

# Forging a Christian College Core Curriculum

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No Comments

Having worked at three different Christian colleges in my career, I have observed that discussions surrounding the core curriculum at Christian colleges can be cantankerous. Colleagues from other Christian universities have confirmed with me that core curriculum debates can set colleagues at odds. In fact, one professor I spoke with (at an institution that shall remain unnamed) likened faculty discussions about the core curriculum to a [ridiculous battle sketch by Monty Python](#).

Core discussions can bring out the worst in some faculty, and can descend into a zero-sum battle between departments maneuvering for student traffic and resources. Yet, they also have the potential to open up lively discussions about an institution's mission and the very heart of Christian higher education. In fact, these latter kind of discussions

remind me of why I was originally drawn to teaching at a Christian college.<sup>1</sup>

When I talk with current students, they frequently complain about the core and about “getting it out of the way.” Ironically, when I talk with alumni what I tend to hear is how much they enjoyed the breadth and perspective they gained in the core curriculum. It’s unfortunate students’ future selves, who are often the most enthusiastic promoters of the core, cannot visit them. A thoughtful core curriculum that is helpful for current students and later appreciated by alumni will include several key components.

First, a core curriculum should reflect a Christian understanding of created reality. Think about a flower: it possesses not only mathematical and geometric aspects but physical and chemical properties, such as the ones that make photosynthesis possible. Furthermore, a flower is a living thing that functions biologically and as part of a larger ecosystem. Moreover, flowers function in aesthetic ways, and at times may have economic value (as is the case in a floral business). Flowers can be associated with social occasions, **to communicate messages**, or as **religious symbols**. Flowers, like the rest of created reality, are *multi-aspectual* with associated laws and norms.<sup>2</sup> A core curriculum should include a range of liberal arts and sciences courses that equip students with different ways of knowing.

A broad core helps to guard against reductionism – the tendency in academic studies to reduce all of created reality to one disciplinary framework.<sup>3</sup> Examples include explaining all of reality as data, or as just the random interaction of particles, or economics, or as a struggle between power structures. A liberal arts and science core reflects the comprehensive, multi-aspectual nature of created reality in courses taken from diverse areas of study. As someone who teaches engineers and computer scientists, I understand how critical it is for students in narrow technical disciplines to be exposed to the wider aspects of reality. Woe to the data scientist who looks at a flower and **sees only**

**data.** Even computer programs cannot be reduced to algorithms but need to be seen as having significant cultural, social, justice, economic, and ethical aspects. Some of the most pernicious challenges we face will require this kind of broad, holistic ways of thinking.

Second, a solid core curriculum will include foundational courses that will welcome students into a conversation with the animating vision of an institution. Presuppositions always exist in academic pursuits, shaping and molding each of the disciplines. Courses in Christian foundations (drawing from the deep Christian past to the present) can help to establish a framework for Christian scholarship. These will often be comprised of courses in theology, philosophy, and history, but taught for a wide audience in a winsome and hospitable way. These courses must also welcome students who may be less familiar with the Christian tradition or the denominational roots of an institution, drawing them into a vision that is *comprehensive, Christocentric, and communal*.

Third, a core program should bring *coherence* to an undergraduate education. The collection of courses offered in the core should not be a random smorgasbord of independent content; rather it should be interconnected. A thoughtful core includes an intentional *thread* that runs through the entire curriculum.<sup>4</sup> For Christian colleges this will include the centrality of Christ, themes from the biblical story such as creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, and enduring questions like “what does it mean to be human?” These themes can be introduced to first year students, revisited throughout the curriculum, and engaged in a culminating project in a capstone course. These themes will help underscore that, although created reality is diverse, all things cohere in Christ (Col. 1:17). Ideally, students should be able to look back and clearly recognize this thread woven through all their studies.

Fourth, a core curriculum should not only be academic in nature but should also strive for holistic formation.<sup>5</sup> What formative practices shape the on-campus student experience in the dorm, the basketball court, the chapel, as well as in the classroom? Ideally, a core curriculum

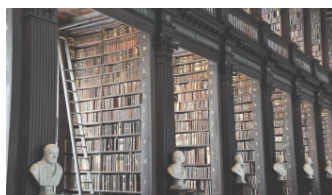
ties into the co-curriculum with the co-operation of student life, chaplains, and coaches. A thoughtful core recognizes that students are not just “brains on a stick” but rather seeks to form whole persons in and out of the classroom.

I am grateful to have taught at three different institutions with a vital, thoughtful core curriculum. If your institution is embarking on forging a new core, set a tone that discourages enmity between academic guilds and emphasizes the communal opportunity to revisit your mission and to shape your students. A thoughtful core program is not just curricular; it is teleological, helping “equip students to become a vital citizen of the Kingdom of God as it is manifested in the contemporary world.”<sup>6</sup>

### Footnotes

1. As someone who attended a specialized engineering program at a secular school, I have since become a strong proponent of a Christian liberal arts and science undergrad education – also in professional programs.
2. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, Eerdmans, 2005, pp. 16-17.
3. For more about a non-reductionist theory of reality, see chapter 11 in Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1991.
4. This requires intention, coordination, and collaboration between professors teaching in the core.
5. For an excellent introduction to formative practices for teaching, see David Smith, *On Christian Teaching: Practicing Faith in the Classroom*, Eerdmans, 2018.
6. *Christian Liberal Arts Education: Report of the Calvin College Curriculum Study Committee*, Eerdmans, 1970, p. xvi.

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