Q & A about the Core Curriculum

How is the Core Curriculum different from the current general education situation?

It differs in two important respects. First, the Core Curriculum is a general education program for the entire undergraduate population at the University of Arizona. At present, general education varies from college to college; thus, students who change colleges also may find that the courses they have taken do not meet the general education requirements of their new college. Second, all current general education programs stress the selection of courses from a large menu of options in a wide range of fields, without enough attention to the coherence of the program of study, to the integration of knowledge, or to the relationship between basic skills and substantive knowledge. The Core Curriculum, in contrast, is intended to incorporate courses that provide broad, rigorous treatments of fundamental knowledge and methods of inquiry.

Doesn't `broad, rigorous treatments of fundamental knowledge' translate as `watered-down versions of discipline-based courses'?

Not at all! During the summer of 1995, over 60 faculty members worked to develop guidelines for such courses that would ensure their intellectual rigor. (These guidelines are outlined in the Phase II report published in Lo Que Pasa on November 2 and are available on the Undergraduate Education Homepage on UAInfo.)

Do you really mean that all colleges will share a single foundational curriculum? How can this be possible when their educational expectations differ so dramatically?

The Task Force on Undergraduate Education argued that, regardless of disciplinary focus, the essential purpose of an undergraduate education should be to provide our students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of mind that are the foundation of a lifetime commitment to learning, personal development, and social responsibility. The Core Curriculum is an implementation of this ideal.

I keep hearing about `tier 1' and `tier 2'. What is this `tier' idea, anyway?

The Core Curriculum has four parts -- the first tier of foundational study in three general areas (Natural Science, Traditions and Cultures, and Individuals and Societies); the second tier of disciplinary-based coursework in three general areas (Natural Science, Arts and Humanities, and Individuals and Societies); the proficiencies (Composition, Mathematics, and Second Language); and Area Studies. Each area within the First Tier includes two three-unit courses, all of which must be completed by the end of four semesters of full-time study. Each area within the Second Tier includes two three-unit courses. All undergraduates would be expected to complete two of the three segments of the Second Tier, where the exempted area is generally a function of a student's major.
The major in my department requires a lot of preparatory work at the freshman and sophomore level before the actual major courses can be taken. Won't the Core Curriculum extend the time to graduation for majors like mine?

The extension of the First Tier to the first four semesters of full-time study is an implicit recognition of the reality of such preparatory work. In addition, undergraduates majoring in Nursing, Pharmacy, Molecular and Cellular Biology, and other biologically-based sciences would be exempted from the biological sciences component of the Natural Science requirement; undergraduates majoring in Engineering, Physics, and other physical sciences would be exempted from the physical sciences component of the Natural Science requirement.

My initial understanding was that the Core Curriculum was to be designed so that all students beginning as freshmen at the University would take the same courses. The current descriptions appear to be moving away from this idea. What gives?

One beauty of the original vision was the idea that it is possible to create for new students an intellectual community. The current vision acknowledges faculty members' concerns that single monolithic courses might not draw on their strengths. However, it is possible to recreate the intellectual community for students in a different fashion by embedding the Courses in Common model in the Core Curriculum.

The Core Curriculum seems to be constructed with the idea that all University of Arizona students begin as freshmen, but many of our students transfer from other institutions. Won't transfer students be disadvantaged by the Core Curriculum?

The issue of how to accommodate the significant portion of our undergraduates who transfer from other institutions has been a central part of the discussion of the Core Curriculum from its inception. The current recommendation is that students transferring from Arizona community colleges who complete the Transfer General Education Core Curriculum (TGECC) will have met the University requirements for general education. Three options for transfer students who have not completed the TGECC suggest themselves: (1) The TGECC may serve as a model for the evaluation of transfer credit for all transfer students. Students who have not completed the TGECC will receive course by course transfer evaluation within this model. (2) Students will be required upon transfer to complete the general education program of the University or the community college. (3) The first tier and skills areas will not be a hybrid. A student will be required to complete the community college equivalents before transfer or the University program after transfer.

What about Honors students? Why should they have to take these broad general courses when they really want to begin advanced work in their prospective major?

Honors students are no different from other students in requiring rigorous foundational courses. However, the Core Curriculum should include a track for Honors students that acknowledges their particular abilities and talents.
Many students, but especially Honors students, bring AP credits. How will such credits be accommodated in the Core Curriculum?

The kind of foundational course envisioned for the First Tier is not obviously replicable by the kinds of courses represented in AP credits. These credits are probably more appropriate to introductory major courses or, perhaps, to particular disciplinary courses in the second tier. AP credits will, of course, continue to be counted towards graduation units.

The current proposal in regard to the second language is that all students will demonstrate proficiency at the second semester level. This is pretty minimal. At a time when everyone agrees that a second language is critical, isn't the University of Arizona moving in the wrong direction?

For every student graduating from the University of Arizona to be fluent in a second language is a truly laudable goal, but it cannot even be considered unless students come to the University with more language training than is currently the case. The new entrance requirements to the University, to be implemented in Fall 1998, will require that students take two years of a single language in high school. The second language component of the Core Curriculum, as proposed by the team working on this issue last spring, builds on this change and moves beyond the specification of ‘seat time’ to proficiency. Further, many majors and perhaps even some colleges will continue to require further study in a second language. Tying language study more closely to major coursework should make it more relevant for students.

I haven't heard much about mathematics in the Core Curriculum. Are students going to be required to take mathematics at the University?

All undergraduates would be expected to complete a mathematics course. Entry level students would choose one of three mathematics strands, according to their interests and preparation:

- The ‘G’ strand: Those students whose major requires general knowledge in mathematics only would take Mathematics in Modern Society. This is a topics course which naturally lends itself to the possibility of different sections according to the interests of different groups of students.
- ‘M’: Those students whose major requires moderate knowledge in mathematics would take Finite Mathematics, Brief Calculus, or a statistics course, where the choice is determined by the major selected. Students in this group would be expected to come from Architecture, BPA, Pharmacy, or certain majors in SBS.
- ‘S’: Those students whose major requires substantial knowledge of mathematics would take calculus. This group would be comprised largely of students in Engineering and Science.

You say that one goal of the Core Curriculum is to reduce the difficulty students can face when they change colleges and/or majors. But if colleges and majors can impose different language or mathematics requirements, won't that just reintroduce the problem in a different guise?
A student's mathematical sophistication and facility with a second language determine many of his/her academic options. The better the background in these two areas, the more options a student has. Thus, the best advice to all students is to aim as high as possible in language and mathematical training in high school and to come to the University prepared to begin calculus and to move into junior level language study. With such a background and given the Core Curriculum, a student can change colleges or majors without having to backtrack on foundational courses.

**Who is going to teach these Core Curriculum courses?**

Given the large number of students requiring general education, the current distribution of faculty among the colleges, and the situation that faculty in several colleges are not now involved in the general education program, the delivery of general education by faculty members is currently compromised. The general education program is arguably at the heart of the educational offerings at the University, a program that should have very high priority among teaching obligations, a program that should involve the teaching interests of all colleges. The Core Curriculum approach recognizes these arguments and provides a mechanism whereby all faculty, whatever their collegiate affiliation, could participate.

**How can I teach a Core Curriculum course?**

Pilot courses for the Core Curriculum are being offered in Spring 1996 (see pg. 15 of the Schedule of Classes) and are being developed for Fall 1996. Faculty members who are interested in developing and piloting a Core Curriculum course should read the guidelines published in the Phase II report or on the Undergraduate Education homepage and then contact either Vice Provost Michael Gottfredson (gottfred@ccit.arizona.edu) or Associate Vice Provost Susan Steele (steele@uge.arizona.edu) on how to proceed.

**I have heard that the Core Curriculum is going to require us to rip up the mall to build an underground building. Why should this be necessary?**

The Integrated Instructional Facility is intended to be a first-year teaching building, designed to integrate classrooms, tutorial and advising services, and library resources. Since the University lacks adequate high-quality classroom space, the existence of the IIF and the Core Curriculum are logically independent, but both reflect the commitment of the University to undergraduate education. The decision to locate the IIF in the mall in front of the library was the result of many months of study of potential sites.