUNY faculty even passed a vote of “no confidence” in the trustees, urging Governor Pataki to dissolve the board and build a new one from scratch.⁹

That's a fascinating and instructive pre-history for a set of decisions that have acquired an exemplary status in the decade since they were made. For the fact is that today, the SUNY core owns an honored place in the history of higher education reform.

The SUNY core was one of the first to be established by a state system with multiple campuses serving dispersed, diverse populations. Columbia and the University of

⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/12/nyregion/suny-poised-to-require-core-courses.html>

⁸ http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/opinions/1998/12/27/1998-12-27_suny_cuts_to_the_core.html

⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/24/education/24suny.html?fta=y> and

<http://www.uwm.edu/~jcm/governance/suny.txt>

Chicago have excellent core programs—but they are private, single-campus institutions serving a comparatively small and exceptionally well-prepared student body. In the late '90's, examples of how to ensure consistency of quality and content across a massive, sprawling public system were nearly nonexistent. Just about the only comparable effort was in Texas, where a legislature-mandated core was established in 1999.¹⁰

Modeling how to affect a robust, flexible core within a vast statewide system, SUNY helped set a new standard for public higher education. In recent years, Oregon and Montana, among others, have also sought to follow the SUNY model to raise academic standards by replacing diffuse distribution requirements with more coherent core courses.¹¹

And while it was once nearly unthinkable to suggest that students should have less choice and more direction when fulfilling general requirements, now it is widely accepted that the smorgasbord approach to general education does students a profound disservice. My organization, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, has issued several reports over the years on the importance of substantive core curricula, and on the “hollow core” that prevails at most of our public and private colleges and universities. The American Association of Colleges & Universities, one of our foremost higher ed associations, has echoed our critique, deploring the “hollowness” of “cafeteria-style” curricula.¹² And the message is reaching the mainstream. As a recent *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece put it, “our compassless colleges” offer a “veneer of structure” but lack substance and direction; they urgently need to re-align their priorities by “crafting a core consistent with the imperatives of a liberal education.”¹³

SUNY has long been a standard bearer for public higher education. As former education secretary and scholar Chester Finn has observed, SUNY is a “pacesetter for the entire nation, and thus the world.”¹⁴ Back in the 90's, Finn urged SUNY to “send a signal throughout the land” by replacing its slack, inadequate general requirements with a solid, coherent core curriculum. And SUNY has clearly done just that.

All of this is to say that the story of SUNY's history-making curricular shift is instructive indeed. It has much to teach us about the nature of institutional change, about the lasting and cumulative value of high academic standards, and, crucially, about the delicate interplay between the responsibilities of governance and the values of academic freedom.

As I've noted here—and as members of this panel and the audience no doubt recall from personal experience—the core brought with it some institutional challenges. Those were very real, and their effects still reverberate now and again, even today. Still, it's important to recognize that, snags notwithstanding, the SUNY trustees blazed a trail and set a

¹⁰ <http://statecore.its.txstate.edu> and <http://www.colostate.edu/orgs/ucc/corecriteriafa07.pdf>

¹¹ <http://mus.edu/transfer/MUScore.asp>,

http://www.usg.edu/academic_programs/information/core_curriculum, and

<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/04/09/georgia>

¹² <http://www.aacu.org/about/statements/SpellingsFinalDraft.cfm>

¹³ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118895528818217660.html>

¹⁴ Empire Foundation, op. cit., p. iii

standard for both good governance and necessary curricular reform at public universities across the country. Most pressingly, the SUNY trustees established a strong precedent for how boards can function as true fiduciaries—in this case, by raising academic standards in an integrated, coordinated way—while still respecting the tradition of institutional autonomy and the principle of academic freedom. The trustees stipulated the broad structure of the new core requirements, but they did not dictate the content of core courses. Instead, they scrupulously left the specifics of implementation and assessment to the faculties at individual campuses (and it's worth noting, here, that the resulting SUNY Assessment Initiative has drawn high praise for the skill with which it meets external calls for accountability while also placing a more internal, developmental emphasis on improving general education).¹⁵

The trustees thus struck a balance between engaged oversight and respect for faculties' independence when it comes to pedagogical prerogatives and peer review. And that's no small feat. Just a few weeks ago, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* listed the main reasons why the academy is feeling the economic crisis so acutely. Near the top of the list was “rubber-stamp governing boards” that “nod off on the job” and so betray their roles as “fiduciaries.”¹⁶ The *Chronicle's* point, that trustees must be active and engaged, is not news at SUNY—which, to its great credit, was ahead of its time on matters of responsible governance as well as curricular reform.

I am pleased to be part of this celebration and look forward to sharing views with you.

¹⁵ <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2007/06/26/penn>

¹⁶ <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i27/27a00101.htm>