



Core Skills & Comprehension: What do students want?



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Research Methods & Sample

We gathered data from 4 focus groups (FGs) of 29 students total and an online survey of 444 students. *FG results informed the survey questions.*

- FG and survey respondents were well-distributed across majors, years, and genders
 - 20.4% of survey respondents were students of color (of the 382 respondents who identified race/ethnicity)
- Copies of all survey questions are available.

How to Make a Core Curriculum (CC) and Its Purposes Easier to Understand

Survey question: “How helpful do you think these approaches would be in making the core curriculum and its purposes easier for students to understand?”

- Response options: Extremely helpful, Very helpful, Somewhat helpful, A little helpful, Not at all helpful

Key point:

- Students’ top preference is to provide a guide or rubric like those for majors.

Table 1. Percentage of respondents indicating they view these options as Extremely or Very Helpful for making a CC and its purposes easier for students to understand

Option	Percent
Provide a guide or rubric similar to the ones for majors	83.9%
Include discussion of the core curriculum in a first-year seminar	61.6%
Have advisors explain the core curriculum in advising meetings each year	59.0%
Write the core curriculum in student-friendly language	71.4%
Put the core requirements in a sequence	41.6%
Include a reflection element such as a capstone course or a final portfolio	22.7%

Recommendation: At minimum, create a Core rubric in student-friendly language.

Comments/Feedback

Attach your post-its here.

What Skills Do Students Want to Gain From a Core Curriculum?

Survey question: “In addition to obvious things like writing and critical thinking, how important do you think it is for students to gain these skills from a core curriculum?”

Response options:
Extremely important
Very important
Somewhat important
A little important
Not at all important



Table 2. Percentage of respondents indicating these skills are either Extremely Important or Very Important in a core curriculum

Skill	Percent
Meaningfully engaging with people from varied cultures & backgrounds	90.8%
Giving and receiving constructive criticism	88.1%
Willingness to make mistakes	86.4%
Working effectively with others	86.1%
Ability to advocate for oneself and others	84.6%
Conflict resolution	81.1%
Ability to articulate one’s strengths (e.g. skills, knowledge, experiences)	79.0%
Self-evaluation	78.3%
Time management	76.9%
Creative expression	72.3%
Leadership	68.8%

Key Points:

- Most viewed all of these skills as important for a core curriculum.
- Top preference: meaningfully engaging with people across cultures and backgrounds, which is complemented by many of the others.
- Race/ethnicity and year: No important differences.

Follow-up question: “What other skills do you think are important for students to gain from a core curriculum?”

- Top items: Skills for financial literacy, open-minded and respectful dialogue, and teamwork. Students also want skills for asking questions, listening, being flexible, and resolving problems.
- FG participants wanted life skills including financial skills, knowledge for living on their own after college, awareness of mental health issues, and skills for taking care of themselves.

In students’ own words:

“Being respectful of people that have different experiences and opinions, having meaningful conversations with people you don’t see eye-to-eye with without resorting to arguments...”

“I would love for the college to require a personal finance class in the core... I think it is so vital for all students since it is something we will all use... It can also help us to be more successful after we leave St. Olaf.. [and] will help us to [address] the debt that many of us face when we graduate.”

Skills in a Possible First-Year Seminar

Survey question: “If St. Olaf includes a First Year Seminar, how important do you think it would be to include these items?”

- Top response: Communication skills, especially discussion and engagement across varied backgrounds
- Many of these items overlap with the skills students view as important for a core curriculum.
- Students also mentioned as important: Getting to know their professors, gaining time management and study skills, and learning about finances and mental health.
- A small minority objected to the idea of a FYS.

Table 3. Percentage of students finding it Extremely or Very Important to include these items in a FYS

First Year Seminar Option	Percent
Gain tools for respectful engagement with people from varied cultures or backgrounds	84.5%
Develop effective discussion techniques	82.1%
Learn about college resources including academic support and the Piper Center	71.6%
Gain basic research skills such as library research and data base use	68.6%
Engage with current events	64.7%
Understand the purposes of college	45.6%
Understand the concept of “liberal arts”	40.1%

Recommendations for a Core, based on this research:

1. Emphasize open-minded and respectful dialogue across differences. Other related skills include listening, asking questions, flexibility, and conflict resolution.
2. Incorporate discussions that foster constructive criticism, self-advocacy, and creative expression.
3. Develop a course that addresses all of these skills.
4. If including a First Year Seminar, address communication skills, especially discussion and engagement across varied backgrounds, along with topics such as financial literacy, mental health and health care, and other post-graduate life skills.

Comments/Feedback

Attach your post-its here.