

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 in order to inform future decisions about the core curriculum at St. Olaf College. The study was conducted by a team of student researchers in collaboration with Ryan Sheppard and Tom Williamson. Although not named as authors, two additional students, Grace Jackson and Pearl McAndrews, helped design the study and conduct the focus group portion of the research.

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.

Seven themes emerged from the focus groups' discussions of important elements of their 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 themes from the focus groups and input from the GE Task Force to design a survey that was sent to 2,252 St. Olaf students in early February 2019. Respondents included 444 students, yielding a response rate of 20%. The sample extended broadly across student demographics:

- Year: 30.6% were first years, 26.2% were sophomores, 19.7% juniors, and 23.5% seniors
- Gender: 63.9% female, 33.8% male, and 2.3% non-binary
- Race and ethnicity: 20.4% students of color (8.6% Asian or Asian American, 1.3% Black or African American, 3.9% Hispanic or Latinx and, and 5.8% mixed, with two or more groups) and 79.6% white
- Major or intended major: 48.6% NSM, 41.0% Social Sciences, 24.9% Humanities, 16.9% Fine Arts, and 11.2% IGS (total is greater than 100% because of double and triple majors)

Major findings from the research, along with results-based recommendations, are discussed below.

Desire for Flexibility and Choice in the Core Curriculum

To address this topic, the survey provided a list of options for enhancing student choice and flexibility in the core curriculum, based largely on focus group results and shown in Table 1, and asked, "Which three options would you most prefer from this list?" Results indicate that students want more flexibility and choice in the core curriculum. Of the options we investigated (based on focus group 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.

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

Option	Percentage
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	19.5%
Provide independent study options to fulfill requirements	11.9%
Allow students to create a portfolio to fulfill requirements	11.5%
Your own idea(s)	7.0%

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.”*

Based on these research results, we recommend the following:

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.

Student Preferences Regarding Two Potential Core Options

Focus group participants were asked to identify possible topics to be included in a new core curriculum.

Students consistently brought up the 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. We addressed these topics in the survey.

The survey asked, "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 options included Extremely effective, Very effective, Somewhat effective, A little effective, and Not at all effective. 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%). (See Table 2.) Examples of courses that could fulfill the religion requirement: Music and Religion; Psychology of Spirituality/Religion, Islamic Theology.

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

Components of a Religion Area	Percentage viewing the option as extremely or very effective
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%

Many students added comments that flesh out the data above. For example:

- *"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."*

Based on these research results, we recommend the following:

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

The survey also asked, "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?" The response options were the same as for the religion question. As shown in Table 3, 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 3. Percentage of students indicating these options are Very or Extremely Effective

Option for learning about power, social inequalities, and social difference	Percentage responding extremely or very effective (of 415 students who answered this question)
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%

Again, many students added comments that flesh out the data above. For example:

- *“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”*

Based on these research results, we recommend the following:

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.

Skills Students Want to Gain from a Core Curriculum

The survey asked, “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?” The skills listed in Table 4 were based largely on focus group results. Response options included Extremely important, Very important, Somewhat important, A little important, and Not at all important. As shown in Table 4, most respondents viewed all of these skills as important for a core curriculum. The top preference was to be able to meaningfully engaging with people across cultures and backgrounds, which is complemented by many of the other skills listed. We tested for variation by race/ethnicity and year in school but found no important differences.

Table 4. Percentage of respondents indicating these skills are either Extremely Important or Very Important in a core curriculum

Skills that might be included in a core curriculum	Percentage viewing skill as extremely or very important in CC (of 422 students answering this question)
Meaningfully engaging with people from varied cultures and backgrounds	90.8% (383)
Giving and receiving constructive criticism	88.1% (372)
Willingness to make mistakes	86.4% (363)
Working effectively with others	86.1% (370)
Ability to advocate for oneself and others	84.6% (354)
Conflict resolution	81.1% (341)
Ability to articulate one's strengths, such as skills, knowledge, and experiences	79.0% (330)
Self-evaluation	78.3% (328)
Time management	76.9% (325)
Creative expression	72.3% (303)
Leadership	68.8% (290)

We also asked: “What *other skills* do you think are important for students to gain from a core curriculum?” The top items students listed were skills for financial literacy, open-minded and respectful dialogue, and teamwork. Students also want skills for asking questions, listening, being flexible, and resolving problems. Focus group participants reported wanting to gain 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.

Again, students offered comments, for example:

- “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.”

Related to this, we also asked about skills and other items to include in a First Year Seminar: “If St. Olaf includes a First Year Seminar, how important do you think it would be to include these items?”, using the same response options. As shown in Table 5, the top response was communication skills, especially for discussion and engagement across people from varied backgrounds. Many of these items overlap with the skills students view as important for a core curriculum. Students also mentioned that it would be important to include 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 First Year Seminar.

Table 5. Percentage of students finding it Extremely or Very Important to include these items in a FYS

Components of a FYS	% viewing the skill as extremely or very important for a FYS (of 413 answering this question)
Gain tools for respectful engagement with people from varied cultures and backgrounds	84.5% (346)
Develop effective discussion techniques	82.1% (340)
Learn about college resources including academic support and the Piper Center	71.6% (295)
Gain basic research skills such as library research and data base use	68.6% (282)
Engage with current events	64.7% (267)
Understanding the purposes of college	45.6% (188)
Understand the concept of “liberal arts”	40.1% (168)

Based on these research results, we recommend the following:

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.

How to Make a Core Curriculum and Its Purposes Easier to Understand

To address this topic, the survey asked, “How helpful do you think these approaches would be in making the core curriculum and its purposes easier for students to understand?” Response options included Extremely helpful, Very helpful, Somewhat helpful, A little helpful, and Not at all helpful. As shown in Table 6, students’ top preference is to provide a guide or rubric like those for majors.

Table 6. 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

Options for making a core curriculum and its purposes easier for students to understand	Percentage viewing the option as extremely or very helpful (of 396 answering this question)
Provide a guide or rubric similar to the ones for majors	83.9% (33)
Write the core curriculum description in student-friendly language	71.4% (283)
Include discussion of the core curriculum in a first year seminar	61.6 % (246)
Have advisors explain the core curriculum in advising meetings each year	59.0% (237)
Put the core requirements in a sequence	41.6% (164)
Include a reflection element such as a capstone course or a final portfolio	22.7% (88)

Based on these research results, we recommend the following:

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