"Smaller Core" Small Group Progress Report

The smaller core working group was tasked with making recommendations related to the size of a new core curriculum. One of the six proposed principles in the Core Proposal approved by the Academic Assembly of the College of Arts and Sciences last year states "Electives that provide flexibility and exploration give vitality to the intellectual habits of mind that are at the heart of the liberal arts. The new Core should therefore be made smaller, while protecting both electives and a rich and varied distribution of requirements." One aspect of our task is to consider the feasibility of this principle in order to determine whether it (this principle) should be adopted.

At this time (November 1) our working has not agreed on recommendations concerning the size of a new core curriculum. We believe that we must first hear the recommendations of the other small working groups and the Catholicity Task Force, and discuss how those recommendations will affect our undergraduate goals and specific core requirements. What follows is a status report, which summarizes data and suggestions that we have gathered that are related to the size of the core.

The size of USD's current core curriculum is 19 classes plus a lab, if the D requirement is not counted (the D course typically will satisfy some other core requirement), and if 3 language classes are assumed.

Last year, the faculty of the College of Arts and Science, the School of Business Administration, and the Engineering Programs, were surveyed concerning their views on the size of the core curriculum. The response rate was quite high – around 75% of College of Arts and Sciences tenure track faculty. 80% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the current core curriculum should be made smaller. 14% believe that the core should have 9 - 11 courses, 35% 12 – 14 courses, and 30% 15 – 17 courses. Many respondents included comments. Some of the reasons supporting a smaller core were

- Gives students flexibility to explore and develop. Right now some students have little room for electives.
- Allows students to take a more active role in their education.
- USD's core is bigger than average for liberal arts colleges.
- Transfer students can have difficulty completing degree requirements within a 124-unit plan.
- The current size encourages a checklist approach.

Some of the reasons supporting not reducing the core size were

- Current core ensures that students receive a balanced liberal arts education.
- Simply allowing students more electives will not guarantee that they will do so in a manner that gives them a broad emphasis on the liberal arts (including philosophy and theology and religious studies) that is an important part of Catholic higher education.
- One of the strengths of Catholic universities has been a strong commitment to a larger core that all students take.

Our working group conducted an open forum on the issue of a smaller core, and comments and suggestions there echoed those on the survey. A summary of those comments is attached.

Because one of the most common reasons given for a smaller core is that it would give students more room for electives, we tried to get an idea of how many electives our students actually have. The Provost's office assembled data showing, for each undergraduate major, the number of elective units a typical student has after satisfying core and major requirements. We prepared two charts (Figures 1 and 2) to illustrate this data. Most striking to us is the wide range of free units (shown in purple) across the different majors, from none or few up to over 40. So for at least some majors, students do have relatively little room for electives, and a smaller core would allow them to better explore topics that interest them or pursue a minor.

A question that has arisen in smaller core discussions is the degree to which USD students come in with AP credit that satisfy core requirements, thereby reducing the number of course units that they have to take at USD. With help from the registrar, the Provost's office did a check of 2012 graduates in three majors (Biology, Business Administration, and English), and found that only 6 of 41 (15%) Biology majors reduced their core by 9 or more units with AP credit and 18 or 41 (44%) did not reduce it at all; 8 of 167 (5%) Business Administration majors reduced their core by 9 or more units and 131 of 167 (78%) did not reduce it at all; and 7 of 61 (11%) English majors reduced their core by 9 or more units, and 43 of 61 (70%) did not reduce it at all. This shows that most students are not able to significantly reduce their core curriculum requirements through the use of AP credits. A similar study of 171 engineering graduates showed that 40% of the students graduated with no AP, IB or CLEP credit, and the vast majority of AP credit used was applied to math or science classes. Tables 1 and 2 summarize these results.

We also considered the question of whether a smaller core is feasible. Ultimately, this will be decided by the CPC as it revisits the undergraduate learning goals and outcomes, and designs a core curriculum that meets those goals. But we did look at a sample of other Catholic schools, and found some whose core curricula are smaller than ours (Georgetown's core has 12 courses plus language courses; Duquesne's has 11 courses, but no explicit language requirement; and Holy Cross has a core with 12 courses), some with cores close to the size of ours (Fordham with 17 – 20 courses; Loyola Chicago with 16 courses, but no language requirement; and Notre Dame with 18 courses), and one with larger core than USD's (Fairfield with 20 – 22 courses). This suggests that reducing the size of our core is a reasonable objective to consider, depending on what other committees deliver as their own findings.

The following are considerations that have been suggested as the CPC prepares a core proposal. Our working group seeks feedback on these from faculty.

- The CPC should revisit the undergraduate goals, keeping in mind that a majority of faculty support a smaller core.

- The undergraduate goals should drive the design of the core. Any requirement that we are thinking of including in the core should address one or more specific undergraduate goals.
- Undergraduate goals should be satisfied by the student's experience in the core, their major, and any minors.
- The core requirements should be efficient at satisfying undergraduate goals.
- There should be increased flexibility in how different schools and programs achieve the common undergraduate goals and learning outcomes of the University. Don't think of this as different cores for different schools or programs. Rather, undergraduate goals and learning outcomes define our core, with different students meeting those goals in ways that are specific to their programs of study.

Respectfully submitted by the smaller core working group (Jim Bolender, Michelle Gilmore-Grier, John Glick, David Light, Yasamin Mahallaty, Rick Olson, and Dirk Yandell)

Comments and suggestions from the “Smaller Core” open forum on September 25, 2012

1. It was noted that a lot of our students typically take 4 classes or more per semester, a reason for revisiting the core requirements. Some wanted to know exactly how many units our students do typically take, and it was noted at the time that Carole Houston would be getting that information out.

2. We noted that approximately 40% of our incoming students come in with no units, but that some students come in with some units, and some students come in with many course unit credits. Given this disparity, the idea of revisiting the core seemed to be a good idea. In relation to this it was noted that our Honors students typically come in with 30-40 units of AP credit, but it was not clear exactly how many of those courses typically count towards the core. It was suggested that most of the AP units counting towards the core typically apply to the sciences, English, History.

3. It was suggested that, given some of the above considerations, that our committee might discuss the possibility of recommending that no student can gain advantage by getting credit upon admission toward the core at all!

4. It was claimed that it used to be the case that any one of a number of different courses in different disciplines could satisfy the core, but that Dean Drinan narrowed this in order to facilitate assessment. While some individuals emphasized the need to ground the core in a way that allows for assessment, a few people wondered whether we shouldn't simply resist this emphasis on assessment and allow it to "drive the core."

5. A number of individuals suggested that we should NOT give up on requiring students to take courses they otherwise might not take, in order to underscore our status as a "liberal arts" university. In other words, some appear to want to resist giving up on the traditional "distribution" model for the core.

6. It was also suggested that we consider, as we proceed, placing before the University that different majors or disciplines might have different (unique to their disciplines) cores, or different number of core requirements. In other words, that different disciplines or departments might have more autonomy in deciding upon their own core requirements.

7. Others, in response to the above suggestion, noted that it was essential that we collectively think about how the core is informing OUR school, and that this would impact how we re-conceive of the core. A smaller core could potentially impact our advising, as well as our admissions processes. In response to this, some suggested that we might to consider that any change in the core might require the development of a more "advising culture" across campus.

These were mostly comments and queries. There were some recommendations that people offered. They are as follows:

8. It was suggested that we ought to develop a "structure" where more courses are team-taught, in order to make the satisfaction of core requirements to be more efficient, so students could simultaneously satisfy different core courses in different areas.

9. Along these lines, it was suggested that in order to allow for more double majors, we might find inter-disciplinary ways in order to consolidate the core with the majors. Here again, some were concerned about giving up on requiring students to take courses they otherwise would not have (cf. above).

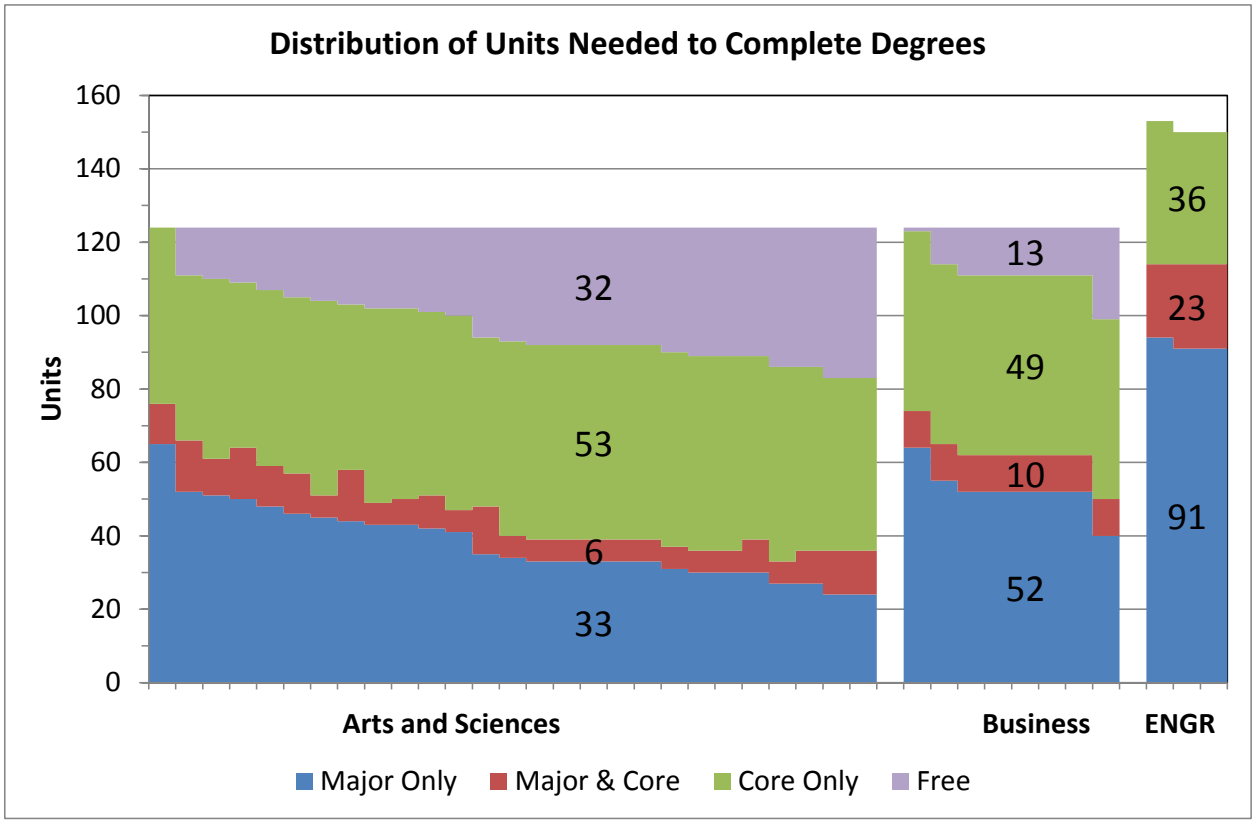

Figure 1. Summary of degree requirements in CAS, SBA and Engineering showing the number of units that students take to satisfy major requirements, core classes, or both major and core requirements. The free electives available to pursue minors or other academic interests appear at the top of each bar. Numbers shown summarize the size of the columns within which they appear.

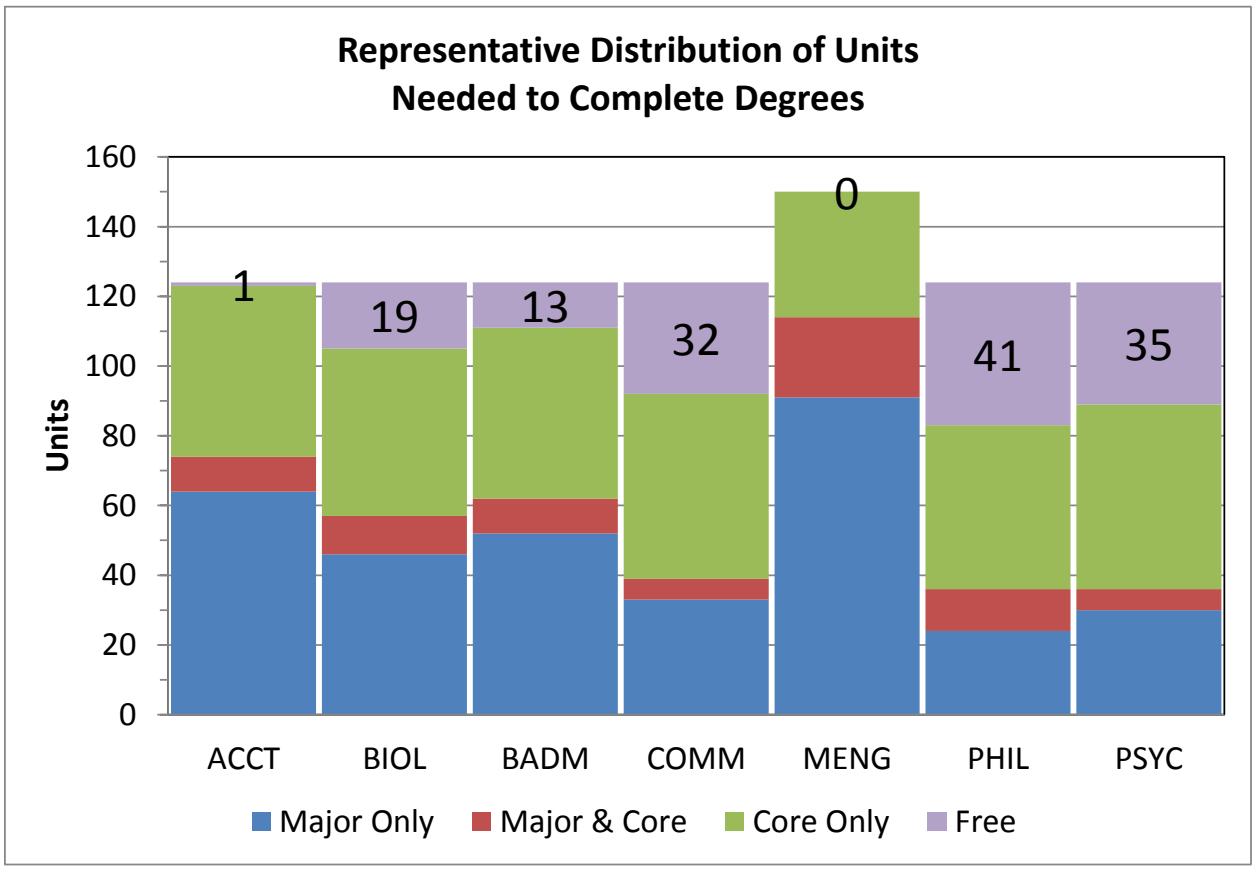

Figure 2. Distribution of major requirements, core classes, common major+core classes and free electives for selected majors. Numbers shown are the free electives available to each major.

Table 1. Summary of AP/IB/CLEP credit received by engineering graduates
(Entered USD as freshmen in Fall 2002 or later and DARS records available)

	Total Credit Received	Used in Major	Used in Core & Major	Used in Core	Not used
Max (units)	39	8	11	9	26
Median (units)	8	0	4	0	3
Avg (units)	10.17	0.69	3.49	1.43	4.57
Total Units Earned	1068	72	366	150	480
% of Total AP Units Earned	100%	7%	34%	14%	45%

Table 2. Number of engineering graduates using AP/IB/CLEP credit to meet curricular requirements
(Entered USD as freshmen in Fall 2002 or later and DARS records available)

	Total Credit Received	Used in Major	Used in Core & Major	Used in Core	Not used
3-6 units	43 students	14 students	62 students	39 students	34 students
7-12 units	32	2	16	1	21
13-21 units	21	0	0	0	8
22+ units	9	0	0	0	1