A USER'S GUIDE TO THE UNIVERSITY CORE CURRICULUM

WENDY L. WATSON
DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF THE CORE CURRICULUM

JANUARY 2018

A USER'S GUIDE TO THE UNIVERSITY CORE CURRICULUM
Executive Summary

- Core curriculum lays the foundation for a liberal education, giving students the skills they need to succeed in their disciplinary courses

- Bones of the University Core are dictated by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and feature six core objectives (critical thinking, communication, empirical and quantitative reasoning, teamwork, personal responsibility, and social responsibility)

- Per the THECB, the core is structured around a number of "foundation component areas" (types of classes such as math or political science or social science); each FCA is associated with specific core objectives

- Departments are responsible for creating "signature assignments" that give students an opportunity to demonstrate mastery of the core objectives

- If the department participates in the communal assessment process, they agree to give the Director of the Core occasional access to student work for purposes of assessment (assessment of the Core, not of the course)

- If the department opts for an individual assessment process, they must develop an assessment mechanism—or use the University's rubrics, assess their own students' works, and report those results in TracDat

- All requests to create a Core course, submit an existing course for inclusion in the Core, or change a Core course (including changing name, course number, etc.) must go through the university's curriculum process AND be approved by the THECB

- The THECB will only accept a single submission from the University in a calendar year (we make ours in late April)

- The Director of the Core is here to help you at every step of this process

A User's Guide to the University Core Curriculum

A Word About This Guide

This guide to the University's Core Curriculum is intentionally fairly short. You may be looking at the document thinking, "this is short?" I assure you, however, that it is. As you move through the guide, keep three things in mind: (1) There is a glossary at the end that will help you with the extraordinary level of jargon; (2) If you get to a point where you want to give up, it is likely that things will become more clear a page or so down the road; and (3) the Office of the Core Curriculum is here to answer any questions you have when you are through. As the Director of the Office of the Core Curriculum I am happy to come visit with you or your faculty to discuss the Core in general or any aspect of it. Everyone in the Office of the Provost wants to be transparent about this process and keep all departments in the loop.

What Is the University Core?

The Core Curriculum provides the foundation of the undergraduate education, giving students a breadth of knowledge that informs their later development in their chosen area of study. The specific contours of the core curriculum are mandated by the state through the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (the THECB). While some students transfer in from community college having taken a full suite of core courses (they are "core complete"), most will take at least some if not all of their core courses at UNT. We may be tempted to view these courses as service courses, but we should remember their significance in launching students' academic careers.

The Organization of the Core

The THECB defines six objectives they consider central to a college education:

1. Critical Thinking (CT): creative thinking; innovation; inquiry; and analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of information
2. Communication (COM): effective development, interpretation, and expression of ideas through written, oral, and visual communication
3. Empirical and Quantitative Skills (EQS): manipulation and analysis of numerical data or observable facts resulting in informed conclusions
4. Teamwork (TW): ability to consider different points of view and to work effectively with others to support a shared purpose or goal
5. Social Responsibility (SR): intercultural competence, knowledge of civic responsibility, and the ability to engage effectively in regional, national, and global communities

6. Personal Responsibility (PR): ability to connect choices, actions, and consequences to ethical decision-making[1]

The THECB then categorizes Core courses (largely) around more traditional disciplinary lines: communication; creative arts; language, philosophy, and culture; life and physical sciences; mathematics; American history; government/political science; and social and behavioral sciences. We refer to these categories as "foundational component areas" or FCAs.

Each FCA is tied to four of the six objectives. For example, classes that fall under the government/political science FCA are tied to the objectives of critical thinking, communication, personal responsibility, and social responsibility. Absolutely all of the FCAs are tied to critical thinking and communication; they only differ with respect to which two of the remaining four objectives they must reflect.

Foundational Component Area	Required Core Objectives
Communication	CT, COM, TW, PR
Mathematics	CT, COM EQS
Life and Physical Sciences	CT COM, EQS, TW
Language, Philosophy & Culture	CT, COM, SR, PR
Creative Arts	CT, COM, TW, SR
American History	CT, COM, SR, PR
Government/Political Science	CT, COM, SR, PR
Social Behavioral Sciences	CT, COM, EQS, SR

As part of their curriculum, students must take a specified number of credit hours in each of the FCA categories for a total of 36 FCA credit hours:

- Communication: 6 SCH
- Mathematics: 3 SCH
- Life and Physical Sciences: 6 SCH
- Language, Philosophy, and Culture: 3 SCH
- Creative Arts: 3 SCH
- American History: 6 SCH
- Government/Political Science: 6 SCH
- Social and Behavioral Sciences: 3 SCH

---

[1] Elements of the Texas Core Curriculum, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/index.cfm?objectid=427FDE26-AF5D-F1A1-E6FDB62091E2A507)

It bears repeating that these requirements are mandated by the state, not by UNT. Individual colleges may add program requirements, but these baseline degree requirements are imposed by the state. For example, College X may decide that any student graduating with a degree in their college must have 6 SCH of Language, Philosophy, and Culture courses. However, College X cannot decide to eliminate the Language, Philosophy, and Culture requirement altogether. Colleges can add to the Core; they cannot reduce it.

In addition to the 36 FCA credit hours, the THECB requires students take an additional six credit hours designated as "Component Area Option" or CAO (at UNT the catalog lists these courses as "Core Option Courses" to avoid confusion for students; "Component Area Option" is a fairly opaque term). CAO courses fall into two categories: CAO-A and CAO-B. Students can take two A courses or an A and a B. They cannot take two B courses.

CAO-A courses appear, on the surface, to be FCA courses. They must meet the definition of an FCA course and they must address the same four objectives as the FCA course. Nevertheless, for administrative purposes, they are treated as distinct courses. Think of them as clones of FCA courses: they have the exact same DNA, but they are different entities. Thus, while they look the same, CAO-A courses cannot be used to fulfill FCA requirements.

Because they look so much alike, it is not surprising that CAO-A courses and their related FCA counterparts could be moved back and forth. For example, a course in the FCA that is Literature, Philosophy, and Culture, could be designated as a CAO-A course. In fact, that process is relatively straightforward, and requires only a cursory administrative review by the THECB. A course that is CAO-A which meets the definition and objectives of an LPC course could absolutely go through the process and likely, be designated as an FCA LPC course. However, that process involves full THECB review; it is longer, more complicated, and the result is more uncertain.

UNT is taking steps to designate all FCA courses as CAO-A courses, so all classes that are part of the "regular" Core Curriculum can be used to fulfill this additional six-credit "CAO" requirement. This is helpful for programs that are struggling to squeeze their program requirements and these additional six core hours into the 120 hour degree limit. All FCA courses currently in the Core have been designated as CAO-A courses, and we will be asking for this dual designation as a matter of course moving forward.

CAO-A	$\rightarrow$	FCA
	(difficult)	
FCA	$\rightarrow$	CAO-A
	(easy)	
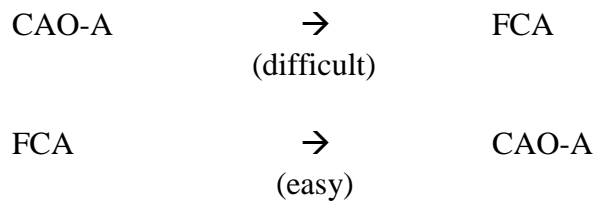
CAO-B courses are "lighter" than either FCA or CAO-A courses. They must meet the definition of one of the FCAs and address both communication and critical thinking. However, instead of needing to address two additional objectives, B courses only need to address one.

When the dust settles, students must complete the 36 hours of FCA requirements. In addition, they must complete an additional six hours in the Core. Those six hours looks like this:

Course 1:   FCA   or   CAO-A   or   CAO-B

Course 2:   FCA   or   CAO-A

Assessment

While we should focus on the importance of the Core for our students' long-term educational success, ultimately, the THECB and SACS do require information about the effectiveness of our Core Curriculum in the form of assessment. When we approach the assessment process, it is important to remember that it is assessment of the Core Curriculum, not assessment of your individual classes. Your individual classes simply provide the vehicles for implementing the instruments by which we assess. In many cases it is also true that your courses are those in which students acquire the knowledge they are demonstrating on the assessment, but we are never evaluating the quality of a single class or department. We cannot expect, for example, a single course to be responsible for a student's overall sense of personal responsibility when we hope that the student has taken a number of Core courses that have helped develop personal responsibility.

Signature Assignments

The details of the Core Curriculum approval process are provided below, but here is a sneak peek to help you understand the assessment process. During the process of developing a Core course, you will develop "signature assignments." These are specific course assignments that will be used in all sections of the course that are designed to measure students' mastery of the Core objectives tied to your courses. For example, every course in the Core is required to assess students' communication skills. The metrics we recommend are found on the UNT communication rubric (which can, itself, be found at curriculum.unt.edu). Your department, will create an assignment that would prompt students to produce some work—some artifact—that could be evaluated using that metric. That is a signature assignment. Every section of that course would, in turn, use that assignment.

Each Core objective must be assessed through a signature assignment. However, you do not need to have four assignments. It is quite possible to have a single signature assignment that incorporates two, three, or even all four of the Core objectives tied to a course. For example, an essay assignment might require students to demonstrate communication skills but also require

students to engage in critical thinking in the process of developing its content. If it includes a reflective component, it might also address personal responsibility. It may take some creativity, but you can definitely combine objectives into a single assignment. I can help you streamline your assessment obligations as much as possible.

Individual Assessment Method

The assignments are the instrument for assessment, but the actual measurement is the final objective of this process. To that end, when you create a Core course, you choose whether to use the individual assessment method or submit the course for the communal assessment process. If you choose the individual assessment method, you will follow the steps listed below:

1. You will define the metric you will use to evaluate your signature assignments. While the Office of the Core Curriculum recommends you use the UNT core rubrics—because they are most likely to be approved by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board—you may choose an alternative method for measuring the output of your instrument (your assignment).
2. You will create a benchmark for success. For example, if the course is using the UNT critical thinking rubric, the highest score an individual assignment might earn is a 20. The department might set as a benchmark that "at least 75% of the students will achieve a score of 15 or higher."
3. Your instructors will use the appropriate metric to evaluate student work in their classes and report the data to the Chair or a designated faculty or staff member. ***Instructors should evaluate all four objectives for each course each semester it is taught***.
4. The Chair or designated faculty or staff member will submit the information through the TracDat data management system.[2]

Communal Assessment Method

If departments do not elect the individual assessment method, they must elect the communal assessment method. The communal assessment process is spearheaded by the Office of the Core Curriculum with significant help from the Oversight Committee for the Core Curriculum. Furthermore, it relies on significant numbers of volunteer faculty members.

The Office of the Core Curriculum tackles three Core objectives each year: communication, social responsibility, and teamwork during odd/even academic years; and critical thinking, personal responsibility, and empirical/quantitative methods during even/odd academic years. This schedule is posted at http://curriculum.unt.edu/content/core-curriculum, and it will be distributed to Department Chairs every year.

---

[2] If the course is newly added to the Core, the course itself will be in TracDat. However, you will need to add your signature assignments and benchmarks to TracDat before you can start entering data. There are instructions for this process at curriculum.unt.edu, and I can assist you with this process.

Mid-semester of each semester, the OCCC will select a sample of assignments from the courses in the communal assessment pools. CLEAR will provide me with access to a sample of Learning Management System (Canvas) "shells" for those classes (solely for the purpose of obtaining student work), and I will take a random sample of assignments from that shell. All student- and course-identifying information will be redacted from the artifacts and they will be stored for scoring.

Once the Office of the Core Curriculum has the sample of student work from the communal assessment courses, the actual scoring begins. To facilitate faculty schedules, actual scoring will take place the following fall in the weeks shortly after classes begin. After a brief training session, volunteers will be encouraged to work during Friday shifts, using the UNT rubrics, to score the student work. (Scorers may also work independently, but working with groups is preferred.) The UNT rubrics can be found on the UNT Core website.

The whole process looks something like this:

Choose　　　　→　　Choose　　　　→　　Pull Work　→　　　　Communal
Objectives　　　　　　Assignments　　　　　from LMS　　　　　　Scoring
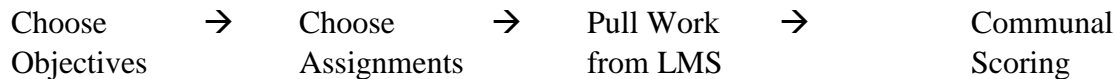
The Core Curriculum Process

Submitting a Course to the Core

The key to submitting a course to the Core is preparation. You will need to determine which FCA (or CAO) your course will fall under, whether your course meets the definition of that FCA (definitions can be found at curriculum.unt.edu), and what the necessary course objectives are. You then must develop one or more signature assignments that will allow students to demonstrate mastery of those course objectives and that will allow you or some outside scorer to measure the degree of that mastery. Finally, you will need to follow the necessary steps through the curricular process to gain approval of your course from both UNT and the THECB.

If these seems overwhelming or unduly complicated, consult with me. It is actually advisable to consult with me in every case. It is not required, of course, but I am a resource for you, and a consultation may prevent a minor mistake that will cost you down the road. I can assist with issues of timing, help draft or review signature assignments, and assist with navigating TracDat.

Forms and Other Core Curriculum Processes

As with all curriculum proposals, proposals related to courses in the Core Curriculum are processed through the Curriculog system (unt.curriculog.com). Any member of the UNT community can access Curriculog, but you do need permission to start a proposal. It is advisable to have at least one person in your department with permission and who understands the curriculum process.

The vast majority of Core-related curriculum proposals will require approval of the Director of the Office of the Core Curriculum and a majority of the voting members of the Oversight Committee of the Core Curriculum.

The primary curricular forms relating to the Core are:

Change in Existing Core Course – This involves changes to seemingly minor things like course prefixes, credit hours, description, title, cross-listing, etc. It will nevertheless require you to submit a complete assessment plan (all of the signature assignments you will use to assess your core objectives). Do not take this step for granted. Sometimes, the standards set by the THECB change, so the assignments that passed when you originally created the course will no longer be acceptable.

Change in Existing Core Course Structure – This is the form you use when you are making a more significant change to a core course: you are changing its FCA, you are purposefully changing the assessment method, or you are purposefully changing objectives.

Deletion of a Core Course – You should use this form if you are deleting a course entirely or simply taking it out of the Core. This is usually a non-controversial process.

Addition of a Course to the Core Curriculum – This is relatively self-explanatory. It bears noting that this can be the addition of a brand new course or the addition of an existing course to the Core. In either event, the proposal will need to contain a full assessment plan: a sample syllabus for the course and the assignments that will be used to measure the four Core objectives assigned to the FCA associated with the course.

***It is CRITICAL to note that, if you are creating a new course to add to the core, the curricular process of creating a new course and the curricular process of adding it to the Core are SEPARATE. In other words, you will need to submit one form, and begin one process, to have your course recognized as a course by UNT. You will need to start a separate, parallel process to have your course declared as a Core course. Both of these processes are in Curriculog, but they involve originating two separate, parallel proposals.

Timeline

If you are adding a new course to the Core Curriculum, you must go through two separate processes: adding a course to the University inventory of courses and designating that course as a Core course. The first process—adding the course to the University inventory—has a reasonably tight timeline. Your proposal needs to make its way to the UUCC's October agenda in order to be included in the catalog for the following academic year. This means it will have made it through your Department and your College first, and then to the UUCC.

The second process—designating the course as a Core course—and all the other Core-related curricular matters have a more relaxed deadline. As long as they are on the MARCH UUCC agenda, they can be prepared for the submission to the THECB. Keep in mind, however, that proposals can sometimes require revision before they are successfully passed through the OCCC. The OCCC is not being obstructionist; they are trying to assure that department proposals are likely to be approved by the THECB.

Once proposals have all cleared by the UUCC (the last UNT step in the process) I will compile a single submission for the THECB. Once the THECB opens submission portal in the spring, we only have a single opportunity to make our annual submission. UNT usually takes advantage of that opportunity in April. When the THECB portal closes, it closes.

After the THECB considers our submission (usually within two months), they will provide us with a list of proposals that were accepted and those that were not. The University then has 30 days to appeal any negative decisions. I will reach out to Departments for assistance in this process, often asking for tweaks in assignments or syllabi, explanations of language, etc.

After resubmission, the final result is fairly quick, and it is reported to affected Departments and the UUCC.

Glossary

Assessment: Our ability to determine whether students in our Core courses possess certain competencies or skills deemed important for college students to possess.

COA: COA stands for Component Area Option. This is the term used by the THECB to refer to the 6 hours of credit that have been added to the original 36 hours of FCA hours. The COA hours fall into the categories of CAO-A and CAO-B courses.

Communal Assessment: The annual process of collection of student-created artifacts from courses in the communal assessment pool and scored by volunteer faculty

Core Objective: One of the six competencies the THECB has deemed important for college students to master and which are assessed as part of our Core Curriculum (critical thinking, communication, empirical and quantitative analysis, teamwork, personal responsibility, and social responsibility)

Core Option: In the catalog, UNT has dubbed CAO-A courses as Core Option A courses and CAO-B courses as Core Option B courses. This change in designation is to make the purpose of the requirement a bit more clear for students.

Curriculog: UNT's online portal for creation, deletion, and modification of classes, degrees, certificates, and programs

Foundational Component Area (FCA) CA: a traditional category of courses that make up a general education: communication, math, physical and life sciences, etc.

Individual Assessment: assessment of Core courses by individual Departments. Departments should assess all four objectives associated with each course during each semester.

Oversight Committee on the Core Curriculum (OCCC): a standing committee of the Faculty Senate charged, in part, with reviewing proposals related to the Core Curriculum and assisting faculty in creating of appropriate signature assignments

Office of the Core Curriculum / Director of the Office of the Core Curriculum: responsible for projects relating to the University Core Curriculum including assisting faculty with the development of Core courses and assessment of the Core Curriculum for all accrediting bodies

Signature Assignment: an assignment attached to a Core course meant to assess one or more Core objectives. The signature assignment should be assigned in every section of the course that is taught.

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB): a state agency that oversees all higher education institutions in Texas (both four-year and two-year). They are responsible for implementing state mandates, reviewing institution curricular decisions, and overseeing institutional effectiveness through assessment and reporting.

University Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (UUCC): a standing committee of the Faculty Senate charged with overseeing the entire undergraduate curriculum and thus the Core Curriculum. They are the "last stop" at UNT of any Core curricular proposal.