

Revising UAB's Core Curriculum

Proposal submitted to the UAB Curriculum Committee
February 6, 2020

This document is submitted on behalf of the Signature Core Curriculum Committee to the members of the UAB Curriculum Committee. After more than two years of intensive work, the committee and its co-chairs feel that this is the right juncture to ask for an endorsement from the body of UAB faculty, as represented by the Faculty Senate. This is not to say that every aspect of our proposed curriculum has been fleshed in, and this document will point to areas where questions of implementation need to be resolved. Still, we have most of the curriculum in place and need to hear from the Faculty Senate before proceeding further.

One of the most gratifying aspects of revising the core has been its conversational quality. The committee has had far-reaching discussions among ourselves and with many constituencies around campus and in the community about the essentials of an undergraduate education. To capture a sense of that conversation, this document is punctuated at various points with some of the key questions or objections we have encountered. By including these, we hope to clarify our thinking and allow the UCC to see how our plans have shifted in response to concerns and queries.

Rationale for Changing the Core:

UAB's undergraduate core curriculum has remained essentially the same since the university awarded its first undergraduate degree in 1969. In the intervening 50 years, the university has changed dramatically, as have the needs and expectations of students and parents. "[Forging the Future](#)," UAB's strategic plan, calls for the establishment of a revised core, the Signature Core Curriculum, which will provide an improved foundation for undergraduate study and lifelong learning.

This Signature Core Curriculum is crucially important for several reasons:

- **Recruitment:** As competition for students increases, we can use a well-designed, dynamic core to attract students to UAB. An improved core can also give students a reason to take courses here instead of through transient credits and/or at community colleges.
- **Retention:** Students are most at risk for leaving college during their first 1-2 years, the time when they typically take most of their core classes. An improved core can help them feel more intellectually challenged, connected to their new university community and engaged, thereby supporting the university's efforts to increase four- and six-year graduation rates.
- **Equity and Inclusion:** Currently, students who come to UAB through the Honors College skip many of their Core classes and/or take an alternative through the University Honors Program's interdisciplinary curriculum.¹ By strengthening the existing core, we can ensure that all of the students coming to UAB have the option to take exciting classes and to encounter high-impact practices in their first two years.

¹ Currently, students who come to UAB specifically through the University Honors Program fulfill their general education requirements through UHP's interdisciplinary courses and seminars. This exemption will remain in place under this revised structure.

- **Flexibility and Transparency:** Qualitative and quantitative feedback from both faculty and students revealed similar complaints: The existing core provides little flexibility, and its value is not clear. For example, students do not understand the rationale for requiring a sequence in either History or English Literature as opposed to, say, Art History or French Literature. Departments are frustrated by the limited number of existing core classes and the difficulty of having new ones approved. In this revised curriculum, we have built in opportunities for faculty to design interesting general education classes, and we have worked to communicate the value of the core.
- **Parity:** Perhaps because the existing core has been in place for so long, it no longer matches changed institutional realities. For instance, while some departments in the College of Arts and Sciences have core classes in the catalog, others—surprisingly--have none (e.g., Criminal Justice, Computer Science). As the home of the liberal arts at UAB, CAS departments naturally sit at the heart of the core curriculum; however, the current model makes it unnecessarily difficult for departments not in the current core to participate. All departments should have the option to offer general education courses that explore deep, fundamental questions about the human and natural world.
- **Assessment:** New rules from SACSCOC now require all universities to assess their general education curriculum as part of the accreditation cycle. Revising the core curriculum provides an ideal opportunity to build in broad learning outcomes and assessment systems so that assessment is an integral part of the curricular DNA instead of being tacked on.

Process for Change

Pursuant to the establishment of the strategic plan, Provost Pam Benoit convened a [Signature Core Curriculum Committee](#) in the spring of 2017, co-chaired by Alison Chapman (Professor of English, CAS) and Professor Suzanne Judd (Professor of Biostatistics, SOPH). The committee included faculty representatives from all units that teach undergraduates, academic support staff, students, parents, and community members. Each department at UAB that teaches undergraduate also has a [liaison to the committee](#).

During the 2018-2019 academic year, the committee gave [dozens of presentations](#) to departments, schools, and student and staff groups, and it administered qualitative and quantitative surveys to faculty, students, staff, and alumni. The committee also engaged in research into best practices in general education nationwide, and this research included sending teams to conferences and bringing experts to campus. At the end of the year, a [Core Action plan](#) was compiled, posted on the website for comment, and presented to the Faculty Senate Curriculum Committee for comment.

In summer 2019, the committee used all of the feedback gained to draft a new curriculum. During a two-day retreat in May, a vision, broad goals, and learning outcomes were established. In June, a team attended the Institute on General Education in Vermont and worked intensively under the guidance of general education experts from the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The draft curriculum that emerged from the Institute was then extensively vetted by the committee over the course of the summer.

The 2019-2020 academic year has been devoted to a repeat tour of campus (departments, schools, student focus groups, staff, advisors, associate deans, etc.) to collect feedback on our draft curriculum.

Vision for the Core Curriculum

We will provide a broadly place-based curriculum that offers students multiple opportunities to engage with the community and to develop a sense of themselves as engaged citizens. In this curriculum, local places (campus, city, state, region) provide a lens for thinking about larger issues.

Rationale:

The Core should increase students' sense of belonging and citizenship, in part by raising their awareness of the place where they live and the issues that impact it. The Core should give students a chance to practice understanding larger concepts and bodies of knowledge in context of specific human communities and physical places. This does not mean that every course must be "about" the city or state. Instead, the curriculum as a whole should nudge students to look upward and outward and to think about themselves in relationship to wider horizons.

Specific goals:

To develop our students' potential as socially conscious leaders and increase civic engagement

To develop a core curriculum that provides greater flexibility for faculty and students while still ensuring that students are encountering certain foundational competencies

To ensure that the core curriculum exposes students to a breadth of knowledge and disciplinary approaches.

To create a core that provides an improved foundation for learning in the major.

To design a core curriculum that makes more room for the kinds of high-impact practices (e.g., community-based learning, integrative learning, applied learning, problem-solving) that have been proven to boost student learning, engagement, and retention.

To create a core that is truly unique and that has the potential to attract students to UAB.

Architecture of the Core

Overview

In order to make the whole curriculum more comprehensible for students, we have broken it into a series of component parts. Our goal is also to foster a sense that the core has a trajectory whereby one part builds upon the competencies of the other.

Part I:	The On Ramp	(0 CH)
Part II:	Local Beginnings	3 CH
Part III:	Intellectual Foundations	15 CH
Part IV:	Thinking Broadly	20 CH

Part V:	The City as Classroom	3 CH
Part VI:	Collecting Flags	(0 CH)
Part VI:	Build Your Crest	(0 CH—optional for students)

Total: 41 CH

Question: Why leave the core at 41 hours, its current size?

Our current footprint of 41 hours is right in line with other Alabama institutions of higher education. The committee felt that it was important not to expand the core (because this could adversely impact graduation rates) or to shrink it (because the core provides important foundational competencies and broad learning).

Question: Do students have to take courses in this order?

No, we will not insist on a rigid sequencing, and students can take most of these courses in the order that works for them. That said, the On-Ramp and Local Beginnings will typically fall toward the beginning of the freshman year, while The City as Classroom will in most cases occur in the sophomore year.

Each of these six parts is described in the following pages.

Part I: The On-Ramp (0 CH)

Technically speaking, this sector is not part of the actual curriculum as it is not credit-bearing. However, we include it here because it represents an important point of convergence between the curriculum and the co-curriculum and because its goal is to help students succeed in their academic work.

Currently, most students outside the Honors College do not have a rich experience on campus before they begin taking classes. In many cases, they have just over 24 hours to acclimate to dorm and campus life, to begin thinking of themselves as college students, and generally to get used to this new phase of their intellectual journey.

A task force led by Student Affairs and Enrollment Management—with representation from the Signature Core Curriculum Committee—is currently developing this On-Ramp component (a pilot will run in fall 2020) and aligning it with the overall core curriculum's learning outcomes. The goal is to a) extend the move-in period; b) do more to connect students to the city and community—and to one another—during their first weeks on campus; c) provide more opportunities for students to engage in experiential, co-curricular learning; and d) better prepare students for success in their academic endeavors.

Part II: Local Beginnings (3 CH)

The Signature Core Curriculum committee has suggested the following broad goals for First-Year Experience courses at UAB.

- 1) All FYEs should count as part of the core curriculum.
- 2) FYEs should have some percentage of shared competencies (e.g., learning outcomes, career exploration modules, etc.) so there is consistency across the board.

- 3) All FYEs must include some component that connects students to the community around them: options might include a campus or community service project, field trip, survey of local career options, etc.
- 4) Schools should still have the flexibility to tailor FYEs to the needs of their students.
- 5) The credit hours of FYEs should be standardized.
- 6) If departments have the resources, they should be allowed to offer freshman seminars for students who are not in the Honors College.

While the committee established these as broad goals for FYEs, it was not able to progress further toward defining them or implementing them. The existing FYE landscape is so varied as to seem almost chaotic. For example: FYE courses can vary from 1 to 3 credit hours, sometimes within a single school's offerings, and the learning outcomes of FYE courses differ dramatically across the campus landscape

To address this variability in a way that is sensitive to the needs of schools, the committee co-chairs asked Provost Benoit to convene a separate working group to collect data, talk to stakeholders (deans, advisors, faculty, etc.), research best practices, and make recommendations for change.

We are asking the UCC to provide a *provisional* endorsement of the broad goals above with the understanding that these might be amended/supplemented by the FYE Working Group. The FYE Working Group will bring specific recommendations to the Faculty Senate at the conclusion of its work in December 2020.

Question: I have heard that FYEs are leaving the units. Is this true?

Definitely not. The goal is not to pull the FYEs away from the units that teach them. The goal is to impart some degree of consistency across all FYEs, with an emphasis more on consistent objectives than consistent content. In most cases, units can benefit from this change since credit hours are being "freed up" from the major—e.g., a course such as EGR 110 will now count toward the core, meaning that Engineering now has extra credit hours to work with.

Part III: Academic Foundations (15 CH)

As its name indicates, this section of the core is intended to provide students with the foundational competencies they need to succeed in any academic endeavor. These four requirements were chosen on the basis of quantitative survey results: faculty, students, and staff had broad consensus on these four areas.

Writing

6 CH²

- Freshman Writing I: Analysis, narrative, exposition
- Freshman Writing II: Argument, persuasion, and information literacy

² In 2020-2021, the English Department will be piloting a "Write Local" program to focus more freshman writing assignments around local/regional issues. The goal is to create a greater sense of ownership and urgency in assignments and to help students create intellectual connections to the larger community. This program will be supported with funds from a Strategic Investment grant designed to enrich Core teaching.

Question: Will these be English courses?

The precise administration of these courses will be determined going forward, but the Committee has endorsed a model from other universities in which the first course is offered by a single program (often English, although some universities have created a separate Writing program). The second course in the sequence—which focuses more on research and argumentation—then can be taught by faculty from various disciplines. This approach leaves one program/unit with the responsibility for creating, staffing, supporting, etc. the large volume of fall classes that are such an important entry point for incoming students while still providing flexibility for other programs/unit to contribute to teaching writing to first-year students.

Quantitative Literacy

3 CH

- Courses that teach students to work with numbers, formulas, data, probabilities, etc.

Question: How definite are the descriptions on this page?

These are just working sketches of what each requirement does. Each of these requirements—both in this Academic Foundations section and in the following Thinking Broadly section—will be further defined by groups of faculty. We will convene these task forces once there is a sense that the broad architecture is satisfactory.

Reasoning

3 CH

- Courses that teach logic and reasoning processes

Communicating in the Modern World

3 CH

- Courses that teach students about verbal/visual forms of communication

Question: Can one course count in more than two places?

The recommendation of the Committee is no. Putting courses on more than one shelf has three drawbacks: 1) it makes life more difficult for advisors; 2) it makes the Graduation Planning System programming more difficult; and 3) it complicates assessment since a given course will have to be assessed along two different axes. While we recognize that the subject of a course might lend itself to different requirements (e.g., a course on mathematical proofs could fall equally under Qualitative Literacy and Reasoning; a course on the history of mass media could fall equally under Communicating in the Modern World and Humans and Their Societies), faculty and departments will need to pick the single requirement category that is the best fit for a course.

What about prerequisites?

In our existing core, some classes have prerequisites. For example, students who want to take General Physics I (PH 221) must first have had Calculus, and students who want to take American Literature II must first have had English Composition. These kinds of prerequisites are helpful for students, and the new core will not disrupt them.

Thinking Broadly (20 CH)

The core should expose students to many different ways of viewing the world. Whereas the existing core is labeled according to disciplinary divisions (e.g., “Social and Behavioral Sciences” “Arts and

Humanities”), these new requirements are labeled with an eye to communicating their value more clearly to students and their families.

History and Meaning

3-6 CH

Courses in this section will explore the ways that human beings have sought to understand, organize, and interpret the human experience and to give it meaning. Subjects might include history, ethics, literature, language, and philosophy, among others.

Question: Why are some of the categories on this page “3-6 CH”?

One of the complaints students have about the current core is its lack of flexibility. In three of the four categories here, students have the option to take a second course.

The Creative Arts

3-6 CH

Courses in this section will explore the imaginative and creative arts. Subjects might include theater, film, art, and music, among others.

Question: Can an upper-level course count in one of these categories?

No. All courses in the core must be general education courses—i.e., intended for a “general,” as opposed to a major-specific audience. They should be numbered at the 100- and 200-level.

Scientific Inquiry

8 CH

Courses in this section will teach students the processes of scientific inquiry and the uses of scientific evidence. These courses will be accompanied by labs (two 3 CH courses plus two 1 CH labs). Subjects might include physics, biology, chemistry, environmental science, geology, astronomy, and computer science, among others.

Humans and their Societies

3-6 CH

Courses in this section look at the ways that human beings behave in the social world and how they have organized their societies. Subjects might include political science, anthropology, sociology, criminal justice, and communication studies, among others.

Question: How are courses going to be populated into these categories?

See the section at the end about Implementation.

Important Note:

The committee is committed to defining the categories in this curriculum according to what the courses do, as opposed to the department or unit that teaches it. However, this approach carries a risk. Department X or School Y could populate courses into multiple categories (Reasoning, Humans and Their Societies, Quantitative Literacy, etc.), and then students in that department or school could predominantly take those courses. However, this would defeat the purpose of the core, which is not just to expose students to different subjects but also to fundamentally different ways of looking at the world.

At this point, it is unclear what specific guidelines will be needed to ensure the right levels of disciplinary heterogeneity. A crucial part of implementing this core will be modeling and test driving. For now, the Signature Core Curriculum Committee is committed to the principle that the core should require students to fan out appropriately across the disciplinary landscape.

Part V: The City as Classroom (3 CH)

This requirement builds upon the Local Beginnings section in that it asks students to think about themselves in context of a larger community. It also serves as a prologue to the capstone experience in the major in that it asks students to take what they know and begin considering its real-world implications. Courses in this category encourage students to look at big issues (poverty, education, crime, economies, technology, health, etc.) in context of local, state, and/or regional realities. All courses in this category must have some project-based and/or experiential assignments (i.e., not 100% tests). Here are some possible examples:

- The Sustainable South (Biology, Environmental Sciences, Public Health)
- Birmingham and the Industrial Revolution (History)
- The Health of Birmingham (Public Health, Nursing, Social Work)
- Human Rights in the City (Political Science)
- The New South in a Global Context (International Studies, Business)
- Learning in Birmingham (Education)
- Smart Cities (Engineering, Physics)
- Writing Alabama (English)
- The Local Arts (Music, Art, Theater)
- Crime and Punishment in Alabama (Criminal Justice)
- Honors College seminars (depending on their subject matter)

Ideally, this requirement should be taken in the sophomore year; however, since many of our students arrive with many of their core requirements fulfilled through AP and/or dual enrollment, we should not prevent freshmen from taking these courses.

Question: What about students in online degree programs?

This requirement will most likely be waived for those students.

Part VI: Collecting Flags (0 CH)

Before graduation, students must collect five flags. Flags are simply markers, and they can be attached to any course, depending that course's content. Flagging allows us to ensure that our students are picking up important competencies without adding to their overall credit hours.

Global / Multicultural Perspectives	1 flag
High-Impact Practices	1 flag ³
Writing (post-Freshman Writing)	1 flag
Sustainability	1 flag
One more flag (student's choice)	1 flag

A given course may have to up to two flags. For example, a departmental honors thesis course would carry an HIP and a Writing flag; a course on global climate change (whether a core class or one for the major) would carry a Global flag and a Sustainability flag.

As with previous sections, the criteria for flags will be established by faculty task forces, which will also establish a streamlined process for course submissions.

Question: How are students going to collect all these flags in their core classes?

Flags do not just have to occur in core classes. Any class—core, major, minor, electives—can carry a flag, as in the two examples above. The Core Director will work with departments to ensure that there are ample flagged courses.

Question: How did the committee arrive at the number and subject of these flags?

Globalism/Multicultural issues and Sustainability were chosen because of widespread feeling that our students urgently need to understand both. One of the most consistent themes in our year-one listening sessions was the need for students to continue honing their writing skills beyond the freshman year. And HIPs have been proven to have a positive impact on student learning. As for the numbers of each flag, these are currently “best guesses.” Once flags are established and data is collected (e.g., Where in the curriculum are students encountering flags? Are there are bottlenecks or deficiencies? Are they picking more flags than they need and if so, which ones?), we may need to adjust these numbers up or down.

Part VI: Curricular/Co-curricular Badging

Part I of this curriculum—the On-Ramp—emerged from the committee’s conviction that the curriculum and the co-curriculum should complement one another. That same conviction is evident here. Part VI encourages students to combine their curricular and co-curricular experiences to earn additional credentials or certifications.

Examples:

- A student could earn a Civic Engagement badge by collecting two additional HIP flags for service learning and by completing the Leadership Pathway currently offered by Student Affairs.

³ “High-impact practice” is a nationally recognized term that refers to those pedagogical approaches (e.g., service learning, study abroad, undergraduate research, project-based learning, internships, undergraduate theses, reacting to the past, team-based learning) that have been shown to accelerate student learning and retention.

- A student could earn a Globalism and Diversity badge by collecting additional Global/Multicultural flags and by participating in approved co-curricular events.

Instead of badges, some universities allow students to graduate with “Leadership Honors.” This system recognizes students who have been engaged citizens of the campus and local communities, as opposed to the current *cum laude* system, which only acknowledges those with high GPAs. Some universities provide a “back of the transcript” option where activities (e.g., off-campus internships, work-study jobs, alternative spring break, student leadership, etc.) are listed. Whatever the mechanism, the goal is to provide official, institutional acknowledgment of the fact that student success can take many forms.

This section is one of the least clearly defined in this curriculum because it is optional. In the initial phases of implementation, the primary focus will be on standing up those sections of the curriculum that are required such as Academic Foundations, Thinking Broadly, and The City as Classroom. When those are up and running, this category can be further developed and finalized.

Transfer Students:

Per Alabama law, all schools must accept the inward transfer of core classes from other state schools. As a result, students who complete all of their core requirements at another state school will automatically get credit for having completed the entire UAB core curriculum, and the provisions of this document will not apply to them. Students who come to UAB “midstream”—i.e., having completed some, but not all, of their core requirements—will simply begin working to complete their core as incoming freshmen do.

Question: Are transfer students from community colleges going to lose ground in this curriculum?

Informal trial runs indicate that this draft curriculum is transfer friendly: most of what students would take at a community college can be easily articulated into these categories. The one exception is the City as Classroom, and most students coming in “midstream” would need to take this course, although there may be exceptions.

Question: Aren't we creating a two-tier system whereby students who matriculate here as freshmen get a better core than those who arrive later?

Yes, this is true. However, there are two separate jobs facing those undertaking core curriculum reform. Job #1 is to design the best curriculum possible for incoming freshman students. Job #2 is to make generous provision for transfer students and to design support systems for them. An improved core can give students more incentive to begin their coursework at UAB.

Part of implementing this core will involve the following:

- Working with advisors, admissions, the transfer office, etc. to make sure that articulation issues are solved ahead of time.
- Providing a core exceptions request form for advisors. This form exists in the current core since there are always cases that fall through the cracks.
- Resolving problems generously in favor of the students.

Governance:

One reason that UAB's core curriculum has remained unchanged since 1969 is that no one is charged with supervising it, but just like the academic curricula inside departments, the core needs continued oversight and maintenance. To keep the core relevant and rewarding for students and faculty, we need to establish a governance structure.

The co-chairs of the Signature Core Curriculum Committee, Alison Chapman and Suzanne Judd, and the director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, Scott Phillips, are co-PIs on a \$1.4M Strategic Investment grant that runs 2020-2023. This grant includes funds to hire a Core Director (~50% faculty position) as soon as the overall curricular architecture has been endorsed by the Faculty Senate and approved by the provost and president, with on-going funding to be identified in future years.

This Core Director will assume the responsibility for implementing the structure laid out in this document, communicating it to stakeholders, assessing it, and maintaining it. We recommend that this person chair an advisory committee. The current co-chairs will be available to assist as much as needed in this transition process.

Question: Who will be on this advisory committee?

The faculty own the curriculum, and while the Core Director will have administrative oversight, this person should also have a committee to help troubleshoot, make decisions, etc. The Signature Core Curriculum Committee recommends that this group be made up primarily of faculty who are committed to and experienced in undergraduate education, particularly in first- and second-year courses. It should be broadly representative. It seems to make sense for this committee also to have solid representation from the UCC and/or Curriculum Committee.

Assessment

Per new SACSCOC guidelines, all general education curricula must be assessed, and institutions must demonstrate that they are using assessment data to improve student learning. We have designed this curriculum with those requirements in mind.

We have selected the following VALUE rubrics (AAC&U) to apply to the core as a whole:

- Critical Thinking, Inquiry and Analysis, and/or Problem Solving
- Oral and Written Communication
- Quantitative Literacy
- Ethical Reasoning
- Personal and Social Responsibility

All core courses must have at least some learning outcomes and some assignments that align with these rubrics, and all core instructors should expect to participate to some degree in ongoing core assessment efforts. For example, instructors might be asked to contribute anonymized student artifacts (papers, lab reports, tests, etc.) for program assessment, or they might choose to be part of an assessment team for one of the learning outcomes.

The main component of our Strategic Investment grant was funding for three years of a Core Fellows program. 25 [Core Fellows](#) have been convened for the Year 1 cohort, and as part of their responsibilities, these Fellows will begin piloting an assessment system for core classes. The office of Institutional Effectiveness and Academic Planning has already begun working with them toward this end.

Timeline:

Here is a hypothetical timeline for implementation:

- Spring 2020: Curriculum endorsed by the Senate
Curriculum approved by the provost and president
- Summer 2020 A Core Director is hired and a faculty advisory committee convened
- Fall 2020-Spr 2021 Faculty task forces define the criteria for different areas of the core
Core Director develops a course submissions system
Departments begin proposing courses for different categories, for flagging, etc.
Core Director begins developing communications material
- Fall 2021 Core requirements go into the course catalog
- Fall 2022 Students arrive on campus under the new core curriculum

Question: What if all this cannot get done according to the timeline above?

UAB has had the some core for 50 years so if we cannot get a new one up and running according to the milestones above, that's okay. The old core just remains in place a bit longer. It is better to do things right and take bit longer than to risk disruptions to students and confusion to faculty. This is an aspirational timeline, not a required one.

Expedited Implementation

As part of this proposal, we are asking the Faculty Senate to agree to an expedited implementation process. Currently, proposing a change to the catalog text of a single core class involves several layers of approval; adding a course to the core requires even more. The core is the single largest academic program at the university, and we are proposing deep, complex revisions to it. It would be nearly impossible to implement these in a timely manner within the existing approval protocols.

We request the Faculty Senate agree to the *principle* of expedited implementation with the understanding that the details would be worked out once a Core Director is hired. The goal is to create a process and a team that can move relatively quickly while still having the necessary oversight to prevent mistakes.

Question: What exactly does expedited implementation mean?

The most important goal is to prevent students from hitting speedbumps. Toward that end, during the first 2-3 years, the Core director—with advice/support from the advisory committee—will work with departments to populate requirements with courses that seem a reasonably good fit. During this period, the Director+committee will create a submissions system/approval workflow along with detailed criteria for each category. From that point forward, all courses must be approved through that system, and all courses (including the ones populated in during the initial, expedited period) will have to be periodically recertified.

The overarching goals are as follows:

- No course becomes a permanent fixture
- All departments have an opportunity to propose courses

- *Ongoing recertification allows a process for continued updating of the curriculum*
- *The recertification process is efficient and transparent (e.g., clearly stated criteria, an online portal for submission, a streamlined and logical approval workflow)*