The Unified Core
A "Major" Learning Community Model in Action

Gwynn M. Powell
Corey W. Johnson
The University of Georgia

J. Joy James
Appalachian State University

Rudy Dunlap
Texas A & M University

Abstract

The Unified Core is an innovative approach to higher education that blends content through linked courses within a major to create a community of learners. This article offers the theoretical background for the approach, describes the implementation, and offers suggestions to educators who would like to design their own version of this innovative approach. Four separate three-credit foundation courses, Foundations of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Programming in Leisure Service, Community Programming in Recreation Leadership, and Contemporary Social Issues in Recreation and Leisure Studies, are taught as a blended unit to undergraduates entering the initial semester of the Recreation and Leisure Studies major.

KEYWORDS: Unified core, cohort-design, expeditionary learning, learning community model

Address correspondence to Gwynn Powell, gpowell@uga.edu or Corey Johnson, cwjohns@uga.edu RLST-UGA 343 Ramsey Center 300 River Road Athens, GA 30602 706-542-5064

The Unified core[1] : A "major" learning community in action

In many academic programs, it is often assumed that both students and faculty will make connections across the individual courses they take/teach, and that course content, skill development, and experience will coalesce for the student as an emerging professional identity. This article highlights a curricular innovation that creates an interdependent community of learners who explore, develop, sustain, improve, and contribute to leisure/human service delivery in a critical and meaningful way. This approach uses integrated course content, experience-based delivery, and active learning strategies to provide students with the skills necessary to become leisure service professionals. Students engage with material in meaningful ways and provide services to populations that are often under-served. The unique features of the approach are highlighted with recommendations for others who want to implement similar curricular changes.

Theoretical Background and Assumptions

Investigation by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2004) seeking to capitalize on the integration of skills and knowledge as related to intended outcomes for students in higher education sparked discussion about what, how and why "we" teach the way "we" do. Building on Kolb's process of experiential learning (1984), the emphasis on the connected and recursive linkage between concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation helps spotlight the active role learners can take in the process of education. Within the realm of outdoor education, Outward Bound is often considered a leader in placing the learner in the middle of the content and providing intense experiences to spark growth. Those principles are central to the discussion and practice of expeditionary learning (www.elob.org) in school reform. The overarching goal is to create powerful instructional practices so that learning opportunities are created for the students.

Building on these ideas, the Unified Core approach operates from three basic assumptions: 1) Students need authentic community-based learning environments enriched by the support of their peers and the engagement of their faculty to challenge them to make connections beyond the classroom and to encourage them to do their best. 2) Leisure service professionals of the future need authentic experience with populations who are different from them. These experiences must be guided by principles of social justice and a value for the common good so services can be delivered with considerations of equity and equality. 3) Faculty members of all experience levels can benefit and remain better engaged in the living/learning process when pedagogical strategy choices are both challenged and supported within a learning community that positions them as learners too.

The Unified Core

The intended outcomes of the unified core include students who are able to: a) present ideas and talk with citizens, colleagues, participants, donors, and policymakers

---

[1]The Unified Core received the 2009 Society for Park and Recreation Educator's Innovation in Teaching Award.

with knowledge and confidence; b) approach challenges by looking for the connections between experience, existing information, and new information in order to make better decisions; c) lead organizations by recognizing the interconnectedness of leisure, recreation, research, and the challenges of a diverse society; d) enter the profession with a wide-range of tangible skills and the ability to effectively demonstrate those skills in an interview and on the job; and e) create and support individual and societal action related to leisure, recreation, and the "common good."

Four separate three-credit courses are taught as a blended unit to undergraduates entering the initial semester of the Recreation and Leisure Studies (RLST) major: RLST 3030 Foundations of RLST, RLST 3800 Programming in Leisure Services, RLST 3800L Community Programming in Recreation Leadership, and RLST 3850 Contemporary Social Issues in RLST. As compared with conventional introductory courses that run a full semester, the Unified Core's introductory material is taught at the beginning of the semester to serve as a solid foundation for multi-layered learning that follows in sequence. The foundational material is constantly engaged and subsequently applied, with more investment and risk as the semester progresses. During the first part of the semester, two guiding questions are addressed: 1) "What are leisure, recreation, and play and what relevance do they have toward achieving an individual and common good?" and, 2) "What foundational skills do I need to be an effective leisure services professional in a diverse community?" Then, two-thirds through the semester, a third is introduced: "How can I identify and respond to the critical issues that impact leisure service delivery?" This last question is an application of the skills and content acquired earlier in the semester, but is presented at a time when they are ready for a challenge and within the context of issues facing the local community (homelessness, poverty, obesity, immigration, high-stakes testing, sustainable energy and agriculture, etc.). Students then investigate the role recreation can play in addressing these critical issues.

Each of the four courses is assigned an instructor of record (two faculty and two doctoral students) and those four instructors comprise the teaching team. In years with economic support, there has been logistical support via a masters-level graduate assistant. The instructional teaching team meets once a week for planning, and designs and delivers all content with the collective goal of achieving the student outcomes. The creative process of delivering learning experiences that elicit the desired learner outcomes is different than the typical delivery of a singular course, taught by a lone instructor. The give-and-take among the team often generates a higher quality experience for the student[2] as ideas are defended and refined during planning meetings with collective agreement leading to a more consistent approach.

"Person, process, and product" is the phrase that links student outcomes with the pedagogical strategy for the Unified Core. The teaching team frequently asks, "What can students do to better understand the issue/concept?" and "What can they do to demonstrate mastery?" With a focus on the "doing," as opposed to the "telling/listening," the goal is a value statement for students to understand that learning is more than a final

---

[2]We are happy to share any course materials and planning documents to assist with the logistics of implementation, and invite readers to see previously published learning activities documented at the end of the manuscript.

grade. Active discussion about the pedagogical strategy helps students shift their way of thinking. The forward focus connected to the local community and the ability to talk about "failing forward" brings the material to life with direct feedback on how students can make a difference, right now, instead of just "when I graduate."

The traditional academic environment has certain logistical constraints that the Unified Core is able to circumvent. We hold class Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for 50 minutes, as well as on Tuesday and Thursday, with two courses scheduled back-to-back to give a three-hour block for in-depth simulations, field trips and guest panels. Additionally, a separate two-hour programming lab is held on site at local community agencies such as Boys & Girls Clubs, after-school programs, and senior centers. Students tell us frequently, "We can't slack off in this major, since we see you every day and the instructors talk to each other." Because students in the Unified Core attend class every day of the week, scaffolded learning activities build on previous work and students can see the connections and relevance.

While one instructor is assigned to each course as the instructor of record, we do not limit ourselves to teaching only during our assigned time. Instead, we choose to teach based on when skills and content are needed in the classroom. In this way, we capitalize on our strengths and further develop our areas of weakness. For example, an instructor may be in the classroom every day during one week and then just one or two days the next week, with the content and/or skill set being the determining factors. Consequently, the conventional university course evaluations had to be modified to allow students to evaluate individual instructors, while also providing feedback related to the team teaching model.

This course design requires a collaborative process that prevents us from simply "pulling out our dusty old lecture notes" in preparation for class. Teaching in a team requires the rationalization of ideas and acceptance of suggestions regarding conceptualization and implementation of a variety of pedagogical strategies and personal styles. It also models teamwork so students have good examples to take with them in professional settings as they learn how to work with others. There are constant challenges, on the spot modifications, and on-going formative changes in this approach, but each day is fresh, allowing for the refinement of knowledge and skill by everyone involved.

Recommendations for Adoption/Adaptation

We offer several key considerations about how to begin and sustain a unified curricular approach. First, examine the curriculum as a whole with an eye to overlaps and gaps, rather than a focus on individual courses. We began with a discussion about what we wanted our graduates to be able to do and then worked backwards. Second, engage in dialogue among faculty regarding common core beliefs about pedagogy and be sure to respect (even celebrate) the differences. For example, we began with simple "complete this sentence" activities such as, "my expectations of engaged learners include ___" or "I am afraid about teaching this course as a team because ____." We then progressed to sharing assignments that we felt were necessary and/or meaningful. These sharing exercises gave us insight into each other's values and classroom practices, some of which we were completely unaware. This process also helped us see who might like to be part of

team-teaching (and who might not). We agreed that no one would be forced to be a part if they were not excited or intrigued by the endeavor.

Next, we suggest handling the unique logistics based on where you are currently; do not wait for institutional change. We started with all four courses at once because two of us were already teaching or supervising the whole curriculum and we were a "fall start" major. However, in larger departments or under different circumstances, we can see the wisdom of starting small by blending two courses and then building on that success to encourage others to play along (as we have done with subsequent semesters). Play along, you ask? Expect resistance from colleagues, university administrators, parents, and students. This model is different, so we focused attention on the positive outcomes we were seeing to ride out the short-lived discomfort. Six years later, our biggest naysayers are now some of our biggest supporters. The transformation of Case Western Reserve University's MBA program is well documented and reveals the challenges of cultivating faculty buy in with major curriculum change (Boyatzis, Cowen & Kolb, 1994).

We are intentional about language and creating culture within the classroom. We give the group a name, introduce sayings or buzzwords, and use a movie metaphor to outline the journey. For example, after some of the negative perceptions of the first group who went through the core, we changed the name from "the block" to "the core," so that when the seniors spoke of their experience in the class the juniors did not automatically associate it with their own experience. To put this language and culture in place, we realized that it was helpful to have one instructor lay the groundwork for the first week to ten days and then introduce new faces and techniques. We repeat the phrases, "emerging professionals," "check with the team," "what has become clear since our last meeting," and "remind you of what you already know" as ways to make visible the team and content layering approach.

We recognize that there is a continuum of collaborative teaching strategies ranging from the traditional guest lecture to shared assignments among courses to a fully integrated semester of coursework. Knowledge of this approach could at first seem extreme, but it might serve to re-anchor the expectations of what "could be." At this point, we each would find it hard to imagine another way to teach, as on the teaching team we capitalize on strengths and learn from others in areas of weakness. It creates a different environment, with our focus now on achieving student outcomes; it would seem strange to return to teaching separate courses.

Unified Core Assignment Publications and Products

Dunlap, R., Powell, G., & James, J. (2006). Historical figure and polis discussion. *Schole: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education, 21*, 155-158.

James, J., & Powell, G. M. (2007). Hands we are dealt: A metaphor for teaching leadership. *Schole: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education, 22*, 73-78.

Pate, J., Tobias, T., Powell, G., & Johnson, C. W. (Number 2, 2011). How to invite engagement through community connection and civic Action. *Schole: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education.*

Powell, G. M., & Johnson, C. W. (2010). Yes we can…Revolutionize Higher Education.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bxbyu3qUbRo

Powell, G. M., Pate, J., & Johnson, C. W. (2010) Serving without 'Othering': Using social justice education as a theoretical framework for service-learning. In D. Dustin & K. Paisley (Eds.), *Speaking up and Speaking out: Working for environmental justice through parks, recreation, and leisure.* Urbana, IL: Sagamore.

Tobias, T., Pate, J., Powell, G., & Johnson, C.W. (2010). Opening the eyes of students: The first step toward service-learning. *Schole: The Journal of Recreation and Leisure Education, 26*, 105-110.

References

Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2004). *Taking responsibility for the quality of the baccalaureate degree: A Report from the Greater Expectations Project on Accreditation and Assessment.* Washington, D.C.

Boyatzis, R. E., Cowen, S. S., Kolb, D. A., & Associates. (1994). *Innovation in Professional Education: Steps on a journey from teaching to learning.* Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.

Eames, C., & Stewart, K. (2008). Personal and relationship dimensions of higher education science and engineering learning communities. *Research in Science & Technological Education, 26*: 3, 311–321

Swords, A., & Kiely, R. (2010) Beyond pedagogy: Service learning as a movement building in higher education. *Journal of Community Practice, 18*:2/3, 148-170.

http://elschools.org/our-approach/what-we-do. Retrieved December 23, 2010.