

## Considering the Core Curriculum

In 2022, popular conceptions of UChicago are inextricably linked to its Core Curriculum: numerous internet articles about UChicago reference its challenging Core, many non-UChicago people I've encountered have at least a vague understanding of the Core, and a large portion of current undergraduates I've spoken with said the appeal of UChicago's Core Curriculum motivated them to apply. Evidently, UChicago's purportedly unique and rigorous Core is frequently the first point of contact for people learning about UChicago.

Despite outsider perceptions, in its present form, UChicago's Core is not particularly unique. Biology, physical sciences, mathematics, art, and language requirements compose over half the Core Curriculum.<sup>1</sup> These courses are generic general-education requirements at numerous universities. While the remaining seven Core courses: HUM, CIV, and SOSOC<sup>2</sup> are UChicago exclusives, other universities similarly teach the humanities, social sciences, and civilization studies via in-house sequences.<sup>3</sup> Having established the existence of analogs to both the Core's makeup and the material it teaches at other universities, I propose the Core's alleged proprietary rigor is the product of aggressive advertising by UChicago administration.<sup>4</sup> This marketing serves to differentiate the school from other universities to attract applicants and obscure the school's increasing shift towards vocationalism.

Prospective undergraduates are inundated with references to the Core's — and, by extension, UChicago's — excellence through tours centering the 'magic' of a rigorous Core education, and the host of marketing literature UChicago sends potential applications touting the Core as central to the university's distinct educational philosophy. By presenting, and then reinforcing, the 'UChicago has a unique, rigorous Core' postulate, UChicago has created an artificial metric which serves as the basis for differentiating UChicago from other schools.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Core consists of fifteen nine-week courses. Bio, physci, math, and art are two courses each (eight total). While not technically counted in the fifteen course Core, UChicago's language requirement is one year of study at the college level (three additional courses).

<sup>2</sup> These abbreviations are short for the Humanities (two courses), Civilization Studies (two courses), and Social Sciences (three courses) sequences.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Princeton undergraduates take the trio of Literature and the Arts (two semester), Social Analysis (two semesters), and Culture and Difference (one semester) and Stanford undergraduates must satisfy an 11 course [Ways](#) concentration.

<sup>4</sup> By UChicago's administration, I primarily refer to the Dean's Office, College Admissions Office, and the President's Office.

<sup>5</sup> My inclination is to say UChicago's advertising of the Core arises from the school needing a 'thing' by which to differentiate itself from other top universities with better name recognition.

This marketing blitz pays dividends for the University come college application season. Advertising the Core increases applicant awareness of UChicago, resulting in greater numbers of submitted applications. This presents the admissions office with a larger, theoretically stronger, pool to choose each incoming class from. More applicants leads to further decreases in UChicago's acceptance rate. Extreme selectivity correlates heavily with a high ranking on yearly top colleges lists, with the universities ranked at the top of such lists seen (deservedly or not) as the world's 'best' colleges. In these ways, UChicago's Core marketing strategy helps it curate larger, ostensibly higher quality applicant pools and simultaneously increase its cache relative to peer institutions.

In addition, the university's promotion of the 'rigorous Core' involves simultaneously presenting the Core Curriculum as UChicago's core.<sup>6</sup> This indicates to me that a further aim of the advertising campaign I've outlined is pushing the idea that the Core is *the* sufficient cause of UChicago's academic excellence. I believe this marketing effort is working<sup>7</sup> and that the postulate 'UChicago has a rigorous Core' is widely considered congruent to the statement 'UChicago is a top-flight university.' The implications of this are that so long as UChicago continues to present itself as having a rigorous core, UChicago can expect the public to continue regarding it a world-class academic institution.

Crucially, the manufactured link between a rigorous Core entailing UChicago's excellence gives university administration cover to take actions that make UChicago without harming the school's reputation. In the past five years, the University has shifted sharply towards a vocational institution. Notable examples include the introduction of the Business-Economics degree,<sup>8</sup> switching the Computer Science introduction sequence from working in Haskell to Python,<sup>9</sup> and truncating the ten-week quarter to nine weeks. Making its majors more pre-professional at the expense of material learned dilutes the quality of a UChicago education, while shortening the quarter truncates the amount of education UChicago provides by a tenth.

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<sup>6</sup> Amidst other pro-Core materials, the [University's website](#) calls the Core "The cornerstone of the College's transformative curriculum," traces a history suggesting the guiding ethos "Teaching students *how*, not *what*, to think," has directed the evolution of the Core from 1931 to the present, and explicitly links UChicago's preeminence to the Core Curriculum.

<sup>7</sup> I ground this claim in two observations. First, the online articles/messages boards I've seen which speculate on the difficulty of UChicago typically mention the Core's purported rigor. Second, in my conversations with various non-UChicago people who know little about UChicago outside what they've heard about Core, I am often asked about UChicago's rigor.

<sup>8</sup> Before biz-econ was implemented, one hundred UChicago professors signed a [petition](#) urging the university not to add the major.

<sup>9</sup> Haskell is a purely functional programming language which enables covering many computer science topics more in-depth than possible in Python. Given Python lends itself less to academics than Haskell, it is widely speculated the shift from Haskell to Python is because Python is software engineering's lingua franca.

The image UChicago sells of having a rigorous Core is vital to reducing awareness of, and opposition to, these changes. Those external to Hyde Park — crucially U of C alumni — are steeped in the previously mentioned message promoting UChicago’s rigorous Core. They also see the high place UChicago holds on college ranking lists.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, this leads alumni to believe UChicago is as strong a school as ever. Thus, the group which traditionally successfully lobbies against administration is defanged by university projections of its ‘rigorous Core’. As a result, university administration enjoys greater leeway to move UChicago in the direction it pleases.

Besides serving UChicago’s propaganda arm, the Core Curriculum also shapes every UChicago undergraduate’s experience. Before matriculating, soon-to-be students are grabbed by University’s relentless promotion of the ‘transformative Core’ awaiting them. On campus, newly minted first years find their housing assignments grouped by HUM sequence. Those students then dedicate nearly a third of their undergraduate education to fulfilling Core requirements. Interestingly, there appears a positive correlation between the more Core requirements a student has satisfied and a student’s level of dissatisfaction with the Core.<sup>11</sup> Considering this, I propose the Core Curriculum’s current form lets down UChicago’s student body. Notably, it does not foster a cohesive educational experience nor teach students “how to think” as the University’s website suggests. Conversely, I posit the Core can even promote student disengagement with academics.

I begin my argument through presenting UChicago’s expressed purpose for the Core as defined by the Core Curriculum section of its website: “UChicago’s distinctive Core Curriculum provides all students with a challenging, common academic foundation before they begin courses specific to their fields of study.”<sup>12</sup> This statement makes two claims. 1. — The Core serves as a common and challenging academic experience for undergraduates.<sup>13</sup> 2. — Undergraduates experience the Core at roughly the same point in their UChicago academic journey as peers. Through contradicting these claims, I will prove the Core does not achieve its aims.

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<sup>10</sup> A ranking I have shown is partly thanks to the same ‘rigorous Core’ propaganda.

<sup>11</sup> I discovered that {greater Core exposure → greater Core dissatisfaction} though speaking with students and finding first years tend to speak highly of the Core while fourth years largely express disdain for it. Further supporting this hypothesis is that second years I’ve talked with generally tend to be enthusiastic about the Core, albeit less so than first years, and third years who have expressed their opinions to me criticize the Core more than second years, but not at the level of jaded fourth years. Although this motivated me to consider the Core’s deficiencies, I want to emphasize that my theory is not meant to be distilled to ‘upperclassman have distaste for the Core’. Student dissatisfaction is absolutely a prominent component of the Core’s failures, but it is far from its sole shortcoming.

<sup>12</sup> <https://college.uchicago.edu/academics/core-curriculum>

<sup>13</sup> This claim can be subdivided into two lemmas, both of which I will prove specious. 1. — The Core is a common education. 2. — The Core challenges students no matter the requirements they fulfill it through.

The Core does not foster undergraduates building a shared knowledge base or curating similarly refined intellectual tools to one another. Respectively, this is due to the significant quantity of paths students can take to satisfy the Core and those paths' high variance of academic quality.

I start from the quantity side. Only considering propriety Core courses,<sup>14</sup> there are 3,096 different ways to meet the Core's requirements. With [1,729](#) students in the class of 2026, it is very possible every current first year will satisfy the heart of the Core distinctly from their peers. If one also accounts for the possible ways to fulfill the Core's bio, physci, math, and arts requirements, there are several million class combinations that satisfy the Core. The magnitude of ways to fulfill the Core refutes any argument that the Core is a common education.

On the surface, a plausible counter against my coherency argument is that given the sheer number of students possessing diverse academic interests that there is no way to expect UChicago undergrads will take the same courses or learn the same material. After all, as UChicago's website emphasizes, the Core's philosophy is to "teach students *how*, not *what*, to think." However, as I am about to show, the suggestion that the Core teaches common intellectual skills falls apart under scrutiny.

The vast disparity in the quality and rigor of Core classes disputes the Core's claim that a student and their peer who both fulfilled the Core have honed comparative intellectual tools. For example, to satisfy one's physical science requirement a student can enroll in two quarters of Physics and delve into topics including mechanics and electromagnetism. Another can satisfy the same Core requirement through taking Earth as a Planet and Global Warming, two classes famous for reviewing high school concepts, having online exams, and padding GPAs. Certainly, students have different comfort levels with certain subjects, and the school must offer courses of varying levels. However, there is no way to say these hypothetical students have developed comparable critical thinking skills when the former learns to derive Einstein's Law of Special Relativity and Gauss's Equation while the latter's final entails creating global warming memes.

Having disproved the claim that the Core is a shared intellectual experience, both regarding the material learned and the skills taught, I now quickly dispel with the notion that the Core is temporally aligned for students. While HUM is required of all first years, every other Core class has no timeframe dictating when students take it. This means students can theoretically finish their majors before starting the Core — the opposite of the Core expressed intentions.

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<sup>14</sup> I refer here to SOSC (8 sequences), HUM (9 sequences), and CIV (21 sequences on campus, 22 sequences abroad). It is important to include the study abroad sequences because, according to UChicago's website, [48%](#) of students satisfy CIV abroad.

Furthermore, despite being created as a linear three-quarter sequence, CIV isn't required to be taken chronologically. The effect is CIV courses become disjoint from one another rather than providing a coherent education. Both these examples refute the Core's claim of guiding students' intellectual trajectory at the same time of their peers. Thus, by contradicting both statements UChicago's website makes about the Core's aims, I have proven the Core doesn't come close to achieving those aims. I now outline why this means the Core fails UChicago's students.

Due to the host of pro-Core propaganda UChicago presents students throughout the period before they arrive in Hyde Park, students matriculate with visions of the Core as the transformative experience the University sells. That image is shattered when a student experiences Core in reality. For some, it is the variance in the Core's quality. For others, resentment against the Core arises when they can't discuss their Core classes with other students because peers are pushing their Core to 4<sup>th</sup> year or satisfied the same requirements with widely different classes. Regardless, for many students, experiencing the Core reduces the once-mythical entity to nothing more than graduation requirements students wish they didn't have to fulfill. This explains the {greater Core exposure → greater Core dissatisfaction} phenomenon.

I have shown students often leave UChicago dissatisfied with the Core due to its shortcomings. Given the Core's shortcomings facilitate this dissatisfaction and that the Core is nearly a third of an undergraduate's course load, the Core should be held responsible for students becoming disenchanted with a substantial portion of their undergraduate education. For some students, disenchantment with the Core even spreads to general disenchantment with UChicago. Ultimately, the Core's failure to achieve its educational goals and evidence that greater Core exposure breeds greater student resentment towards the Core enables me to confidently say the Core lets down UChicago's students.

Thus far, this paper has served only to critique the Core. Criticism's other half is creation. Accordingly, I now present my theory of a better Core. I am under no assumption that my following suggestions would not pose their own host of problems that would then warrant addressing,<sup>15</sup> but they are earnest attempts to remedy the issues this paper has raised — the Core's lack of educational coherency, the Core's unaligned timeline, the Core's failure to help students sharpen similarly refined intellectual tools to one another, and student disengagement with the Core.

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<sup>15</sup> For example, my suggested Core reforms could pose a disaster for the registrar's office. The registrar would have to implement a class schedule enabling students to satisfy the new requirements and absorb the students who would otherwise be enrolled in Core courses that I suggest cutting. I give this example to demonstrate that there are complex administrative hurdles that would need addressing in tandem with reforming the Core.

To begin, I suggest implementing a Core with greater linearity. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> years would be respectively required to take HUM, SOSC and CIV.<sup>16</sup> CIV would also only be offered chronologically. The importance of having a set timeframe for when students take these sequences is it ensures students at a similar level of educational development are in class together. Also, knowing all their students have taken the previous year's sequence, professors in SOSC and CIV can better curate discussions and materials that meet student academic needs. Evidently, temporally aligning the Core would be beneficial.

My second suggestion involves replacing the Core's biology topics, physical sciences, and art requirements. I chose to remove these courses due to their reputations of teaching very little and — in the cases of bio and physci — being the Core classes most heavily derided by students.<sup>17</sup> Since most students appear disengaged with the courses, removing these five courses would not be particularly detrimental.

In their place, I propose the Core implement an exploratory section. A student satisfies their exploratory requirements through taking any collection of five major level courses which are not offered in or crosslisted with that student's intended major. Students would be graded satisfied/unsatisfied<sup>18</sup> and students would be able to register for one exploratory course per quarter. I theorize this requirement that students take upper-level courses outside their concentration, not specifying what courses the students should take, and minimizing the pressure of grades, would lead students to take courses that they are interested in but otherwise might have shied away from.

The exploratory sequence would be UChicago's way of directly facilitating that, at least for a few classes, its undergraduates have the means to learn purely for learning's sake. Many UChicago undergraduates bemoan not having taken certain courses. Oftentimes, their rationale for avoiding a course they thought intriguing is they don't believe they have scheduling for it, or they are worried about their GPA. I posit that implementing the exploratory section would present students — who, by being UChicago students, are some of the most intellectually curious undergraduates on the planet — the freedom to let their intellectual curiosity run wild. This step would elevate student engagement

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<sup>16</sup> CIV 3<sup>rd</sup> year also ensures students wishing to satisfy it by studying abroad can still do so.

<sup>17</sup> I recognize some students would still like to take these courses. Thus, I am not suggesting eliminating these classes as options for students hoping to fulfill the Core through them but offers alternatives that would prove more engaging to a greater number of students.

<sup>18</sup> This would be functionally equivalent to pass/fail. However, given both that exploratory courses are meant to be distinct from regular classes and that some students would be worried about pass/fail showing up on their transcript, a different classification system would be beneficial.

with the Core tremendously because students would be taking classes they felt truly drawn to.<sup>19</sup> A further implication of this engagement is that students would be challenging themselves in disciplines they have interest in but were wary to try. The key takeaway of the exploratory sequence is it promotes students use the Core to truly expand their intellectual horizons.

My adjustments address most the issues I raised with the Core's current iteration. Mandating HUM, SOSC, and a sequential CIV be taken in successive years would curate a coherent timeframe for student development in the Core. The exploratory sequence would drive undergraduates to explore new interests, while motivating them to challenge themselves and grow intellectually. Admittedly, my revisions result in a Core with perhaps even a greater myriad of ways to satisfy its requirements than the previous Core. However, I believe this shortcoming is outweighed by the common ground promoted by the linear HUM, SOSC, CIV timeline and heightened student engagement I think the exploratory sequence would foster. Ultimately, and while far from perfect, my redesigned Core is both more coherent and more unique than the present version. It better highlights HUM, SOSC, and CIV – the Core's crown jewels – while encouraging every student explores topics that specifically draws them.

This paper has examined three dimensions of the Core: its symbolic value, its material circumstances, and potential for improvement.<sup>20</sup> These lines of inquiry were important to explore because they are interconnected and through being interrelated, they carry implications for UChicago. My visions of a better Core are grounded in the material shortcomings of the current Core. Student disengagement with the Core is amplified by the chasm between the Core the university sells applicants and students' actual experiences in it. The 'rigorous Core' market campaign presents the Core as almost sacrosanct – curtailing potential discussions about improving the Core. These examples demonstrate that a holistic assessment is required to consider the Core and present reforms to it.

Applying this framework to UChicago places the Core as a component of UChicago whose character carries ramifications for the overall character of the university. The current character of UChicago is that of an undoubtedly great institution, albeit one defined by the conflict between vocationalism and scholarship. The Core's position as first point of contact for many learning about UChicago and the fact that nearly a third of student classes are Core classes, indicates the Core carries

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, some students would satisfy the sequence by taking courses with the lightest workload regardless of their interest in the material. But, given the curiosity of most UChicago students, I posit this would be a small percentage of students. Furthermore, the situation I just described is exactly what most students currently do in bio, physci, and art. Thus, in its worst outcome the exploratory sequence results in the Core's present state.

<sup>20</sup> 1. The Core is a marketing symbol 2. The Core lets down students 3. How to build a better Core

an outsized influence on UChicago's makeup. By positing the current Core disengages students while serving as propaganda for university administrators directing the school towards vocationalism, this paper has indited a core component of UChicago.

Through subsequently offering improvements to the Core, this paper intends to convey that the Core — and UChicago — can be successfully reformed. I do not mean to suggest that resolving the issues I raised with the Core will fundamentally transform UChicago. However, I do believe that changing the Core from a symbol of rigor which students find disenchanting into what I suggested, or another iteration of the Core actually curated to student needs and wants, would carry wide-reaching, positive impacts for undergraduates. And, to me, aiming to make UChicago more academically engaging for students is an aim well worth pursuing.