

Reflections on General Education and the Core Curriculum

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Note: A shortened version of this essay (without the personal notes) was prepared for the 50th Reunion of the Colgate University Class of 1970. I thank classmates James Fox and Ray Hartung for the invitation to reflect on Colgate's Core Curriculum; they and another classmate, Charles Beitz, made helpful comments during the writing.

This essay was written in 2019, for publication in the 2020 Reunion Book. Since then, the review of the Core Curriculum referred to below has been completed. See the Postscript for a letter to the editor of the Colgate *Scene* concerning the new Core Curriculum instituted for the Class of 2027.

When I arrived at Colgate I was headed for an academic career, but Colgate shaped the kind of academic I became. Although I spent [my entire career](#) in major research universities -- Harvard, Wisconsin, Arizona, Yale, and Berkeley, I focused my teaching on undergraduate education. That included the [introductory psychology course](#), which I taught for four decades (see my essay, elsewhere, on [changes in psychology over the past 50 years](#)). And it also included a commitment to general education (for graduate students as well as undergraduates). I served a term as director of Berkeley's interdisciplinary undergraduate major in Cognitive Science, a field that included philosophy, psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, computer science, and contributions from other social sciences such as the sociology of knowledge and cognitive anthropology (it is the perfect undergraduate major). When I was appointed to an endowed chair at Berkeley, it wasn't in psychology or even social science, but in undergraduate and interdisciplinary studies.

In our time, Colgate's undergraduate curriculum had two distinctive features. First, the January Special Studies Program (JanPlan), in which we pursued individual or group projects tailored to our own special interests, under the aegis of a faculty member. Second, a rigorous Core Curriculum, in which we all took a set of general education courses in common. Freshmen (as we were called back then) took a one-semester course in "Rhetoric and Writing" (Core 15), a two-semester course on "Philosophy, Religion, and Drama" (Core 17-18), and another two-semester course in physical and biological science (Core 11-12, "Problems in Natural Science"); potential science majors (including Psychology) took Core 10 ("Problems in Science") instead -- a one-semester course in the history and philosophy of science. Sophomores, Core 21, a single course on "Music, Poetry, and the Visual Arts". Juniors took a two-semester sequence on "Values and Institutions in a Changing World": Core 37 on "America as a Developed Society"; we could choose from a set of courses for Core 38, "Studies of

Emerging Countries” – China, Kenya, Nigeria, etc. Although we didn’t have that last course in common, at least we all took Core 38 at the same time, so that a student who was reading *Red Star Over China* could talk about it with his roommates who were reading *Facing Mount Kenya* or *Things Fall Apart*. By our time, a Core course for seniors (Core 49), focused on global issues and institutions, had been dropped from the curriculum. That’s seven or eight courses out of 32, plus another eight or so in our majors. Including the four JanPlans, there was still plenty of time left over for electives that might have nothing to do with our majors or vocational plans.

The Core Curriculum was not simply a fancy label for general education, and its purposes could not have been fulfilled by the usual sort of distribution requirement – a writing course and college algebra, plus two courses in the humanities, two in the natural sciences, and two in the social sciences. As Jim Smith ’70 notes in his new history of the University, *Becoming Colgate*, the Core was introduced following WWII as part of a nationwide curriculum reform, for high schools as well as colleges, intended to address the special challenges of the post-war world, including the Cold War and the emergence of new “Third World” nations from colonialism. The overarching goal was to foster an appreciation of the Western Tradition, and the development of the individual as a responsible person and citizen.

Unlike other general education curricula, which are typically assembled from introductory courses taken “off the shelf”, Core courses were designed *de novo*, and they were truly interdisciplinary in nature. They were taught by faculty who were, often, working outside – sometimes far outside -- their disciplinary specialties. The faculty themselves convened seminars in which nonspecialists could discuss the material they would be teaching with expert colleagues. But most important, the faculty worked from a common syllabus (the exceptions, I think, were Core 15 and 38). And that meant that, despite our (and their) diversity of backgrounds, interests, and goals, for our first two-plus years we were all reading, and discussing, a lot of the same material (I’m working from memory here): *The Book of Job* and *Nicomachean Ethics*; the *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* and *What is Life?*; *Capitalism and Freedom* and *The New Industrial State*; *Black Power*, *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, and the *Port Huron Statement* (this was the 1960s, remember). We were watching the same plays: *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Miser*, *Waiting for Godot*. We were looking at the same paintings and listening to the same music, including *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* and *Le Marteau Sans Maître*.

“Socrates Sucks!” wasn’t just the call to the P&R Riot; it was emblematic of a set of intellectual experiences we had in common as Colgate students – not just as the Class of 1970, but also with the classes of 1969 and 1971. Chuck Beitz ’70 has reminded me that when the student body convened in the Chapel in April of our senior year to discuss its response to the shootings at Kent State University, the proceedings were laced with references to Immanuel Kant’s “Categorical Imperative”; that could only have occurred because all four classes had read the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in Core 18.

Although JanPlan is gone (not just from the curriculum, but from history itself -- try Googling it), the Core Curriculum lives on, but in very different form (see <https://www.colgate.edu/academics/core-curriculum>, retrieved in July 2019; I understand that the Core is currently under review). The topics are different -- “Legacies of the Ancient World”, “Challenges of Modernity”, “Communities and Identities”, “Scientific Perspectives on the World”, and “Global Engagements”, but as far as I can tell from the online catalogue only the first two of these are common to all students. Students can now satisfy the “science” core, for example with a course on “Sports and the Scientific Method” or one on “Energy and Sustainability”, among many others. There are, naturally, lots of different courses on “Communities and Identities” -- just as there were many different offerings covering our Core 38 requirement on the Third World. Aside from those two courses on the ancient and modern world, it appears that today’s Colgate students have no educational experiences in common. The Core is not as central to the student experience as it used to be.

I once chaired the General Education committee at the University of Arizona, so I know full well how hard it is to hold a GenEd curriculum together -- never mind a rigorous Core Curriculum like Colgate’s. Graduate schools increasingly turn out narrow specialists, and nobody wants to teach outside their area of expertise (actually, lots of faculty don’t want to teach at all, aside from vanity courses, but that is a topic for another essay). A colleague of mine once ruefully joked that his graduate students in psycholinguistics, future faculty members all of them, were so focused on individual words that they didn’t know what a sentence is. It is difficult enough to get new faculty to teach lower-division introductory courses (now usually handed off to adjuncts and other untenured, contingent faculty), or even mid-level surveys of their own field -- never mind a Core course that might require a sociologist, for example, to teach a little economics or political science. There are lots more students at Colgate now, too, which makes it even harder to recruit enough faculty to staff Core courses of the traditional sort with relatively small classes.

Students are increasingly specialized, as well, and so focused on graduate or professional school that they balk at any requirement that is not directly relevant to their career goals. Departments encourage them choose majors in their freshman (*sic*) year (we couldn’t even take Psych 1 until we were sophomores), and pile on prerequisites which serve as little more than hurdles, while counselors encourage double majors (thus increasing the prerequisites) so that students can cover more bases for the future. This leaves precious little time for electives, much less a set of Core courses that will take up one-quarter of their transcripts and force them to grapple with Job and Kierkegaard, Milton Friedman and John Kenneth Galbraith -- never mind Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Tom Hayden, Pablo Picasso, and Pierre Boulez.

So it’s understandable that GenEd at Colgate, as at so many places (including all the institutions where I’ve taught) has devolved into a menu of courses, each of which is relevant to some broad aspect of intellectual life, but few of which are taught from a common syllabus, or taken by the student body as a whole. The economics of higher education militates against it. So does the desire of faculty to focus their teaching on their areas of expertise, and the perennial student desire to be free from any

requirements at all. But it's also understandable to mourn for what has been lost: an educational experience that is shared in common by students and faculty alike, something that specialists and nonspecialists can teach, and majors and nonmajors can learn, together -- providing an intellectual foundation for the college community; something that the whole college has in common besides the basketball team.

What might such a Core Curriculum look like for the 21st century? I'd leave Core 151 and 152, "Legacies of the Ancient World" and "Challenges of Modernity", intact. And I'd revive Core 37 and 38, devoted to the problems facing the United States as a developed society, and the issues facing developing nations in Africa, Asia, or Latin America -- or, for that matter, the European nations of the former Soviet Bloc. Maybe the "Communities and Identities" Core does that, but it doesn't have a common syllabus for everyone teaching or taking the course.

As for science, at Arizona we tried to institute a two-semester course on "The Evolution of Earth and of Life" -- the first semester covering the origins of the universe, galaxies, and the solar system, the geological evolution of the Earth, and climate change; the second semester covering biological evolution, genetics, and human origins and diversity. I'd have a quantitative reasoning requirement, but not the usual calculus course (which, while totally useless for most purposes, is now taught in high school anyway). Instead, I'd do something along the lines of "Methods for an Experimenting Society", covering basic probability and statistics, information theory, decision theory, research design, and their implications for public policy, so that the next generation of students will have a better understanding of things like public-opinion polling and clinical trials.

And finally, I'd restore some version of Core 21. The fine arts, music, and poetry are conspicuous by their absence in Colgate's current core curriculum, but they're an important part of life -- especially the kind of life that Colgate is preparing its students for. Liberal-arts students should have some general appreciation of the various forms of artistic activity, the history of various schools and movements, and so on. The course should have some cross-cultural component as well, as a further contribution to cosmopolitan cultural literacy in the face of increasing globalization. Just think of sitting back in the darkened auditorium of the Dana Center, with Bruce Berling doing his multimedia shtick -- don't you wish all current Colgate students had such an experience, if only for relief from the rest of their academic work?

There remains the problem of staffing. It is possible that Colgate is approaching the size where it is no longer possible to have a set of courses taken in common by all students. Then again, expansion of the student body should be accompanied by a commensurate expansion of the faculty. Faculty, new and old, need to understand that the Core is part of the University's institutional identity -- one of the things that makes Colgate **Colgate**. They need to understand that, in taking a job at Colgate, they are making a commitment to the Core as well as to their particular departments. The Administration, too, can foster this commitment by reducing the teaching load for faculty who teach in the Core, or giving new faculty summer salary to help them prepare for their additional responsibility.

The same principle might apply to students, who sometimes resist any requirement that is not directly relevant to their current career goals. Most of us, I'd venture, had little appreciation of the Core when we matriculated. But by the time we graduated, we were thoroughly imbued with it – it was part of our identity as Colgate graduates. It was what made us different from the graduates of other small liberal-arts colleges – and, for that matter, different from the graduates of the Ivies. We were challenged by it, we were shaped by it, we carry it with us still.

A Personal Note:

“JanPlan” was a wonderful curricular innovation, even if one of its purposes was to save the University some wintertime heating costs. In my senior year, I spent the month working on my senior honors thesis. But in my sophomore and junior years I studied Church-State relations in the dispute between Henry II and Thomas Becket, and read the entire *oeuvre* of Albert Camus (in English), respectively.

But my freshman year JanPlan takes the prize: I composed an entire Mass, for mixed voices and brass quintet, in just one month. I had converted to the Episcopal Church in high school, attended a High Church parish, sang in church and high-school choirs and played French horn in the concert band and local amateur symphony. I had these tunes running around my head, and thought I'd set them to paper. It was ridiculous, it was stupid, I was completely unprepared for the task. I had stopped piano lessons in elementary school. I had taken a semester of music theory in high school, but we only got as far as composing variations on the “Amen” cadence. But I bought Walter Piston's textbook on orchestration, rented an electronic piano to pound out the notes, and set to work. The end-product was completely derivative -- of Healey Willan (an Anglican favorite), Vaughn Williams, and even a little Stravinsky. But it was, as the French say, *execrable*.

But that's not the point. The point was that, during January, Colgate put its students on long leashes, allowing us to do almost anything intellectually respectable (and, doubtless, some things that weren't), to try our wings, to see if our reach might not exceed our grasp after all. Mine did. But I'll always be grateful to Donald Wheelock, who taught theory, history, and composition in the Music Department (now retired from Smith College), for letting me try.

And another one: My instructor for Core 15 was Frederick Busch, newly minted from Columbia, who before his untimely death at 64 acquired a well-deserved reputation as a “writer's writer”. Anyway, Fall 1966 was Fred's first year of teaching, and if I remember correctly my section of Core 15 met at 9 AM (it might have been 8!), so he was almost certainly my first college professor, and I was almost certainly one of his first college students (at least as a professor). Our first assignment was to read William Carlos Williams's “The Red Wheelbarrow” with a dictionary in hand – I

guess it was an exercise in the New Criticism (thank God post-structuralism hadn't yet arrived). Anyway, either my first essay was good enough, or it was so bad, or maybe Fred just wanted to lighten his teaching load a little, that he gave me the opportunity to opt out of his course, read a book, and write a paper on it instead. I took the deal, and read Joyce's *Dubliners*, and while I loved the book, and it's stayed with me ever since, I really wish I hadn't done it. If I had stuck with Fred I might have become a better writer, but I had plenty of good writers tutoring me in graduate school; I'm sure I would have become a better reader.

And one more: My instructor for Core 17 was M. Holmes (call me "Steve" – not that I would have dared call a professor by his or her first name) Hartshorne, who was also my freshman advisor. If Fred Busch wasn't my first experience with a college professor, Hartshorne was, and what a jolting transition from high school. Hartshorne had a provocative teaching style, which some characterized as a version of the Socratic Method, but it really wasn't: he didn't ask questions, like Professor Kingsfield in *The Paper Chase*. Instead, he made *us* ask the questions, and he would respond from the point of view of whatever author we were studying – Plato (*Euthyphro*), Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*), or whomever. Initially, I found this extremely disconcerting, because I wanted to know what *he* (Hartshorne) thought about what we were reading, and he never told us. He made us think for ourselves and work it out.

Prospective psychology majors had to take two semesters of physics or chemistry (which, in my view, served as little more than a hurdle to make sure we were serious students). I'll never forgive Hartshorne for shaming me into taking a version of the introductory physics course for which I was completely unprepared ("Baby Physics" was also available, and I should have taken it), and which required calculus to boot. I got two Ds in those courses my first semester, and almost lost a full scholarship. Jim Lloyd, who taught the physics course, saw me crossing the Quad one morning with Henry Jacobs '70, and muttered "It's the blind leading the blind" (; Hank did better in the course than I did, and became a physician).

But still, I fell for Hartshorne in a big way. I took all of his upper-division courses, including his course on "Depth Psychology and Religion", which introduced me to the work of Viktor Frankl. When I applied to graduate school, I was primarily interested in doing hypnosis research (to which I was introduced by Bill Edmonston), but I also wrote that I wanted to "quantify the concepts of existentialist theories of personality". (Burt Rosner, the department chair at Penn, from which I took my PhD in 1975, once remarked that I had been admitted just to see what I looked like.) I never got around to quantifying the concepts of existentialist theories of personality, though the insights of existentialism played an important role in my thinking about the role of cognition in personality and social interaction. In retrospect, I can also see how Hartshorne set me on the road to my research on [consciousness and unconscious processes](#) – but I had little inkling of that at the time.

And, all right, just one more: Psychology was classified as a biological science at Colgate, so I was exempt from the Core 11-12 sequence. My instructor for Core 10 was Theodore Mischel, a specialist in the philosophy of science. Mischel's class

focused mostly on physics and biology, and had little or nothing to say about psychology or the social sciences in general. But the readings were interesting. Later, Mischel moved from Colgate to SUNY Binghamton (as it was then known), which had a graduate program in philosophy. But before he left, he gave a series of seminars that foreshadowed his later books on *Understanding Others* (1974) and *The Self* (1977), and I attended them. Some of the issues discussed in that seminar resonated with material from Hartshorne's courses – especially the problem of how we understand ourselves. Later on, I became involved in the study of [social cognition](#) – the process by which we acquire knowledge of ourselves, other people, and the situations in which we encounter them, and I was also able to spend some time with Ted's brother, Walter, a pioneer in the application of cognitive psychology to problems of personality.

Those Colgate faculty – they stick with you!

Postscript:

At the time this essay was written, Colgate's Core Curriculum was undergoing its scheduled decennial review, and a revised Core Curriculum was published in 2023, applicable to the Class of 2027. The [Winter 20224 issue of Colgate Magazine](#) carried an article on the revisions. In my view, the new Core Curriculum had the same problems that I identified in the prior version – which was, briefly, that it wasn't really a *Core Curriculum*. The *Magazine* solicited comments from alumni, so I wrote a mildly critical response, which is scheduled for publication in the Spring 2024 issue:

For decades, the Core Curriculum has been a distinctive feature of Colgate's educational program. In addition to the usual freshman composition course (Core 15), my Class took six or seven Core courses, spread out over our first three years, with all students in the class taking the same courses at the same time. (We also had the late, lamented Jan Plan, but I digress.) Prospective science majors were exempt from the two-semester Core 11-12 sequence in physical and biological science; we took the one-semester Core 10 on the history and philosophy of science instead. As a result, we were all studying and discussing the same texts at the same time: the *Book of Job* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in Core 17, Janson's *History of Art* in Core 21, Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* and Galbraith's *New Industrial State* in Core 37. In Core 38, we had a choice of courses on such "emerging" countries as China, India, or Kenya; but even there, a student who was reading *Red Star Over China* could have a discussion with his roommate, who might be reading *Facing Mount Kenya*. When the whole student body met in the Chapel to consider its response to the 1970 killings at Kent State, the discussion was laced with references to Kant's "Categorical Imperative": everyone present knew what that was,

because all four classes had read Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in Core 18.

With the new Core, introduced in 2023, that has mostly disappeared. As far as I can tell, students in the Class of 2027 will have only one course in common – the “Conversations” course. The rest is, essentially, a garden-variety distribution requirement: one course each in literature, math, natural science, social science, etc. I am sure that these courses have been specifically designed or chosen to be interdisciplinary, or to connect to topics of societal concern. But there is no longer a *core* holding the entire class together and connecting it with adjacent classes. This is a great loss – to the University and to its students.

I understand that curricula must evolve, and that students don't like requirements. I am also painfully aware that, in these days of increasing specialization, it is difficult to get faculty to teach introductory courses even in their own fields -- much less to step outside their comfort zones to teach something that is truly interdisciplinary. Then again, the University has an identity too, and that identity is expressed in its curriculum. Colgate should continue to honor a commitment to the kind of Core Curriculum that makes Colgate *Colgate*, and that distinguishes its students from those of other liberal-arts colleges.

Despite my criticism of the current Core Curriculum, Colgate was, and remains, a fabulous place to go to college. When I enrolled, at the age of 17, I didn't really understand the Core Curriculum or the JanPlan. I only knew that it was a great school, the best I got into, with small classes on a beautiful campus (and a full scholarship besides). After I got there, I quickly came to appreciate both features of Colgate's curriculum – and so did most of the other students. Colgate no longer has a JanPlan, but no other school has one, either (to my knowledge). Colgate no longer has the kind of Core Curriculum that I enjoyed, but its GenEd program is still better than the ones at any of the great universities I have served as a faculty member. If I had it to do all over again... I'd do it all over again.