

Reimagining the Core Curriculum Working Group Progress Report

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Introduction

The Reimagining the Core Curriculum working group (RCwg) began our work in November 2023, in response to our charge from Provost Constancio Nakuma. In particular, the charge asked the working group to “critically reflect on, research national models for, and propose a CU Denver-informed model for what makes sense to include in our ‘general education’/ ‘core curriculum’ portfolio for students who declare different academic majors.” The charge also posed to the working group three questions:

1. What must the structure and content of the core curriculum be for students in different academic majors to provide for their “broad education” yet find the components of the core to be germane to and complementary of their academic major focus and interests?
2. How should the core be configured to eliminate barriers to students’ academic progression, especially when they need to switch majors?
3. How should documented prior learning and experiential learning factor into the general education core requirements?

In starting this process, we were asked to review the CU Denver student personas, which were developed through the University’s student enrollment management (SEM) process and informed by our location and context. The charge noted that CU Denver is “the only urban public research university in Denver that is also aspiring to be the nation’s first equity-serving institution” and that it “serves a predominantly working learner commuter population of students seeking social mobility.” Revisions to the core should, therefore, foreground the university’s “equity-serving aspiration.”

Through its ongoing inquiry into a range of state and national models, its survey of students and faculty, and its focused review on the student personas, the working group has privileged an outcomes-based approach to the core curriculum. The group is still determining the concrete core skills they hope students develop and what curricular model or models would best support these outcomes. Before the end of the spring semester, the group hopes to agree on a core curriculum model that incorporates documented prior learning and introduces emerging skills for academic, workplace, and civic success.

Values and Definitions that Guide the Work of Reimagining the Core

A significant step in the RCwg's process was to identify the values that will guide our work, considering values as guardrails for our collective work throughout the year. These values were identified through iterative dialogue, and include:

1. Utilize an inclusive conversation and process
2. Operate with transparency
3. Honor and learn from the past
4. Practice a process and decision-making that are data-informed
5. Consider financial impacts of changes on programs and be transparent about it
6. Align with university strategic plan
7. Action-oriented recommendations
8. View requirements from a strengths-based/asset-based perspective
9. Practice best interest perspectives of students (outcomes of Core) and faculty (contribution to Core)

Current Core

The current university core, which was developed more than thirty years ago but has been revised numerous times since, is grounded in a liberal arts philosophy of education “in order to develop a broad set of academic skills for the baccalaureate student and to establish a foundation for lifelong learning” (<https://catalog.ucdenver.edu/cu-denver/undergraduate/graduation-undergraduate-core-requirements/#text>). The Core curriculum “develops multiple literacies, stimulates creative thinking, and utilizes technology,” all of which remain important to academic and workplace success. Important to its status as an equity-serving and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institution, as well as its commitment to becoming once again a Hispanic-serving institution, the university faculty created a core “that engages students in developing sensitivity to diversity and developing their place in an urban environment, as well as in the rapidly changing global environment.”

To support students in achieving these goals, the core includes 9-10 hours in the “intellectual competencies” of composition and mathematics; 19-24 hours in the knowledge areas of the arts, humanities, behavior sciences, social sciences, and natural and physical sciences; 3 hours in courses that emphasize international perspectives; and 3 hours in courses that emphasize cultural diversity for a total of 34-40 hours.

Core Learning Outcomes

The core learning outcomes and rubrics for the undergraduate general education program were developed by faculty to ensure students were achieving the same learning outcomes across a variety of core courses. The learning outcomes for math, for example, are “calculate, represent, interpret, and model,” while the outcomes for composition are “purposeful writing, revising and writing process, argument and analysis, critical reading, rhetorical knowledge, research, and technology/multimodality.” Assessment of these courses measures students’ abilities to demonstrate each of these outcomes. Faculty have also constructed a shared set of outcomes and rubrics for each of the knowledge areas (e.g., “terms and theories” for social sciences and “textual analysis” for the humanities) and the international perspectives (e.g., “global contexts”) and cultural diversity requirements (e.g., “marginalization”). The full list of learning objectives can be found here: https://www.ucdenver.edu/docs/librariesprovider113/learning-outcomes/11-17-15-gen-ed-cover-page.pdf?sfvrsn=d4486fba_2.

Core Issues

Provost Nakuma’s Charge for the working group implies students need a core that teaches more emergent skills and abilities and better values their documented prior learning. There is also a need for more experiential learning—a high-impact practice that has been shown to retain students and help them succeed after graduation—throughout the core. The charge asks the working group to consider core models that support students’ academic achievement—that are complementary to their chosen majors (given that students often change majors)—while also allowing them to complete their degrees in a timely manner.

National and Local Data Landscape

We reviewed several types of data to help the group: 1) understand the purposes and structures of the core in higher education and, more specifically, in peer, regional, and innovative institutions; 2) assess the effectiveness of the core in helping students succeed academically at CU Denver; 3) identify the academic and workplace skills Colorado employers value; and 4) discover what CU Denver students and faculty think the purpose of the core should be.

Peer Institution Research

In order to understand the purposes and structures of the core in higher education and, more specifically, in peer, regional, and innovative institutions, the group compared the CU Denver

core documents, including purpose and outcome statements, with those of our peer institutions and sister campuses. The majority of peer institutions have adopted a distributed core model, which exposes students to multiple disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences and includes writing and math requirements. Several universities, like the University of Northern Illinois, have created a core of clustered courses around contemporary social problems and issues. Others, like UCCS and Minerva University, have crafted a carefully sequenced set of courses and essential learning outcomes that culminate in a complex experiential learning experience or capstone project. On January 11, the group met with Ben Nelson, co-founder of Minerva University, and spent most of its time learning how to research, determine, and assess the durable skills students need from the core curriculum. We learned that assessment is key to our revision. Cal State Fullerton, for example, wrote about full-scale assessment for their core. They were able to embed a way of assessing student learning outcomes, but they did it in a way that built assessment into the teaching itself. Minerva has done something similar.

The group also reviewed AACU (American Association of Colleges and Universities) research on the importance of common high-impact practices to student academic success and the essential transferable skills students need to adapt to rapidly changing workplace environments. More pragmatically, we learned what the HLC requires in terms of the core curriculum for accreditation, as well as the importance of meeting CDHE, GT pathway, and prior learning requirements in order to recruit and retain more transfer students. The working group has regularly acknowledged how important it is to consider the experiences of transfer students when re-imagining the core curriculum. Because of our large transfer population, we need to keep in mind the importance of state-wide articulation agreements and documented prior learning and make sure our new core will not make it more difficult for transfer students. While it will be important for CU Denver to differentiate its core from those of other institutions, especially neighboring institutions, it will be equally important to maintain state-wide and local community college transfer agreements.

Retention and Degree Completion Data

To assess the effectiveness of the core in helping students succeed academically at CU Denver, the working group reviewed OIRE data on student retention and graduation rates. While these data do not tell us whether the core directly affects retention and graduation rates, they do suggest that too many students are experiencing barriers to degree completion. A re-imagined core should play a role in lessening these barriers and/or supporting students in overcoming them. Because the OIRE could not offer the group nuanced information about these barriers or how the core impacted them, they distributed a survey, which included two questions about the core curriculum, to current students and faculty. We discuss the survey questions and results in a later section.

Workplace Skills Data

To identify the academic and workplace skills Colorado employers value, the group invited Jeremy Lingle to present on the post-graduate skills currently in demand nationally and locally. Jeremy shared the core skills chart below, which shows the percentage of organizations that considered the skill to be “increasingly important over the next five years” (p. 32 of the 2023 Colorado Talent Pipeline Report).

01. Creative Thinking (73.2%)	06. Systems Thinking (59.9%)
02. Analytical Thinking (71.6%)	07. AI and Big Data (59.5%)
03. Technological Literacy (67.7%)	08. Motivation and Self Awareness (58.9%)
04. Curiosity and Lifelong Learning (66.8%)	09. Talent Management (56.4%)
05. Resiliency, Flexibility, and Agility (65.8%)	10. Service Oriented (54.8%)

The Talent Pipeline Report data corresponds with a 2021 employer survey research report published by the AACU, which states that “critical thinking and analysis, problem-solving, teamwork, and communication through writing and speaking have consistently been ranked highest over time” (p. 5 of *How College Contributes to Workforce Success Report*).

Student and Faculty Perspectives on the Core

To investigate what CU Denver students and faculty think the purpose of the core should be, our working group constructed two questions for the OIRE student survey—one focused on the purposes for the core and the other focused on its structure. The questions came out of our research on and discussions about the types of essential skills (listed below) we think students should develop and demonstrate over the course of the core curriculum and whether students prefer a flexible or sequenced core structure.

Essential Skills

The core should support students in learning:

- Skills related to civic literacy and a critical understanding and appreciation of cultural and social histories and identities.
- Skills related to logical, ethical, quantitative, and scientific reasoning, as well as creative thinking.
- How to use multiple forms of reasoning and analysis to address complex problems.
- How to communicate across a variety of modes to and for diverse audiences.
- How to evaluate multiple perspectives and collaborate effectively with others.

When our working group members prioritized the skills listed above, they ranked developing academic skills and civic and socio-cultural skills as the two highest priorities for the core, while the students ranked learning transferable workplace skills, succeeding academically, and broadening and deepening perspectives on being human as the three most important purposes for the core. The survey results correspond with recent articles written by students, which argue for more courses on emotional, social, and financial literacy in the core. The survey also shows a strong preference for a flexible core structure over a sequenced set of courses, so the working group will have to consider this when constructing curricular models.

Survey Questions and Results

Survey Question One: The CU Denver Core Curriculum courses ensure students make progress toward fundamentally important objectives. We would like to know what objectives you consider the most important for students. Please select how important each of the following objectives for CU Denver Core Curriculum courses are. Results are pictured below the question.

	Not at all Important	Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Extremely Important
learn and develop skills to succeed academically (e.g., reading and writing carefully, persuasive speaking, interpreting and utilizing quantitative data, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
learn and develop skills to be an engaged and successful participant in your local, national, and global communities (e.g., familiarization with social, ethical, cultural, religious, and economic differences among people, understanding the sources of conflict, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
learn and develop skills across disciplines and perspectives to address complex social problems (i.e. climate change, discrimination, civil rights, diabetes/cancer/other health challenges, food security/scarcity, capital punishment, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Not at all Important	Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Extremely Important
learn and develop essential transferrable skills across a wide range of jobs or careers (teamwork, active listening, adaptability, communication across media, facility with new technologies, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
broaden and deepen your perspective on being human (e.g., understand human historical trends, appreciate ideas citizens need to solve issues, speak and understand the importance knowing a second language, interpret data, know scientific ways of investigating the world, become familiar with ethical and theoretical approaches to understanding life, gain insight into creative fields like art, dance, and fiction, appreciate different political and economic systems, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Importance of Core Curriculum Objectives

	Extremely Important	Moderately Importa..	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
Broaden and deepen your perspective on being human	44%	37%	13%	6%
Learn and develop essential transferrable skills across a wide range of jobs or careers	60%	27%	10%	3%
Learn and develop skills across disciplines and perspectives to address complex social problems	42%	34%	17%	7%
Learn and develop skills to be an engaged and successful participant in your local, national, and global communities	39%	34%	21%	6%
Learn and develop skills to succeed academically	49%	35%	14%	2%

Survey Question Two: For the CU Denver Core Curriculum do you prefer flexibility or sequence? Results are pictured below the question.

A. Flexibility - students may take Core courses at any time during their undergraduate careers at CU Denver

B. Sequence - students should complete Core course requirements during their first year at CU Denver

- Strongly prefer flexibility
- Somewhat prefer flexibility
- No preference between flexibility and sequence
- Somewhat prefer sequence
- Strongly prefer sequence

Preference towards Flexibility vs Sequence for Core Curriculum

Strongly prefer flexibility	55%
Somewhat prefer flexibility	20%
No preference between flexibility and sequence	13%
Somewhat prefer sequence	7%
Strongly prefer sequence	5%

In addition to interpreting and discussing the survey results, the group will research the student personas located in the CU Denver's Strategic Enrollment Plan. In an upcoming meeting on April 18, the group will choose a persona and simulate that student's journey through our current core curriculum. This exercise will help the group better define desired core outcomes for the types of students currently attending CU Denver, as well as the types of students we hope to attract and recruit.

Status of Project

Our first meeting was the charge meeting on November 6, 2023 with Provost Nakuma, and we have met eight times since then. Our overarching plan was to spend December and January reviewing CU Denver and peer institution data on the purpose of the core and the values and principles that inform the structure and content of the core. We then spent all of February and March crafting a shared list of core educational goals (i.e., the skills, dispositions, habits of mind we want students to learn from the core). The hope for April was to begin structuring a curriculum that supported those shared goals/outcomes. However, the group realized they didn't have enough information to move forward. Instead of focusing on skills, we are asking the group to create a shared set of outcomes for the core, which will better equip the group to re-imagine a set of courses (and perhaps a sequence of courses) that will support students in achieving those outcomes.

Here is a summary of the work we have completed over the course of those eight meetings:

November 17, 2023

Presenters antwan Jefferson and Kim Regier (former and current CCOC chairs, respectively) discussed our existing core requirements and recent revisions. Current core curriculum requirements are located here: <https://catalog.ucdenver.edu/cu-denver/undergraduate/graduation-undergraduate-core-requirements/>. Beth Myers presented the HLC accreditation core requirements, CDHE and GT pathway core requirements, prior learning/testing waivers for core requirements, and existing data we have available to aid in core reform.

November 27, 2023

Beth Myers presented the CU Boulder core revisions, and Michelle Comstock presented the UCCS core revisions. The group started brainstorming the values and principles they believed should inform the CU Denver core.

December 15, 2023

Dave Deffenbacher presented OIRE dashboards on DFW rates and degree completion rates, followed by small-group discussions on the following questions: What do the data suggest about barriers students face in completing the core? What additional types of data do you need to understand in a more in-depth way the impact of the core on student performance and learning outcomes? How do the data correspond or not correspond with your own experiences of the core (as an advisor, staff member, faculty member, administrator, etc.)? Do the data support what you hear or experience anecdotally? What other problems do you see with core that are not represented by the data? Based on the data, what do you see as the key educational goals for the core for our population of students?

Over winter break, the group researched the core, including the revision process, for 2-3 universities considered “peer institutions.” Some researched our official peer institutions and others chose comparable universities like the University of Northern Illinois, which has created a core of clustered courses around contemporary social problems and issues. The group noted the primary educational goals for the core at each institution they researched.

January 11, 2024

The group met with Ben Nelson, co-founder of Minerva University and spent most of the session learning how to research and develop core (durable) values, skills, and principles.

January 23, 2024

Jeremy Lingle presented the post-graduate skills currently in demand in Colorado industries, and the group reviewed the current CU Denver Core learning outcomes. In small groups members shared their findings on core curricula at peer institutions, with a particular emphasis on the underlying skills, habits of mind, and dispositions that inform the core.

February 9, 2024

At this meeting, the group began brainstorming the key skills, dispositions, and habits of mind they want students to learn from the core. The brainstorming document is rich with ideas that center on equipping students to navigate shifting career paths and civic and community contexts.

February 22, 2024

The group prioritized several of the above key skills and moved others to the periphery. By majority vote, they ranked developing academic skills and civic and socio-cultural skills as the two highest priorities for the core. They then began brainstorming a more specific set of skills associated with academic success and civic and socio-cultural literacy. Here's that list of essential skills, again:

The core should support students in learning:

- Skills related to civic literacy and a critical understanding and appreciation of cultural and social histories and identities.
- Skills related to logical, ethical, quantitative, and scientific reasoning, as well as creative thinking.
- How to use multiple forms of reasoning and analysis to address complex problems.
- How to communicate across a variety of modes to and for diverse audiences.
- How to evaluate multiple perspectives and collaborate effectively with others.

March 5, 2024

During this meeting members of the working group met in small groups to craft a core curriculum goal statement based on the two top priorities: developing academic skills and civic and socio-cultural skills. The facilitators and mentors then composed a core curriculum goal statement based on the group work. Below is a draft of that statement, which we then shared with the working group at the April 2 meeting.

The purpose of the CU Denver Core is to support student success in the university and beyond through the development of a wide range of academic skills and cultural knowledge. These essential skills include practicing and applying critical and creative thinking, quantitative reasoning, multimodal communication, and collaboration, etc, as well as developing and expanding social and cultural knowledge, which includes understanding cultural and social histories, differences, and identities. Employers agree these skills are critical for a successful career in a world of work marked by rapid change. The CU Denver Core, housed in an urban university with a diverse student body, also asks students to explore society's pressing problems (e.g., climate change, social justice, sustainability) from multiple perspectives. Such knowledge will empower students to advocate for and effect change in their workplaces, communities, states, and nations. Developing these essential skills prepares students to excel in their jobs, advance in their careers, participate effectively in their communities, and adapt to the evolving demands of the 21st century.

April 2, 2024

Our collective agenda at this meeting was to review the above core statement (a combination of small group statements meant to serve as a launching pad and not a final version) and explore different arrangements of the CU Denver Core, when reimagined for our students. We communicated a loose taxonomy for those arrangements: distribution requirements, courses clustered around contemporary social issues, courses sequenced for the development of essential skills during entire college career (Compass) model), and a mix of 2-3 of the above. For instance, while Minerva University emphasizes a set of essential outcomes across disciplines with hands-on learning, UCCS has developed a Compass curriculum that spans over 4 years, building upon prior knowledge. Most institutions implement a distribution model, with exposure to different disciplines. The group was not quite ready to agree on a core statement and preferred to talk about core arrangements. To guide that process, two of the group leaders created an approach that will shift the focus to outcomes at the April 18 meeting.

Future work

At our upcoming April 18 meeting we plan to clarify and distinguish three important core constructs:

- a. Goals and Objectives of the Core
- b. Skills and Competencies that students should develop as they progress through a Core curriculum

c. Outcomes of a Core Curriculum at CU Denver

This refresher will allow the group to consider the charge and the data we have reviewed and discussed over the last several months. In past meetings we used the terms goals, objectives, skills, and outcomes somewhat interchangeably, and we think that might be limiting our progress. By working to distinguish these constructs and thinking through their relationships, the majority of us should be able to agree on a new model—or two alternative models for the new core curriculum. The group's shared outcomes will provide a frame through which it will be able to look at the core holistically, maintaining a focus on the student learning journey while considering the existing university Core. For the meeting group members will revisit the SEM student personas, which include characteristics of anticipated CU Denver students. These personas are located here: https://www.ucdenver.edu/docs/librariesprovider216/student-success/cu-denver-sem-plan-v-3-02-01-2023.pdf?sfvrsn=a7ff49bb_0.

Our plan was to have a working draft or outline of a framework for proposed core changes by the end of April. We hoped to suggest a curricular sequence or cluster of core courses. However, this important return to outcomes may take the entire meeting on April 18. Anticipating this, we added a working group meeting for May, and we hope to have a more concrete sense of the proposed model(s) after that meeting. The co-facilitators will seek feedback on the outline from staff during the summer and refine the proposal with the working group in the fall before presenting it to leadership and faculty governance groups.