

Student Perspectives: Flexibility & Choice in the Core Curriculum

Sumner Pitt, Arleigh Truesdale, Ryan Sheppard, and Tom Williamson

Introduction

This study examines student perspectives on current and proposed requirements for a core curriculum. The goal is to provide a representative report of St. Olaf students' views in order to inform future decisions about the core curriculum.

Focus Groups

7 Focus Group Themes

- Communication and collaboration skills
- Broadly informed critical thinking
- Interacting across different backgrounds and views
- Challenges and risks
- Applying learning outside the classroom
- Involvement and action in the world
- Practical skills and approaches

The research team conducted four focus groups that asked for students' candid impressions of St. Olaf's curriculum, with a focus on GEs. Participants included students from 22 majors and all class years. Each group was conducted by Sociology/Anthropology seniors trained in focus group facilitation.

Survey Participant Demographics

Class year

- First Year: 30.6%
- Sophomore: 26.2%
- Junior: 19.7%
- Senior: 23.5%

Racial/Ethnic Identity

- Asian or Asian America: 8.6%
- Black or African American: 1.3%
- Hispanic or Latinx: 3.9%
- White: 79.6%
- Mixed (2 or more groups): 5.8%

Gender

- Female: 63.9%
- Male: 33.8%
- Non-binary: 2.3%

N=444

Major/Intended Major

- NSM: 48.6%
- Social Sciences: 41.0%
- Humanities: 24.9%
- Fine Arts: 16.9%
- IGS: 11.2%

Comments/Feedback

Flexibility and Choice in the Core Curriculum

Key Points

- Students want more flexibility and choice in the core curriculum
- The main strategy students prefer is to have a wider range of courses that fulfill core requirements (72.6%), followed by allowing students to drop one core requirement (48.9%).
- Students want more interdisciplinary core courses and want to tailor the requirements to their interests and majors.
- Students are also interested in more interdisciplinary course offerings in the core.
- Very few students mentioned wanting to delete or drastically slash the core requirements.



“Which three options would you most prefer from this list?”

Below are ways to give students choice and flexibility in the core curriculum that came up in the focus groups:

Table 1. Percentage of respondents preferring options for increased choice and flexibility

Option for increased choice and flexibility	Percent
Expand the range of courses that fulfill core requirements	72.6%
Allow students to drop one core curriculum requirement	48.9%
Require an experiential component in which students do an internship, off-campus study, or a civic engagement project	33.0%
Allow students to take a core requirement pass/fail	31.6%
Allow students to fulfill requirements through an experience and a presentation or written summary about that experience	29.7%
Include more partial credit (.25 or .50 options)	29.5%
Provide independent study options to fulfill requirements	11.9%
Allow students to create a portfolio to fulfill requirements	11.5%
Other options (respondents' own ideas)	7.0%

Comments/Feedback

Recommendations

3 recommendations to increase flexibility and choice

Based on these research results, we recommend:

1. Expand the range of courses that fulfill core requirements, especially in areas that have relatively few options.
2. Allow students to drop one core curriculum requirement.
3. Offer more interdisciplinary courses.

Quotes

Many students took the time to write comments, and the sample below illustrates their range and themes:

“Especially if the college is going to keep all 23 GE requirements, I think that there should be more courses that fulfill those core requirements.”

“There is a huge lack in availability for some GE's that make it much more difficult for certain majors to get them.”

“Allow fulfillment of similar GEs in one department (i.e. taking both multicultural credits in English department).”

“Allow students to drop one core curriculum requirement if it requires multiple completions (ex. HWC, WRI, HBS, either SED or IST, etc.).”

“The curriculum is widely off balance in terms of scientific vs. non-scientific requirements. Many students in non-scientific fields seem to believe that in general, science courses are not useful to them. I think that is a very dangerous misconception that is being reinforced by the current curriculum. Furthermore, there's a lack of science courses designed to teach scientific skills in relative ways to non-science majors.”

“St. Olaf is awful at allowing non-classroom experiences.”

“I believe that the GE requirements should be less Western and Christian centric. There should not be a requirement for both a BTS-B and BTS-T. The HWC courses are also extremely limiting, and there should not be a requirement to take two of them, especially since most of the courses that offer an HWC are also Western-centric.”

“The core curriculum makes it much harder for transfer students and for people who wish to pursue more than one major.”

Two Potential Core Topics: Religion & Power and Inequality

Arleigh Truesdale, Sumner Pitt, Ryan Sheppard, Tom Williamson

Religion

"In the religion area of the core curriculum, how effective do you think these options would be for helping students learn about religion's importance in the world?"

- Response categories: *Not at all effective, A little effective, Somewhat effective, Very effective, or Extremely effective*

Key Points

- According to students, very and extremely effective options for learning about religion's importance in the world are to take courses on non-Christian religions (75.1%), to take courses about religion in other departments (62.1%), and to take courses in the Religion Department (56.9%). Examples of courses that could fulfill the religion requirement: Music and Religion; Psychology of Spirituality/Religion, Islamic Theology

Table 1. Percentage of students indicating these options are Very or Extremely effective

Options for learning about religion's importance in the world	Percentage
Take courses on non-Christian religions	75.1%
Take courses about religion in other departments	62.1%
Take courses in the Religion Department	56.9%
Include an experiential option, such as a community project	50.5%
Include an independent study option	41.3%

Quotes

"Learning about new religions and having broader knowledge of religions outside of just Christianity is crucial, especially in such a Christian-dominated society. We need to practice open-mindedness and compassion."

"I personally chose St. Olaf in a large part because of the religion requirements. That being said, the BTS-T needs to be less Christian-focused."

"I am a Christian student who would absolutely love to have more opportunities to learn about Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other spiritual traditions."

"Creating courses that combine religion with other fields, for instance how religion affects the course of science and scientific efforts over the years."

Recommendations

1. Expand the range of courses capable of fulfilling the religion requirement.
2. Include courses outside the religion department.
3. Expand the number of courses that examine non-Christian religious practices and traditions.

Why These Two Topics?

Focus group questions asked students to identify possible topics to be included in a new core curriculum. Students consistently pointed to a need to reconfigure the religion requirement and to design a core requirement that addresses topics such as power, inequality, and larger social structures and hierarchies. For more information about the focus group methodologies, see poster *Student Perspectives on General Education Requirements: Flexibility and Choice in the Core Curriculum*.



Comments/Feedback

Power, Social Inequalities, and Difference

"If St. Olaf includes an emphasis on learning about power, social inequalities, and social difference as part of a core curriculum, how effective do you think these options would be for learning about these topics?"

- Response categories: *Not at all effective, A little effective, Somewhat effective, Very effective, or Extremely effective*

Key Points

- The options students preferred for learning about these topics were taking courses in departments that focus on these topics (74.5%) and including the topics of power, social inequalities, and difference in one's major or concentration (71.6%).
- Fewer students indicated interest in an independent study option (43.3%) to learn about these topics.
- Examples of courses that could fulfill this requirement: include HIST 245: Environmental History of Latin America and ENVST 381: Race, Environment, & Art.

Table 2. Percentage of students indicating these options are Very or Extremely Effective

Options for learning about power, social inequalities and social difference	Percentage
Take courses in departments that focus on these topics	74.5%
Include the topics of power, social inequalities, and social differences in one's major or concentration	71.6%
Include the topics of power, social inequalities, and social differences in a first year seminar	62.7%
Include an experiential option, such as a community project	60.3%
Include an independent study option	43.3%

Quotes

"Integrate these discussions into many different courses across the curriculum - not just in the RACE and WMGST depts."

"I want to learn about power, social inequalities, and social differences across the curriculum: in the arts, hard sciences, social sciences, etc."

"Promoting spaces both inside and outside the classroom that promote an open dialogue that focuses on growth and understanding would allow this sort of learning to flourish"

Recommendations

1. Establish a new core requirement that addresses power, social inequalities, and difference.
2. Ensure that this new requirement is able to be fulfilled by courses in many departments.