CHAPTER SEVEN: THE CORE CURRICULUM

I. Overview

Brooklyn College's Core Curriculum was inaugurated in the fall of 1981. Its adoption followed five years of faculty debate about the goals of undergraduate education and the role of humanistic and liberal studies in the undergraduate curriculum. A belief in the value of shared intellectual experience emerged as the philosophical underpinning for a set of thirteen courses in the liberal arts and sciences which have been the centerpiece of the Brooklyn College baccalaureate for the past 17 years. Since its inception, the Core Curriculum has received national interest and praise; in 1993 a national survey ranked it the best core program among public institutions of higher learning.

While, with the exception of Core Studies 9, these 13 courses have not altered with respect to title, all have undergone various degrees of evolution and change. New course materials have been adopted, reading anthologies have been revised, and teaching technology has been integrated into classroom presentations and out-of-class activities. Course syllabi have been revised in response to new teaching materials and developments within disciplinary fields. Teaching strategies have become more diverse, with techniques such as collaborative learning and e-mail conferencing supplementing traditional lecture presentations.

Recent statements and events suggest that the Core Curriculum continues to enjoy strong support from the faculty and administration. Offering and staffing sections of Core courses are institutional priorities; Core-related activities, such as the annual faculty development seminar, are supported and funded by the administration; and when the Board of Trustees mandated a reduction in the credits required for the baccalaureate degree from 128 to 120 credits, none of the eight credits came out of the Core program.

In response to faculty concern that creation of new interdisciplinary programs might divert resources from the Core Curriculum, President Lattin sent a letter to the entire faculty assuring that such new programs are "a post-Core concept that will have no effect on the superb general education Core Curriculum that has brought such prestige to Brooklyn College. . . . The Core Curriculum has been the most important element of the Brooklyn College education that has enabled our students to succeed in the country's best professional and graduate schools. The Core Curriculum is and will remain the cornerstone of our undergraduate education, a counterweight to the vocational emphasis of much contemporary baccalaureate education."

II. Administration and Oversight

The Dean of Undergraduate Studies administers the Core Curriculum, but curricular oversight is in the hands of various faculty bodies. Over the past five years these have included:
A. Faculty Council Committee on the Core Curriculum: seven elected faculty and two students representing day and evening student bodies. Frequency of meetings ranges from weekly to monthly. The committee submits an annual report to Faculty Council.

B. Core Coordinators: generally one faculty coordinator for each Core course, appointed by the college president on nomination by chairs of sponsoring departments. In addition to calling meetings of Core faculty for a particular course, submitting budget requests, and other tasks related to the day-to-day running of individual Core courses, the coordinators generally meet at least once each semester with the Core Committee, submit an annual report to the Core Committee, and often meet among themselves to exchange ideas on various subjects. Since the elimination of reassigned time for core coordinators in 1993, Core Coordinators have not been compensated with released time because of budgetary constraints.

C. Joint Task Force on the Core Curriculum: a seven-person ad hoc faculty committee in the 1993-94 academic year, charged with reviewing and assessing the Core program, identifying administrative problems, and proposing appropriate resolutions. In its interim report (December 1993), the task force identified four main issues confronting the Core Curriculum: 1) Commonality: the interpretation of "common experience" within different courses; 2) Coherence: the linkages, formal and informal, between Core courses; 3) Context: connections between the course content and our heterogeneous student body; and 4) Implementation: problems related to staffing and class size, and the relation of the Core program to majors and electives. The final report (May 1994) presented recommendations in the following areas: 1) Governance: proposes replacing the Core Coordinators and Core Curriculum Committee with a new Core Executive Committee; 2) Revising the present core: offers a number of specific recommendations for changes in Core regulations and implementation and advocates the formation of subcommittees representing Core courses with similar disciplinary perspectives to pursue possible changes in course content and pedagogy; and 3) Case for a New Core: identifies some basic principles that could be used to construct a new Core. Issues raised in these reports were discussed at the June 1994 faculty development seminar and by the Committee on the Core Curriculum during the 1994-1995 academic year. A number of the changes and initiatives described below are products of those discussions.

III. Faculty Development

Every June since the Core Curriculum was instituted, faculty have been invited to participate in a faculty development seminar sponsored through the Office of the Provost. For many years the agenda and program for these seminars were set by a special planning committee, but more recently have been determined by the Faculty Council Core Committee.

IV. Changes and Initiatives since 1992

Every individual course in the Core Curriculum has been scrutinized at various times, sometimes at the initiative of its faculty, sometimes of the Core Committee. Most changes have involved revision of syllabi and anthologies of readings, adoption of new course materials, and
introduction of innovative teaching technologies. Changes in the structure and administration of the core program over the past five years include the following:

A. Abolishing the Tier Structure  Administrative problems, combined with considerable evidence that Core Studies 6-10 did not build systematically on skills and content learned in Core Studies 1-5 and that the interests and abilities of individual students were not best served by deferring certain core courses, led Faculty Council to abolish the tier structure. Students now have greater flexibility in fulfilling Core requirements.

B. Block Programming  Most entering freshmen now register for a program that includes a block of English composition and two core courses. The Office of the Undergraduate Dean reports that block programming greatly simplifies the registration process and has resulted in a significantly higher rate of retention. The cumulative GPA and credits earned were also higher for the blocked students. The goal of bringing faculty in blocked sections together to coordinate assignments and to identify topics and concepts for cross-course reference has been more recently addressed in faculty development initiatives of the Dean's office.

C. Redesign of Science Labs in Block Programs  Core science courses included in block programming have been restructured so that the labs fit into a 75-minute class pattern. This has addressed two long-standing student complaints, namely, scheduling difficulties resulting from 2-hour labs, and the perceived disparity between hours and credits (37 hours of lecture and lab for 2 credits). However, non-blocked sections continue to require the 2-hour lab.

D. Redesign of Core 9  Core 9 was originally conceived as a team-taught course staffed by three faculty members representing the world areas of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Repeated scheduling problems and the absence of qualified teachers reduced the number of world areas to two taught by two faculty members. The Pacific Islands were added as a subject area.

E. ESL Sections of Core Studies 1 and 3  Year-long versions of Cores 1 (1.1, 1.2) and 3 (3.1, 3.2) allow ESL students more time to absorb content and allow instructors to devote more attention to language acquisition. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the high success rate of students in these special sections justifies the additional cost (for a 3-credit course, 6 hours of faculty workload time).

F. Technology: Faculty are exploring uses of computer-assisted instruction, e-mail conferencing, research on the internet, distance learning, and other technological applications in teaching and learning. A Task Force on Virtual Core has been meeting under the direction of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies. The summer development session of 1998 had as its topic the Core Curriculum and educational technology. In addition, a WebCore initiative is now in its third year, sponsoring weekly meetings of faculty (current attendance is about twenty) to discuss curricula, swap ideas, and learn technology. Its activities are presented on a website: http://academic.brooklyn.Cuny.edu/webcore/.

V. Planning for the Future
The continued vitality of the Core program requires continued support of the mechanisms for its ongoing review. The following recommendations have grown out of the current study:

A. **Institute a review of the role and responsibilities of coordinators:** The Core Coordinators often perform unique and important functions in stimulating dialogue among faculty both within and across Core courses and in serving as a link between Core faculty and the Faculty Council Committee on the Core Curriculum. However, a number of tasks formerly charged to Core Coordinators are often now being performed by department chairs. A reexamination of the role and responsibility of Core Coordinators should be undertaken to determine the advisability of reinvigorating the position and once again awarding released time. Possible tasks to be assigned to Coordinators might include the following: periodic meetings with other Coordinators to exchange information and ideas; regular meetings with the Core Committee; meetings with faculty of the course under the Coordinator's purview; orientation and supervision of adjuncts teaching the Core; regular communication with Core tutors in the Learning Center; overseeing special projects such as revising course readers, preparing common portions of exams, and reviewing syllabi.

B. **Reinstate a separate planning committee for faculty development seminars:** Given the busy agenda of the Core Committee, planning the annual faculty development seminar should again be in the hands of a specially appointed committee.

C. **Student demographics:** The student population at Brooklyn College has undergone major changes since the institution of the Core Curriculum in 1981, principally the increasing percentage of immigrant students and diverse racial and ethnic groups. A freshman class today comes to Brooklyn College with educational and cultural backgrounds which are quite different from those of students in 1981. The Core's design had allowed for this development through appropriate courses, such as Core Studies 3, which applies methods of the social sciences to the study of American society "in terms of such specific issues as social class, race, gender, community, equality, and opportunity"; Core Studies 2.1, 2.2, and 6, all of which were directed to include non-Western materials and perspectives; and especially Core Studies 9, dealing with a variety of cultures. Moreover, Core Studies 4, designed with a global orientation, has over the years increased this emphasis through periodic revisions of its syllabus. The Core's design is such as to continue to encourage faculty to "broaden awareness, cultivate the intellect, and stimulate the imagination" by introducing students in the most culturally inclusive way to the whole range of liberal arts and sciences.

D. **Transfer students:** Transfer students, whether from institutions outside CUNY or community colleges within the university, are a significant and welcome portion of our student population. The policy and practice with respect to accepting transfer credits for core courses should be examined to determine whether students' previous work is being appropriately and expeditiously evaluated.

E. **Flexibility within the core:** Although the Core has been commended in a recent external study for its comprehensive liberal arts and sciences scope, the absence of an Economics course was also noted. It is possible to consider such an addition. Although a member of the Economics department served on the committee that designed Core Studies 3 and the department approved the original syllabus, the department decided not to participate in teaching the course because of departmental staffing needs. It may be that this decision should be revisited. Several respondents in
the survey of recent graduates made for this self study expressed a desire for an Economics option in the Core Curriculum.

F. Common concepts: Among the suggestions proposed by the 1993-1994 Core Committee was the development of versions of Core courses which would share common concepts and methodologies but would be taught through different topics announced in the schedule of classes. Now the Freshman Year College has its Faculty Fellows promote communication and collaboration among teachers in Core courses connected by block scheduling. A recent New Visions grant provides for planning the use of a common theme, drawn from issues of race, class, and gender, in a program block of Core Studies 3 and 9, a course in Health and Nutrition Sciences, and English 1.

G. Impact of the Core on majors and nonCore departments and programs: The 1987 Middle States' Evaluation Team report refers to a possible reduction of interest and resources in interdisciplinary programs and a draining off of students from certain areas. That this concern is being met is evident in the action of Faculty Council last year to raise two interdisciplinary "dual major" programs, American Studies and Women's Studies, together with a third dual major, Journalism, to the status of full majors. The report also notes a tension between the performing arts and the Core. In fact, most of the liberal arts and science departments which shoulder the college's commitment to the Core have themselves over the past ten years suffered a reduced ability to staff courses for their majors. During the long period of faculty attrition, it has been inevitable that the effort to balance needs between Core departments and non-Core departments would be strained. In the past two years, however, Brooklyn College has begun to recover the ability to replace faculty losses. While the college has necessarily assigned more of its limited resources to departments with large numbers of majors, it is anticipated that in planning for the future viability of the Core smaller liberal arts and sciences departments, with a smaller number of majors, will be replenished with sufficient faculty to sustain the college's commitment to the Core.