

A White Paper

The New Core, History and Content-Driven Learning

Institutions must engage in continuous strategic planning in all the areas of their operations and activity. In universities and other institutions of learning, the curriculum is a fluid and constantly changing menu of courses and strategies designed to educate students for their future and to insure society is well educated and equipped to maneuver into the new and changing world of the 21st century. ACU has recently embarked on a core revision effort that has been designed to improve the educational foundation during the first two years of matriculation and at the same time, introduce students to “big questions” and interdisciplinary conversations that encourage new ideas and explore relationships in a global community.¹ Concerns have emerged as the university has begun implementation of the new core within the depressed financial environment. The proposed adjustments to the core put forth by Dr. Straughn during the fall 2011 semester,² together with a growing concern within the faculty on how the core is working, suggest that we need to do a better job of equipping our students academically. We suggest that the background knowledge supplied by the study of history should be recognized as indispensable in this regard.

¹ “The Core,” Abilene Christian University website, <http://www.acu.edu/academics/core/> (Accessed January 8, 2012).

² Faculty Senate Blog, Abilene Christian University, <http://blogs.acu.edu/facultysenate/2011/12/05/core-revisions-dec-2011/> (Accessed January 8, 2012).

As we look back on what we have developed in the the new Core and as we look to the future, we need to ask whether some unintended consequences have resulted from our efforts. We are leaving students ill-equipped for their journey through upper level coursework. Are we producing graduates who lack key components of a liberal arts education? The de-emphasis of both history and foreign language in the ACU curriculum has not served our students well, in our view.

Content-Driven Learning

At an Adams Center session during fall 2011, Bob McKelvain talked about ways we can help students learn to study, analyze, and retain information. He said recent research has challenged popular pedagogies that deemphasize content-driven learning and favor teaching students higher forms of thinking such as conceptual mapping. Last February in the journal *Science*, Jeffrey Karpicke and Janell Blunt co-authored an article entitled, "Retrieval Practice Produces More Learning than Elaborative Studying with Concept Mapping."³ By "retrieval practice" the authors mean simple memory work, and they demonstrated that students who practiced it out-performed by a large margin those in other groups not only in terms of retention of facts, but also in terms of higher forms of thinking. In other words, the best way to "teach students how to think," is to get them engaged with bodies of knowledge, so that they have something to think about (and with).

These findings align with work done by E.D. Hirsch in the last couple of decades. Hirsch's "content-rich pedagogy" recently has been associated with the "Massachusetts Miracle"

³ Jeffrey D. Karpicke, *et al.*, "Retrieval Practice Produces More Learning than Elaborative Studying with Concept Mapping," *Science*, Volume 331, February 14, 2011, pp. 772-775

in education reform.⁴ Hirsch has found that students' "background knowledge"⁵ in various traditional fields predicts analytical skills and general literacy. So how do content-rich history courses come into play in a core designed to foster higher levels of thinking?

A Dialogue with All Disciplines

Given the growing evidence for a return to a foundation of learning within a content-rich environment, history offers much to the integrated core sequence. The historian, as a proactive team member in the academy at ACU, leads students in the process of historical inquiry that yields results that can be incorporated into dialogue with all disciplines. That is the essential outcome of an inquiry that places historical questions into the context of life and life's experiences, incorporating a historiographic tapestry of man's existence across the ages. A sequence of broad historical surveys can prepare the student for the Core process and facilitate the expansion of the possibilities in integrated classrooms.

It is true that the Core courses include some teaching of basic historical facts. But some of us who have taught the Core courses have found our students' progress continually delayed and diverted by the fact that the overwhelming majority of them enter the class with virtually no historical background knowledge. As a consequence, instead of spending a week on e.g., *Paradise Lost* – which would be short shrift in any case – we must devote perhaps a third of our class time (and/or student's reading time) informing them about who John Milton was, what literary predecessors he drew on, what was happening in England during the 17th century, and so

⁴ Sol Stern, E. D. Hirsch's Curriculum for Democracy: A content-rich pedagogy makes better citizens and smarter kids. *City Journal*, Volume 19, No. 4, Autumn 2009.

⁵ Ibid.

on. We have less time for the rather difficult text itself, and most of our students – having heard but not digested the background and context material – have already expended a good portion of their mental energy. In other words, some of us have experienced in Core classrooms the basic point that Hirsch is making.

Take for example, the western civilization courses in our survey sequence. They expose students to humanity’s deepest questions as posed from Ancient Mesopotamia, to Rome, to *dar-al-Islam*, to the Francophone Atlantic, forcing students to engage with a broad range of perspectives, worldviews, and faiths in their historical settings. These courses provide crucial context for many of the ideas and great thinkers that students are exposed to in the integrated core classes. Civilization is thus a complement to Core, not made redundant by it and acts as a valuable and effective venue for challenging students’ pre-conceived notions about faith, Christian history, the construct of “Western” identity, and the modern and postmodern paradigms. These ideas are raised and challenged as the historical inquiry examines these philosophies in their context and from primary source materials—a rigorous and coherent framework, supported by a comprehensive knowledge base and historiographic set piece, that sets the table for expansion and consideration of “big questions” in the integrated courses.

In 2011 Robert Wood and others presented a compelling argument for restoration of Western Civilization into the base curriculum. When faced with the questions of “how we got here from there” and “why does it matter,” Wood and his colleagues struck a common chord as they provided a rationale for the urgency to get the curriculum right.

Why Study Western Civilization?⁶

Globalization and world history rightly understood provide new reasons for restoring a focus on Western Civilization, but these aren’t the only reasons to bring back the subject. Western Civilization is worth studying in its own right

⁶ Quoted from Glenn Ricketts, et al, *The Vanishing West 1964-2010*, National Association of Scholars, 2011.

for its unique pattern of creativity. This argument has been made perhaps most forcefully in recent scholarship by the Canadian historical sociologist Ricardo Duchesne.⁷

The academic disciplines that we work with, including the individual sciences, are almost all Western creations. Many of humanity's highest achievements in philosophy, engineering, and the arts are Western. The study of Western history can hardly proceed without coming to terms with its catalog of disastrous decisions and great follies too, but the abiding reason to study the West is that the West continues to matter.⁸

It has shaped and continues to shape the world politically, economically, intellectually, legally, and aesthetically. The worst tyrannies of our time, even in the non-Western world, are typically rooted in Western ideas. Think of Mao's, Kim Il-Sung's, and Pol Pot's appropriation of Marxism, and the Arab Baathist movement founded by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Bitar in emulation of Robespierre and the Jacobin and Fascist conceptions of national unity. This is not to limit the case for studying the history of the West to the argument that it is a key to understanding "the Rest," but to say that the West is a powerful and complex phenomenon that demands elucidation. Students who are left with scant knowledge of Western Civilization are ill-equipped to make sense of their own lives or the world around them.

What do Our Competitors Do?

It might prove helpful to look at the pattern of history within the core for five competitor schools. In each of the universities in Figure 1, its core requirements emphasize history as a key component in general education requirements. Not one of the group has eliminated history and eighty percent continues with the requirement of six hours or two courses. ACU last required six hours or two courses in the 1993-1994 catalog. The following year the core reduced the number to three hours or one course. The current core omits the history requirement altogether. A student can select three hours of history in the social science grouping from nine

⁷ Ricardo Duchesne, *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* (Boston: Brill, 2011).

⁸ [explanatory note by Ricketts, *et al* within the selected excerpt above] We recognize that some scholars draw the lines a little differently. The anthropologist Jack Goody, for example, argues that "Eurasia" is a more compelling unit of study than the West *per se*. We would be open to courses that explored approaches such as this. See Jack Goody, *The Eurasian Miracle* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

disciplines and a list of 23 competing courses. Most graduates can leave ACU with no history on their transcript.

GEN ED REQUIREMENTS AT COMPARABLE OR COMPETITOR UNIVERSITIES	HISTORY REQUIRED	NOTES
Harding	2 courses	One US and one Civilization survey course
Baylor	2 courses	Choice of two US or two World history courses
TCU	1 course	“Historical Traditions” in their core
Texas A&M (College Station)	2 courses	Two US survey history courses
Texas Tech	2 courses	Two US survey history courses
ACU	0 courses required option only	6 hours required in 1993-1994 catalogue 3 hours required in 1994-1995 catalogue Current core—0 hours required, 3 hours from history can be selected from a list of 9 disciplines and 23 courses in the social science grouping

Figure 1
Gen Ed Requirements at Comparable or Competitor University

At Pepperdine and Lipscomb, the trend continues with only Pepperdine exceeding the requirements of all institutions in Figures 1 and 2. Pepperdine requires 12 hours of history with historians teaching all four courses.

GEN ED REQUIREMENTS AT OTHER C OF C SISTER INSTITUTIONS	HISTORY REQUIRED	NOTES
Pepperdine	4 courses required 1 course option from menu	One US history survey course and three Western Humanities courses required One history course can be selected from a menu All courses taught by historians
Lipscomb	2 courses	Choice of two US or two World history courses
ACU	0 courses required option only	6 hours required in 1993-1994 catalogue 3 hours required in 1994-1995 catalogue Current core—0 hours required, 3 hours from history can be selected from a list of 9 disciplines and 23 courses in the social science grouping

Figure 2
Gen Ed Requirements at Other Church of Christ Sister Institutions

None of the universities examined in Figures 1 and 2 matches Pepperdine's coverage in their core requirements. It is clear, however, that all these universities, with the single exception of ACU, value the support of history for their general education requirements. ACU is in the minority in this grouping and moving against the emerging pedagogical trends.

A Proposal, A Solution

We are concerned that the de-emphasis of history – and of foreign languages, we might add – has undermined the quality of an ACU liberal arts education. Based on the arguments presented in this white paper and the emerging awareness that history courses add to the foundational support network of general education, the History Department urges the consideration of these summary points:

- 1) content-rich course methodology should be part of our core curriculum
- 2) courses in Western Civilization and American history can provide valuable context and background that are essential for the integrated core experience
- 3) a true liberal arts education, central to our global mission, requires instruction in history and foreign language

A proposal to adjust the Core is pending before our councils with a vote soon. The Faculty Senate Blog outlined the plan to change the Core:⁹ to move the 2-hour Bible 440 into Core 3 and rename it BCORE as a 3-hour course. According to the proposal, Bible faculty participation would be required in the teaching team. CORE 1 and CORE 2 will combine as a 3-

⁹ Faculty Senate Blog, <http://blogs.acu.edu/facultysenate/2011/12/05/core-revisions-dec-2011/> (Accessed January 8, 2012).

hour course. The new integrated core sequence would include BCORE and COMBINED CORE120/220 with a total of 6 hours, leaving 5 hours left over from the original set of three integrated core courses and the 2-hours of Bible. The History faculty is recommending that ACU consider taking the following two steps:

Step 1: Return History to the general education requirement list at the 100-299 level

and

Step 2: Prefix the new Core 120/220 class as HCORE with history faculty participation required on the teaching team