

Frequently Asked Questions concerning the Breadth component of the Core Proposal

1. Why organize Breadth requirements using “Modes on Inquiry?”

The "modes of inquiry" label was proposed because it best fits the approach we currently take with our students--the approach we believe is most beneficial to the current and future success of our students. In an age where content and details are available in the blink of an eye from web-based sources, it is clear that students need the conceptual and analytical tools to deal with information, regardless of the discipline. As scholars, we naturally pitch our courses as adventures in inquiry, rather than as mere conveyor belts of information. We should highlight our approach; put it front and center. A majority of the faculty who responded to Core-related surveys were in favor of moving away from grouping courses simply by discipline. Labeling Core requirements by discipline perpetuates the "intellectual silos" we often find ourselves in. It also implies that content itself is the highest priority. We know that the challenges facing our graduates include a rapidly changing workplace where skills of critical thinking, creativity, and synthesis and integration of disparate information will be vital. We should advertise our recognition of this need as well as our resolve to meet it.

2. How will this new categorization affect the Core course I currently teach?

It may have no affect on most courses. We believe that most of our colleagues already take an inquiry-based approach to their discipline and in their courses. This is simply considered to be good pedagogy. The proposed organization may inspire some faculty to take a more interdisciplinary approach in their courses, or to offer a course that didn't seem to fit in the current Core structure.

3. Why did you create these four, and only these four, Modes of Inquiry groups?

The four groups we created honor the natural affinities found among disciplines commonly categorized as the Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences. They are named in such a way that they do not automatically restrict membership in the same way as do the traditional divisions of the Liberal Arts education. Members of each of the four groups share similar modes of inquiry: they are similar in the way information is generated, perceived, and analyzed. Because these four groups (Artistic Inquiry, Historical and Literary Inquiry, Social and Behavioral Inquiry, and Scientific Inquiry) are cohesive units and distinctive from each other, any further splitting would not only favor certain disciplines over others, but would also inevitably end up adding more required courses to the Core. This latter outcome was avoided so that a new Core could provide students with more electives, and thus more flexibility.

4. Why use learning outcomes to categorize courses rather than discipline?

Because the "modes of inquiry" groups are not defined by discipline, it follows that

courses that seek to join a group should be scrutinized by their approach to their subject rather than by the department that is offering it. It is expected that this new focus will not change course offerings very much, but it will encourage a more interdisciplinary element to the Core offerings. It will highlight the intriguing areas where disciplines overlap, and provide faculty the opportunity and encouragement to explore them. The movement towards interdisciplinary approaches and integration in the curriculum is recognized as vital for the intellectual growth of future generations of citizens, and we feel that we should create opportunities for this to happen wherever possible.

5. Why require five, and only five, courses from the Modes of Inquiry groups?

We propose requiring five courses, chosen so that at least one course is taken from each Mode of Inquiry group, and that five different departments are represented in the student's choices. We considered reducing number to four, which would be the absolute minimum if we wished all of the four Inquiry groups to be represented. Discussion within the Breadth subcommittee and feedback from the CPC caused us to settle on the five-course option. This is a decrease from the seven that is required in the current Core. This change reflects the effort to decrease the total number of courses required by the Core, which has been a priority expressed by a majority of faculty respondents to previous Core-related surveys. With fewer requirements, students will have more electives. It remains to be seen how they will use these electives: maybe as additional courses in the major, maybe to pursue a minor, maybe as just an opportunity to sample the curriculum. Some departments may see that removal of a guaranteed pipeline of students to their discipline might be offset by students wishing to take courses for pleasure, or for a minor that they never thought they would have time for.

6. Why combine History and Literature into one Inquiry group?

History and Literature are classic elements of the Humanities; they may not be the closest kin within the Humanities, but they both seek to learn about human culture using texts. This is not to suggest that one is a substitute for the other, any more than any two social science disciplines, or any two natural science disciplines, are substitutes for each other. We understand that the combination of these disciplines into one group eliminates the course requirement that both of these disciplines current have, and that this is a problem for many. We are open to new ideas about grouping courses, and hope that we can simultaneously reduce the size of the Core. Incidentally, both Harvard and Columbia have degree programs called History and Literature.

7. In light of the general need for scientific literacy, why reduce the Science requirement?

The Scientific inquiry requirement of one class with a lab (for four units) differs from the current Core requirement of two science courses (one physical science and one life science), one of which must include a lab. However, there is no current requirement

that a science course be four units, in fact many (most?) core science lab classes are three units, with a lab that meets every other week. The four-unit scientific inquiry class we propose will have a weekly lab that is experimental or problem-solving in nature, another departure from the current Core, which relies largely on demonstration, and canned experimental work. Computer Science and Engineering courses are invited to offer labs that allow practice of problem-solving and inquiry from the perspective of their disciplines. We feel that a course with a weekly lab that is hands-on and inquiry-based will do more for the appreciation of the science or engineering in our non-majors than is currently accomplished by two courses in the current Core structure.