

Student Perspectives on a Core Curriculum at St. Olaf College

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This study examines student perspectives on current and proposed requirements for a core curriculum at St. Olaf College. The research team conducted four focus groups (FGs) that asked for students' candid impressions of St. Olaf's curriculum. The participant pool is comprised of students from all years and 22 majors. Seven themes emerged regarding important elements of students' general education: 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, and practical skills and approaches. We used the FG themes and input from the GE Task Force to design a survey that was sent to 2,252 St. Olaf students in early February 2019. Of these, 444 students responded to the survey, yielding a response rate of 20%. The sample extended broadly across student demographics or year, gender, race and ethnicity, and major. Key findings are below.

Desire for Flexibility and Choice in the Core Curriculum: Of the options we investigated (guided by FG data), the main strategy students prefer for achieving greater flexibility and choice 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 are also interested in more interdisciplinary course offerings in the core, and they would like to tailor core curriculum requirements to their interests and majors.

Preferences Regarding Two Potential Core Options: FG participants 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. According to survey respondents, 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%). An example of a course beyond the Religion department that might fulfill the religion requirement is PSYCH 229: Psychology of Spirituality and Religion. The options students preferred for learning about power, social inequalities, and social differences 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, though still a notable percentage of students, indicated interest in an independent study option (43.3%). Examples of courses that could fulfill this requirement include HIST 245: Environmental History of Latin America and ENVST 381: Race, Environment, & Art.

Skills Students Want to Gain from a Core Curriculum: The top skill students would like to gain was to be able to meaningfully engage with people across cultures and backgrounds. When adding their own suggestions, students most commonly listed skills pertaining to financial literacy, open-minded and respectful dialogue, and teamwork. When asked about items to include in a First Year Seminar, the top response was communication skills, especially for discussion and engagement across people from varied backgrounds. Additional items students listed were skills for financial literacy, open-minded and respectful dialogue, and teamwork.

How to Make a Core Curriculum and Its Purposes Easier to Understand: When asked about this topic, students' top preference is to provide a guide or rubric like those for majors.

Based on these research results, we recommend the following:

1. Expand the range of courses that fulfill core requirements, especially in areas with few options.
2. Allow students to drop one core curriculum requirement.

3. Offer more interdisciplinary courses.
4. Expand the range of courses capable of fulfilling the religion requirement.
5. Include courses outside the religion department.
6. Expand the number of courses that examine non-Christian religious practices and traditions.
7. Establish a new core requirement that addresses power, social inequalities, and difference.
8. Ensure that this new requirement is able to be fulfilled by courses in many departments.
9. Emphasize open-minded and respectful dialogue across differences, along with listening, asking questions, flexibility, and conflict resolution.
10. Incorporate discussions that foster constructive criticism, self-advocacy, and creative expression.
11. Develop a course that addresses all of these skills.
12. For a FYS, address communication skills, especially discussion and engagement across groups, plus topics such as financial literacy, mental health, and other post-graduate life skills.
13. Create a Core rubric written in student-friendly language.