

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, nonprofit organization dedicated to working with alumni, donors, trustees, and education leaders across the country to support the study of the liberal arts, uphold high academic standards, safeguard the free exchange of ideas on campus, and ensure that the next generation receives an intellectually rich, high-quality education at an affordable price.

ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance® (IEG), 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, focusing on academic excellence, academic freedom, and accountability.

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WHY A CORE?

How can college effectively prepare graduates for a demanding global job market and for the challenges of citizenship in a free society? In the past, American college students could count on receiving a broad, rigorous education that developed their knowledge and thinking well beyond what they learned in high school. At the heart of that education was a *core curriculum*: a set of required courses in the arts and sciences that introduced students, usually in their first few semesters, to the most important events, ideas, and works known to humanity. These courses provided students with a common frame of reference and with skills in writing, critical thinking, mathematics, and science that sustain intellectual inquiry and exchange. They opened the gate for deep, sophisticated understanding. Such courses inevitably take up the enduring questions of human experience: How should I live? What is happiness? How should I treat others?

Today, however, many students graduate from college with less knowledge about mathematics and science, about the world, our nation, and our culture, than was expected of high schoolers 50 years ago. What Will They Learn?[®], a project of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), investigates curricula at over 1,100 colleges and universities. We have found that 72% of these schools do not require a literature survey. Forty percent do not require mathematics, 80% do not require either U.S. government or history, and


less than 4% require economics. They fail to build the foundation, the scaffolding, for the lifelong learning that the modern world will require.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities' 2023 employer survey revealed that employers, not surprisingly, are often dissatisfied with the preparation of newly hired college graduates. Employers identified significant gaps in critical thinking skills (30% skills gap), aptitude for data analysis and interpretation (19% skills gap), complex problem-solving skills (24% skills gap), and effective written communication (10% skills gap). These findings are corroborated by the National Association of Colleges and Employers' 2023 Job Outlook survey, which indicated that many recent college graduates have not mastered the three areas rated most important by employers: critical thinking (39% skills gap), communication (49% skills gap), and teamwork (19% skills gap). All of these are abilities that a well-designed core curriculum will impart.

WHAT IS A CORE?

Many colleges claim to offer general education. Yet most, in fact, have abandoned a traditional core curriculum in favor of a veritable smorgasbord of courses, including many that are hyper-specialized, too narrow to build fundamental skills and knowledge. In reality, all that many colleges today require is for students to take courses in several subjects other than their major: the so-called “distribution requirements.”

Distribution requirements represent a system in which students select one or more courses from broad academic areas like “Humanities,” “Quantitative Reasoning,” or “Arts and Culture.” Within each distribution area, students often have dozens or even




hundreds of course options from which to choose. At Pennsylvania State University, for example, students can choose from over 480 different classes to fulfill their “United States Cultures” requirement, including “World Media Systems” and “Introduction to Video Game Culture.” This wide range of options may be entertaining, but too often it allows students to graduate with only a thin and patchy education, with no guarantee that they have mastered a core set of facts or skills. Without strong curricular requirements, students do not learn what they need to know to be informed citizens, effective workers, and lifelong learners.

As a trustee, you can change this. You are responsible for the academic well-being of your institution. While fully respecting shared governance and academic freedom, there are steps you can take to guarantee that your students benefit from a core curriculum that will serve them well. Working in partnership with the administration and faculty, you and your colleagues can establish the framework for stronger and more coherent core requirements.

This guide will explain how.

WHAT SHOULD BE IN A CORE?

A core curriculum ensures that all students at a college or university study a specified set of subjects, far better defined than a distribution area. If the core is designed properly, students will master the key skills and knowledge of the essential academic disciplines. There are different types of “cores” at different institutions. In some cores, all students take the same established courses or course sequences (such as the famous Literature Humanities core at Columbia University).



In other types of core curricula, students must still take courses or sequences in specified subjects, like American government, but can choose from a short list of carefully vetted options.

ACTA has identified seven core subjects that form the essential foundation of skills and knowledge on which an American college education should be built. These are Composition, Literature, (intermediate-level) Foreign Language, U.S. Government or History, Economics, Mathematics, and Natural Science. Our What Will They Learn?[®] project grades schools on the strength of their core curricula according to how many of these subjects students are required to study before graduation. Other subjects that an institution might include in its core curriculum include philosophy, world history, fine arts, religious studies, and Western Civilization.

A well-designed core curriculum, such as the What Will They Learn?[®] model, aims to give students the broad base of knowledge they need to succeed in our globalized economy and prepares them for urgent contemporary challenges. Increased globalization requires greater depth of communication across languages and cultures. As STEM—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—fields continue to rise in prominence, scientific literacy increasingly becomes indispensable, and understanding the human experience (literature, languages, and history) will be essential to distinguish humans from machines and guide ethical uses of technology. A common core of knowledge among citizens, especially knowledge of American institutions and history, can help reduce political polarization by facilitating discussion and open discourse.

The contents of a strong general education need not be static. The key is to include fundamental courses that provide a foundation, not only for subsequent coursework, but also for a lifetime of learning.


HOW WILL A CORE BENEFIT MY INSTITUTION?

A core curriculum will benefit your institution in at least three 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 shared course of study steers dining hall and late-night conversations among students toward what everyone is reading. It builds a culture in which great ideas are more compelling and engaging than celebrity gossip. Former University of Rochester president George Dennis O'Brien put 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 plan 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.

The core binds students to each other and the institution, creating lifelong memories that all graduates will share. By insisting on a strong core curriculum, you will give your university a comparative advantage over others that do not develop the “signature” courses that affect students' lives in such a deep way.



Second, building a strong core curriculum can build a stronger academic community. Developing and teaching a core curriculum encourages collegiality in the professoriate, spurring faculty to address the fundamental question of what it should mean to be a graduate of the institution, what it means to be an *educated* person. Sometimes, the core curriculum will inspire the development of team-taught courses. Such discussions and common goals bring the faculty together and give *them* a shared intellectual experience as they prepare one for their students.

Finally, a core gives students the world. A curriculum drawn from the greatest human experiences and achievements frees students from the tyranny of “presentism,” the intellectual habit of seeing all history from the perspective of current issues and ideas. Great books are great precisely because they transcend time and place and speak to ageless questions about the human condition. A strong core curriculum especially benefits those students who, without it, would never experience the power of empirical science and the words and ideas that have inspired and comforted so many throughout human history. In college, students can engage, firsthand and in depth, with primary documents, moving beyond the two or three paragraphs allotted to Julius Caesar or George Washington or Rosa Parks in their high school textbook. They can go from studying basic high school science to experiencing advanced, hands-on work in the laboratory. They can gain technical expertise, valuable skills, and mature into adults with real character and intellectual substance.

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

WHAT CAN TRUSTEES DO?

Each part of an institution has a role to play in setting or revising core curricular requirements. Just as faculty have expertise in their specialties and administrators understand the day-to-day needs of the institution, board members are almost always leaders in economic, professional, and civic life. Such a board has a broad understanding of the skills that future graduates will need to thrive. Indeed, trustees have a fiduciary obligation to ensure that students receive the kind of solid, coherent education that prepares them to succeed in a world that will look very different in 10, 20, or 30 years. In addition, boards have a responsibility to ensure that all aspects of the institution are aligned with its mission. This statement can be the lodestone for any curricular review, and boards need to make certain that current (or proposed) requirements serve the mission.

Attempts by boards to strengthen the core curriculum will often encounter obstacles. You may be told that the distribution requirements fulfill the same purpose and that a broad list of available courses makes students happy. You may be accused of ignoring students' need for vocational preparation because a core will require credit hours devoted to topics outside the immediate goal of job preparation. You may be warned that a core will prompt interdepartmental disputes over who receives core money and who has to teach freshmen.

But do not give up! Siloed campus decision-making often results in a fragmented and ineffective curriculum, but by partnering with experienced and dynamic members of the faculty and administration, trustees can help break the deadlock and facilitate the adoption

of stronger and more effective requirements. Healthy compromises can promote the shared learning of essential skills, allow some student choice, and create equitable department budgets, without increasing the number of credits it takes to complete a degree. These solutions exist, and if boards assemble a team that is truly invested in improving student learning on campus, they will be found.

The following are steps you can take to ensure a quality core.

- 1. Obtain Information.** Find out what core or distribution requirements your institution has and how many courses will satisfy those requirements.
 - Does the current curriculum provide a common foundation of knowledge for students to share and on which advanced courses can build?
 - Are course options sufficiently selective to ensure that students are given a solid base in key topics, such as literature, science, mathematics, American history and government, economics, and foreign language? Or do they include niche, over-specialized, or even negatory studies?
 - Do course and distribution requirements align with the institution's mission and vision statement?

These key questions should be used to inform subsequent board discussions and provide a foundation for any suggested improvements.

- 2. Start a Board Discussion.** While information is being gathered, the board or its academic affairs committee should discuss what it would like to

see in a strong general education curriculum over several meetings. Examine the institution's existing requirements and consider inviting outside experts to provide a national perspective. Bring in experts from other institutions who understand how to build and maintain an excellent core curriculum.

- 3. Partner with Your President and Provosts.** In order to strengthen core requirements, the board and president must work together. The board should make it clear that it will depend on the president to provide leadership, communicate with the provost and deans, and charge the faculty to develop criteria and an implementation plan for a new or revised core. Reach out to key partners early in this process, and make sure that they are tasked with updating the board or committee on their progress at each board or relevant committee meeting.
- 4. Form a Faculty Working Group.** It is imperative that the faculty discuss which subjects a core should include and what skills the core should cultivate. Task the president and provosts to form a working group of faculty members from a diverse selection of departments and schools who will report their suggestions within a reasonable time frame 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 suggestions. Using that information, the board should adopt a framework of essential subjects and skills for the core curriculum. Remember that as the ultimate governing authority, the board can adopt a framework with which the faculty may not agree. However, note that this power should only be

exercised rarely and with good reason: Clearly communicating your objectives is vital.

- 6. Request a Specific Curricular Proposal.** Ask the president and faculty to develop a detailed curriculum within the broad framework adopted earlier. When the curriculum comes before board review, keep in mind the key questions outlined in Step 1. Do not be afraid to send the plan back to the faculty with additional questions, suggestions, or amendments with requests for comments.
- 7. Oversee Implementation and Course Adoption.** Once the core curriculum has been finalized, the administration should keep the board informed of its progress toward implementation. For courses to be offered in September, they generally must be approved and announced by mid-spring. The full curricular review process should be complete within 18 months or less.
- 8. Create a Timetable with Benchmarks.** Establishing a concrete timetable will ensure that this initiative will be completed in a timely manner. Do not allow academic processes to stretch on for many months, if not years.

THE END RESULTS

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.

ACTA'S IEG IS HERE TO HELP

ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance® (IEG) draws on a broad network of higher education experts to provide information that trustees can use in making decisions for their institutions. In addition to curricular reviews, IEG offers a wide range of services, including orientations and retreats, board management seminars, and institutional assessments.

To learn more, visit www.GoACTA.org or call (202) 467-6787.

A MODEL CORE CURRICULUM (18–28 HOURS)

ACTA recommends the following coursework as essential for a robust college education in the liberal arts. Taken together, these topics equip students with a range of knowledge and core competencies that prepare them for a successful career, informed citizenship, and a fulfilling life.

These courses should be required for all students receiving liberal arts degrees, without distinction between B.A. and B.S. degrees or individual majors within those degrees. Since receiving a college-level education in each of these fields is essential, we do not recommend that students be exempted from these courses through high school-level study or standardized tests (such as the ACT or SAT).

In addition to these subjects, colleges may choose to include other subjects such as Western Civilization, world history, and fine arts.

- I. **Composition**—An introductory college writing class focused on appropriate expository style.
(3 hours)

- II. Literature**—A comprehensive literature survey or a selection of courses of which a clear majority are surveys and the remainder are literary in nature (as opposed to literary criticism or film studies). All approved courses must involve significant amounts of reading. (3 hours)
- III. Foreign Language**—Competency at the intermediate level, defined as at least three semesters of college-level study in any foreign language or an equivalent score on a college placement exam. (0–9 hours)
- IV. U.S. Government or History**—A survey course in either U.S. government or history with enough chronological and topical breadth to expose students to the sweep of American history and institutions. (3 hours)
- V. Economics**—A course covering basic economic principles, generally an introductory micro- or macroeconomics or political economy course, taught by faculty from the economics or business department. (3 hours)
- VI. Mathematics**—A college-level course in mathematics. Specific topics may vary but must involve study beyond the level of intermediate algebra or basic statistics and cover topics beyond those typical of a college-preparatory high school curriculum. (3 hours)
- VII. Natural Science**—A course in astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, physical geography, physics, or environmental science, preferably with a laboratory component. (3–4 hours)



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