

Four Courses Within a Discipline *UGA Unified Core*

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Abstract

This article introduces the reader to the Unified Core Curriculum model developed and implemented at the University of Georgia (UGA). Four courses are taught as one course to the juniors coming into the Recreation and Leisure Studies major. An overview of the blended course and sample assignments are provided, as well as a discussion of challenges and benefits.

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Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself.

—John Dewey

Roots of the Innovation

After extensive brainstorming by faculty and doctoral students interested in experiential education, the Unified Core Curriculum (UCC) in the Recreation and Leisure Studies (RLST) Program at The University of Georgia first was implemented in 2005. Instigated by the first author's dissatisfaction with student engagement and performance, we (the authors who have functioned as teaching team members of the UCC) began a quest for new pedagogical models. We were inspired by the benchmark practices of Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound (2003) and the well-documented transformation of the MBA program within the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University (Boyatzis, Cowen, & Kolb, 1995).

Aided by a school design consultant from Expeditionary Learning, the interested faculty began to craft a vision for a different way to deliver content. This dissatisfaction sparked a critical examination of what "was" (Kolowich, 2010), thereby igniting a desire for "better." Various forms of this examination continue presently as the curriculum development process is not seen as stable, but ongoing. Each year since 2005, the Unified Core's curriculum is updated in response to feedback from professionals in the field, research on pedagogy, reflections from the current teaching team, and feedback from current students.

Course Overview: A Learning Community for Undergraduate Professional Preparation

We welcome you (the reader) to go on an active journey in this article. Envision a teaching innovation that allows students to see connections between courses and is grounded in needs of their community. Picture a teaching process that collectively challenges the program faculty and doctoral students to focus on the outcomes of an entire curriculum rather than the objectives of one course. Imagine both a social and academic learning environment that engages its members (undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty) in the application of knowledge in leisure service delivery as the central focus. These principles are not dreams, but are the foundation of our approach to undergraduate education that connects four courses within a discipline.

The Unified Core Curriculum concept is introduced to students in its syllabus as follows:

Welcome to the Recreation and Leisure Studies (RLST) major. Characteristic of an adventure, we will challenge your perspective, foster new ways of thinking and instill confidence! As is with any adventure, you will be challenged mentally, physically and emotionally to your highest potential. You will be given ownership of your own learning! This document is our roadmap and syllabus. It is representative of four classes totaling 12 credit hours with four separate grades. To guide you through the semester, we have created one

syllabus with overviews of assignments and an outline of where the specific assignment grades will count. We, as your instructors, will be functioning as and modeling a team approach. In the past, your education has been delivered in thin layers that may or may not have connected. As you prepare for your profession, we will make connections between content and real-life... together. We look forward to the adventure!

As a result of the Unified Core's implementation, the entire RLST curriculum has been re-envisioned to create an interdependent community of learners who explore, develop, sustain, improve, and contribute to leisure service delivery in a critical and meaningful way. The model integrates course content, experience-based delivery (Kolb, 1984), and active learning strategies to provide students with skills. The goal is to create learning environments that pique the curiosity of emerging recreation and leisure service professionals (the students) in ways that cause them to engage with material in a more meaningful way. The hopes are that they are challenged to provide services to all populations as well as those who might not otherwise receive services and that they will continue to seek the preparation necessary throughout their academic experience to use the content, rather than simply know it.

Unified Core Curriculum's Implementation

The Unified Core Curriculum includes four separate three-credit foundation courses (Foundations of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Programming in Leisure Services, Community Programming in Recreation Leadership Laboratory, and Contemporary Societal Issues in Recreation and Leisure Studies). The UCC teaching team usually consists of four instructors (one per traditional course) and is supported by one graduate assistant. The team can be smaller if faculty take on more than one "course assignment."

As a teaching team, we pose questions that focus the separate course content. In the first semester of the Unified Core Curriculum, we address the following questions: a) What are leisure, recreation, and play, and what relevance do they have toward achieving an individual and common good?, b) What foundational skills do I need to be an effective leisure services professional in a diverse community?, and c) How can I identify and respond to the critical issues that impact leisure service delivery? These questions are especially helpful when both faculty and students become distracted from their larger goals by the minutiae of the Unified Core's daily process. We ask them to ourselves in planning and to the students as take-home final exam questions and class discussion.

Expected Student Outcomes and Curriculum Key Features

In order to foster meaningful engagement with the Unified Core Curriculum, all of the content and assignments are integrated, designed, and delivered through explicit statement to the students about our intended outcomes for them as students. These outcomes include the ability: a) to present ideas and talk with citizens, colleagues, participants, donors, and policymakers with knowledge and confidence; b) to approach challenges by looking for the connections between experience, existing information, and new information in order to make better decisions; c) to lead organizations by recognizing the interconnectedness of leisure, recreation, research, and the challenges

of a diverse society; d) to 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; e) and to create and support individual and societal action related to leisure, recreation, and the “common good.”

Sample Assignments

These assignments are used in UGA's Unified Core Curriculum. We have provided these sample assignments to spark your imagination of the possibilities and to demonstrate what can be done across the semester.

Historic figure experience: This assignment gives students the opportunity to learn about and “become” a person who has made a significant contribution to our understanding of leisure, recreation, and/or play. Through a series of *Polis* (Greek places of public debate) discussions, activities, and writing assignments, students will be able to teach their colleagues about their historic figure's contributions to the field of recreation and leisure studies. Most importantly, we will create opportunities for individuals as diverse as Jack Kerouac, Jane Addams, and Aristotle to converse with one another. The assignment involves reviews of articles by the historic figure, interactive group discussions, and an award nomination summarizing the significance of their figure (Dunlap, Powell, & James, 2006). Foundations Course

This I believe...a personal philosophy of leisure and the common good: A philosophy of leisure—the activity of knowing one's philosophy of leisure is an act of reflection on information, ideas, and experience to help us decide what is good and useful. It is “A point of view from which to take in the world” and standards by which we, as professionals can judge behavior, develop programs, and select methods. Foundations Course

Inclusive perspectives: This project challenges students to examine assumptions about disabilities and inclusion. In preparation for a case study, students participate in a series of simulations. “Inclusion Fusion” introduces the challenges associated with a variety of physical disabilities, and students also spend a limited time using a wheelchair. “Welcome to the World of Poverty” contains scenarios of families and how they interact with local community business, services, and outreach programs. (see <http://www.communityaction.org/Poverty%20Simulation.aspx>). During the “Life Situation,” simulation the students go out into the community using public transportation to accomplish certain tasks (i.e., apply for food stamps, bail a child out of jail, etc.) (c.f. Tobias, Pate, Powell, & Johnson, 2010). They then wrestle with a case study of *Barnes-Wallace v. Boy Scouts of America* using the view Scout's Honor (Shepard, 2001) to identify the key issues that need to be addressed by professionals. Contemporary Social Issues Course

Critical issues investigation: Collective learning and cooperation is an essential outcome for anyone participating in a learning community or leisure service agency. Through involvement with Visual Action Research (VAR), focused on critical issues in the field of recreation and leisure services, students play a vital role in the educational process of multiple stakeholders. As students examine the issues together with classmates, moderators, local citizens, and audience members, they undoubtedly expand their knowledge surrounding their topics and respond with action. As a result exposure to and knowledge of these critical issues will make each of us a more engaged and active member of society. VAR connects visual production practices with the rigor of academic research to open dialogue on silenced issues, to re-expose concealed oppressions, and/or to mobilize action [see Pate, Tobias, Johnson, & Powell, (2011) for an overview of the critical issues process that provides the foundation for VAR]. Contemporary Societal Issues Course

Georgia Recreation & Park Association Conference attendance: The purpose behind this process is to connect students with current professionals and give them the opportunity to see the importance behind professional conferences. Through professional interviews and educational sessions, students are expected to write a conference reflection paper detailing their thoughts and documenting what they've learned. Foundations Course

Career exploration: Students will select and investigate a leisure service career of their choice with the instructor approval. During the career exploration, the student will shadow and communicate with a professional for a minimum of eight hours divided into at least two different time periods (i.e., lunch, coffee or informal interview followed by another on-site visit). This project allows students to explore possible career paths and creates the opportunity to experience various work settings and populations, student report it is also a lot of fun. Foundations Course

Leadership micro blogs: The purpose of these blogs is to document the student leadership journey during the semester as a self-reflective process. The three main goals are 1) to reflect and examine how the student's way of leading activities/groups can help him/her identify the leadership style he/she currently uses; 2) to reflect on his/her childhood in relationship to others who may have been raised differently; 3) to critically examine their current leadership style as compared to other possible leadership styles discussed in the textbook, discussed in class, and observed in others. This project helps students determine the leadership style he/she would like to develop and employ as a future professional. Programming Course

New leisure activity: As a professional in the field of recreation and leisure services, students need to learn how to design and deliver programs that introduce participants to new skills and experiences. To empathize better with such participants, it is beneficial for the students to have the experience

of learning a new leisure activity. Additionally, this assignment is intended to help the students cultivate a new leisure activity in his/her own life. Programming Course

Community program: During the semester, students design and implement a six-week series of 90-minute programs at agencies in the community. The project gives students a realistic experience in planning and implementing recreation programs in a group experience, much like ones they will encounter in the “real” world. Students will investigate their own leadership journey as they work with a group assigned to one of several pre-arranged project sites to plan, implement, and evaluate a recreation program. The program will address agency overviews, needs assessment, program rationale, goals and objectives, target populations, inclusive adaptations, evaluation, environments, risk management, scheduling, staffing, budgeting, pricing, and program promotion/marketing. Students sign up for the population with whom they would like to gain more experience. Programming Course

Special event “staffing”: Students choose from one of the pre-selected events operated by the local park and recreation department and serve as “special event detail/volunteer.” The goal is to see the event from the “ground floor” perspective and conduct a Strengths, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat (SWOT) analysis on the event. Programming Course

Guiding questions days: The last three days of the semester each student addresses one of guiding questions using an activity to culminate the experience (c.f. James, & Powell, 2007 answers the third question of “How can I identify and respond to the critical issues that impact leisure service delivery?”).

Benefits of the Unified Core Curriculum Design

The other articles in this special issue address the overarching challenges of integrated design, but here we offer some specifics from the UGA model. Some of these benefits were intentional, and some came as a pedagogical surprise. We found unintended positive by-products of engaging in a creative process different from those expected in typical course delivery.

Experiential education and community engagement. A frequently asked question in the process of our ongoing course design is, “What can the students **do** in order to understand this issue/concept better?” With a focus on the “doing,” as opposed to the telling/listening and a value statement on the person and the process over the product, the students understand that learning is more than a final score on a test. They see that the real outcome is how they use the knowledge. In addition, the outward focus about what is happening in our local community brings the material to life with direct feedback and reinforcement that they can make a difference, now! They

do not need to wait for their career to start (many of the students already work part-time in the field) to see the effects of their work and knowledge application.

Guiding questions. The questions (a) What are leisure, recreation, and play, and what relevance do they have toward achieving an individual and common good?, b) What foundational skills do I need to be an effective leisure services professional in a diverse community?, and c) How can I identify and respond to the critical issues that impact leisure service delivery? For the students, it is a quest for solutions and answers. For the teaching team, having a clear focus and set of question to answer serves as a guide for what should be included in the course.

Showcasing faculty expertise and schedule accommodation. The team-teaching approach freed us from the limits of the traditional schedule. We could focus on who in the team could best teach a topic. That means that a teaching team member may teach every day one week, and then have a week (or several blocked days) that can be devoted to writing, professional service, or travel. It also brought us together to discuss who should teach a specific segment, and we wrestled regarding the best way to impart the information. This wrestling caused us to clarify learning objective, project pitfalls and truly come out on the other side of the engagement with a better context, example, lecture, or activity.

Personal accountability for student performance. The Unified Core Curriculum provides a different level of personal accountability for student performance. Students tell us they cannot slack off in the Recreation and Leisure Studies major, since we see them every day and the instructors talk to each other. They tell us that in other semesters, they could choose a class each week in which to ease up, and the professor would rarely notice; however, that is not possible with this course design. We all have access to preparation, performance, and attitude measures for each student. We capitalize on this shared knowledge by providing mid-semester and end-of-semester feedback conferences for the students to share our collective assessment of their performance as a professionals and discuss goals and motivation factors.

Student-suggested innovations. As students feel empowered with their learning, they suggest “revolutions to the core.” In our second year of working with the Unified Core, we introduced the concept of senior mentors, where seniors enroll in independent study credit(s) to serve as mentors for the new juniors. The first time, we felt we could have only two to three mentors, but a group came together and proposed a plan for the contributions they could make, a leadership structure that could be replicated, and an educational rationale for having a variety of learning styles to support the diversity of the juniors. This transformation of culture from the inside (our undergraduate students) reinforced the learning process and served as an indicator of the engagement in a model of shared learning.

Challenges of the Unified Core Curriculum Design

As may be expected of such a radical change to the conventional curriculum model of four separate classes, the Unified Core Curriculum is not without its own challenges.

These challenges center on administrative, student and faculty issues. The following paragraphs expand on these issues:

Inflexibility of the typical boundaries of university courses. Since its inception, we realized that the Unified Core Curriculum needed to work within the constraints of the traditional academic environment, and we have sought ways to work within the system rather than circumvent it. Class is held each day of the week with a 50-minute period on Monday/Wednesday/Friday, and two 75-minute class periods held back-to-back on Tuesday/Thursday. In terms of load, we “assign” one instructor to each course, but we do not limit ourselves to teaching at our assigned time, but instead, choose to teach based on the logistics of when skills and content are needed.

Student failure in part of the Unified Core. Because students take four separate courses and receive four separate grades, it is possible for students not to pass one or more courses. If a student is unsuccessful in one course, we have given him/her the opportunity to re-take the course as an independent study in the spring semester. If he/she does not pass two or more courses, he/she re-takes those two courses as part of the next cohort. We simply mark the schedule indicating which days he/she needs to attend and they can see from the syllabus which assignments go with the specific courses he/she is re-taking.

Developing a Unified Voice. University faculty are notoriously possessive of their autonomy in the classroom. Thus, notwithstanding the goodwill of its members, the collaborative nature of the teaching team presents a few challenges. Unlike the conventional classroom, teaching team members must consider the possible ramifications of spur of the moment decisions in the classroom for their fellow teaching team members. Additionally, the team environment and ethos necessitate compromise and (re)conciliation, activities that faculty are not used to undertaking in “their own” classrooms. Finally, despite the efforts to form a unified team, the Unified Core’s students inevitably identify and discuss differences in team members’ teaching styles. While such differences are often humorous, they may become divisive if certain team members are favored over others (i.e., good cop/ bad cop or mom/ dad comparisons).

As individuals, teachers create rubrics and hopefully grade assignments in a consistent manner. However, with this approach grading rubrics and assignment details should be discussed by the teaching team for better consistency. Similar to the notion of inter-rater reliability when conducting research, if one person on the teaching team has higher expectations for writing and grades accordingly, then the rest of the team’s lesser approach could lead to student discontent. This approach to team teaching leads to more accountability for the teaching team. In a traditional setup, the individual instructor is used to doing her/his own thing. In the Unified Core Curriculum, s/he is held accountable to collective grading timetables, meetings with the team, trying to be on the same page with grading standards, coping with student issues and the like. This collectivity creates both stress and support that is interpreted differently by individual teaching team members.

Assessment strategies used in the Unified Core

We have modified the course evaluations to yield the individual numbers that need to be reported but also to give students an opportunity to rate and comment on the teaching team aspects of the model. We regularly invite our teaching mentor from the Center of Teaching and Learning to observe and conduct structured classroom interviews, so we can be proactive to issues effecting learning. We ask students to complete an unofficial version of the National Survey of Student Engagement for our internal use to compare to the institutional data. In addition, we have investigated perceptions of increased cultural competency through the Unified Core Curriculum (c.f. Smith, Johnson, Powell, & Oliver, 2011).

Conclusion

The UGA Unified Core Curriculum is about the creation of a culture of learning for students and faculty. This culture is based on professionalism that is fed by the threads of networking, a committed alumni base that reinforces the important lessons, and wrapped in fun, experiential formats. In a society filled with smartphones, technology, and other gadgets, recreation professionals have an increasing challenge to help people. With a generation of students and future students (Digital natives—generation born after 1995) focused on the digital world, this teaching model utilizes face-to-face, hands-on experiences to make connections. It causes them to unplug, engage, and use their technological advances to connect with the world (and students) around them. The Unified Core Curriculum seeks to model how the professional can play a role beyond basic programming to dealing with societal issues. A student's involvement with the Unified Core helps future recreation professionals to make connections to "experience" in real time as opposed to a digital world.

As the Unified Core Curriculum has progressed, it has evolved into an important entry and marketing point for the Recreation and Leisure Studies Program at UGA. Newly declared RLST majors have heard about "The Core," as it is commonly called, from students who have already experienced it and are mentored along their journey by students in their second year of the major. Students understand that the Core is something that helps them assimilate into the "RLST family" as it is full of experiences around which students form a cultural identity. At a large institution, they are pleasantly surprised that they can form such bonds and begin their professional networking. This is, perhaps, the greatest unforeseen accomplishment of the Unified Core, namely that it has become a self-perpetuating community of learners complete with its own unique culture. At a campus of 35,000 students, to find a place where family is created with academic content as the center is remarkable. As with any community, individuals come and go, and the community culture is a constant state of evolution. However, the Unified Core Curriculum possesses its own unique ethos, one that compels its members to be thoughtful, fearless, and engaged professionals.

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