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# I Sat Down on a Bear Trap Just this Morning: The Struggle for Curricular Core Reform at the University of St. Thomas – Houston\*

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## Abstract:

This is an examination of the process of core review/reform at the University of St. Thomas, Houston and what this process has symbolized and contributed to the discussion on the future of the liberal arts at institutions of higher education.

## Biographies:

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# Introduction and Overview

- The University of St. Thomas is a private Catholic liberal arts institution in Houston, Texas.
- Beginning in 2007, and continuing to the present, faculty members and administrators have devoted thousands of hours of discussion, retreats, interviews and visits to other universities to fulfill a mandate from the Board of Directors to review and modify the core curriculum to ensure that it meets the requirements of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and the Catholic, Basilian mission of St. Thomas.

# Curricular Reform at UST: It all Begins with *Ex Corde*...

- A debate has been raging in Catholic higher education regarding what qualifies as a “true and complete” Catholic liberal arts experience.
- One could argue that the genesis of this discussion can be found with the publication of *Ex Corde Ecclesia* (1990) by the late Pontiff, John Paul II. In addition, an argument has been made that Catholic higher education in the United States in particular is in “crisis.” (Morey and Piderit 2006).

# Rationale for Core Reform at UST

- In the spring of 2005, the University underwent its 10 year regular re-accreditation process as mandated by SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools).
- One of the directives issued by SACS during their last visit in 1995 was that we needed to conduct a review of our core curriculum, a core that had been in place since 1983.
- When the SACS accreditation team arrived on our campus in April 2005 one of their criticisms of our institution was that we had not in fact conducted a review of our core curriculum per the directive issued 10 years previously.
- The result: UST was deficient in several areas, one of which was the failure to conduct a review of our core. SACS gave us until December 2005 to issue them a blueprint to address these concerns or we were faced with the threat of sanctions or non re-accreditation.

# Rationale for Core Reform at UST

- In December of 2005, we learned that we had received our re-accreditation with a few caveats, chief of which was:
  - *We would be reviewed periodically over the next ten years to make sure that we were doing what we said we would do with respect to our deficient areas.*
- July of 2006 brought a new Vice President for Academic Affairs and after dealing with a long left-over agenda item from previous academic vice presidents, the approval of a new system for faculty evaluation and development, he turned his attention to one of the SACS items, core reform.
- By the end of his first year, May 2007, a plan had been developed to evaluate our core curriculum and to formulate a new core if deemed necessary.

# The Core Reform Process at UST: Description of the Three Year Process

- The process began with discussion on Faculty Study Day in August of 2007.
- It concluded with approval of a new core curriculum in April 2010 by the University's Board of Directors.

## The Core Reform Process at UST: Ideological fissures within the faculty and administration

- There were and still remain many ideological fissures within and between the faculty and administrators on campus.
- These fissures and cleavages had tremendous influence on the core curriculum reform process, as well as the final outcome.
- The reverberations of the trench warfare-like fights over the Core are still being felt, and likely will continue to be felt in severed friendships, collegial relations, and faculty-administrative relations.



# Highlights of the Core Reform Process at UST: From a Shaky Start to a Shaky Finish (August 2007 – April 2010)

- Core Curriculum Reform Committee (CCRC):
  - ❑ Curriculum Committee Core Goals – May 2004
  - ❑ Background Readings – August-September 2007
  - ❑ Core Reform at Peer Institutions (Fall 2007)
  - ❑ Travel Groups (Fall 2007)
  - ❑ Faculty Input
  - ❑ Surveys
  - ❑ Labyrinth – May 2008
  - ❑ Core Subcommittees and their Reports – Fall 2008

# Highlights of the Core Reform Process at UST: From a Shaky Start to a Shaky Finish (August 2007 – April 2010)

- Change in VPAA – November 2008
- Documents sent to President – April 2009
- Core Reform Workshops – Summer 2009
- Presidential Decision – September 2009
- Ad Hoc Core Curriculum Reform Discussion Groups – Fall 2009
- Decisions in December 2009 – January 2010
- Final Ad Hoc Core Reform Committee

# Highlights of the Core Reform Process at UST: From a Shaky Start to a Shaky Finish (August 2007 – April 2010)

- Final Product – April 2010.

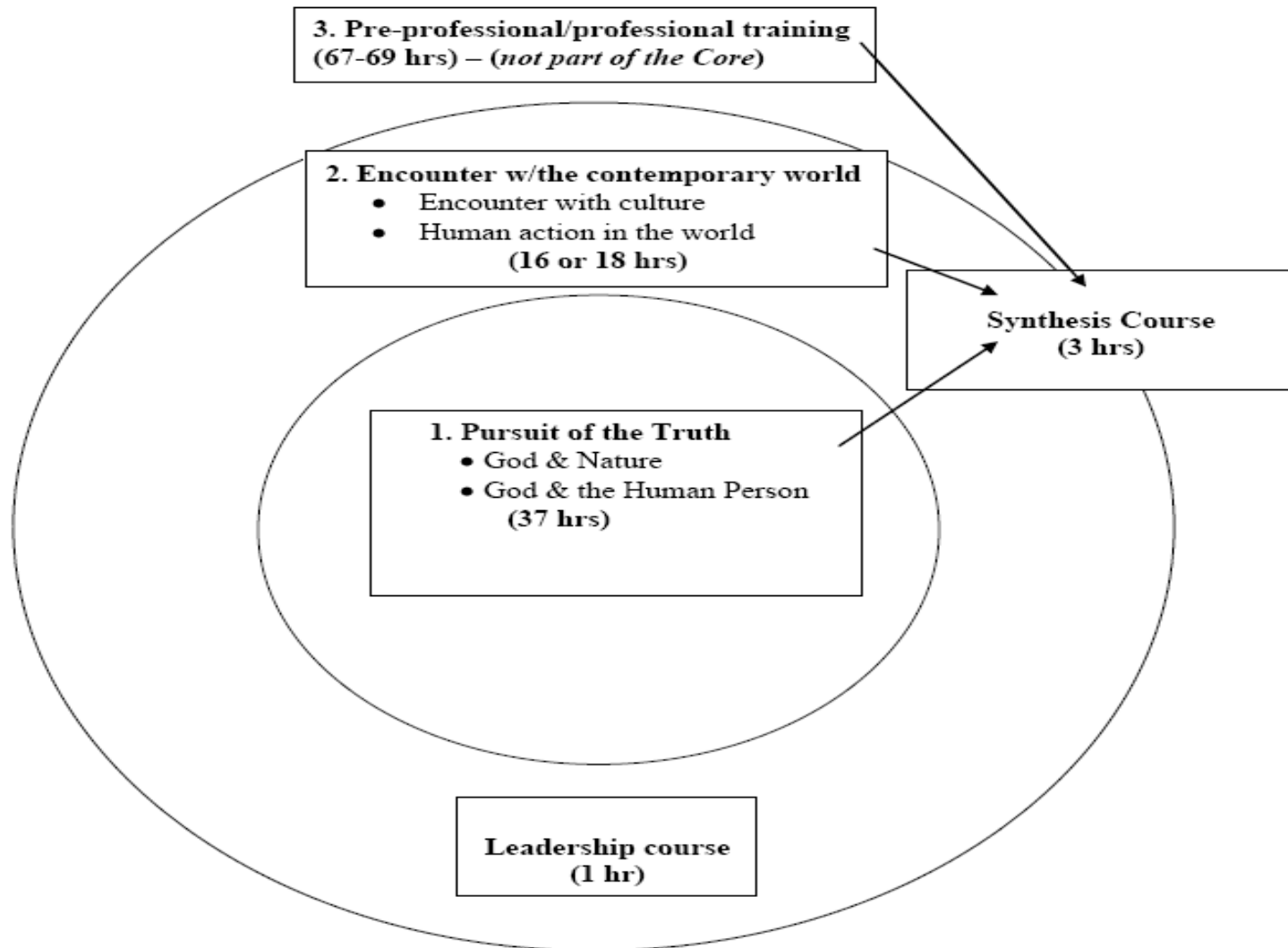
# Some Comparisons/Contrasts between the old core curriculum and the new core curriculum, with the following as a guide:

- ❑ Size
- ❑ Scope
- ❑ Content
- ❑ Basilian influence and tradition
- ❑ *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*

# The Current UST Core Curriculum

UST Core Requirements (71 hours)	Total Hours Complete	To Be Completed	
<b>Theology (9 credit hours) – must take in order:</b> THEO 1300/3300 – Teachings of the Catholic Church THEO 2300/3310 – Intro to the Sacred Scriptures Any 3000/4000 level theology course	<b>Transfer Students:</b>  <i>Transferring 30-59 hours:</i> Theology – 9 hours Philosophy – 9 hours  <i>Transferring 60+ hours:</i> Theology – 6 hours at 3000 level Philosophy – 6 hours as upper or lower division		
<b>Philosophy (9 credit hours) – Choose <u>one</u> sequence and take in order:</b> <i>Systematic Sequence</i> PHIL 1311 – Phil of the Human Person PHIL 2314 – Ethics PHIL 3313 – Metaphysics <i>Historical Sequence</i> PHIL 1315/3315 – Ancient Philosophy PHIL 2316/3316 – Medieval Philosophy PHIL 3317 – Modern Philosophy			
<b>Philosophy and/or Theology (6 credit hours)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any upper division theology</li> <li>Philosophy courses in this category <u>must</u> be 2000 level or higher</li> <li>Student may <u>not</u> take both PHIL 1315 &amp; 3315 – Ancient Philosophy</li> <li>Philosophy courses in this category may be taken from either sequence</li> </ul>			
<b>English (12 credit hours) – must be taken in order</b> ENGL 1341 – The Classical Tradition: Literature & Composition I ENGL 1342 – The Middle Ages: Literature & Composition II ENGL 2312 – The Modern World: Literature & Composition III Any 3000/4000 level English course except 3312, 3341 or 4399 <i>Students with transfer credit</i> 3 hours – take ENGL 1341, 1342, 2312 6 hours – take ENGL 3312 and any 3000/4000 except 3341 or 4399 9 hours – take any 3000/4000 except 3341 or 4399	<i>Students with AP credit</i> Students with 3 hours AP English <u>Literature &amp; Composition</u> with a score of 4 or higher should take ENGL 1342, 2312 and any upper division ENGL except 3312, 3341 or 4399  <i>Students who have AP credit and 3 hours transfer should take 3312 and any upper division ENGL except 3341 or 4399</i>		
<b>Foreign Language (6 credit hours)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two <u>sequential</u> courses in French, German, Greek, Latin, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, Irish, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, or Hebrew</li> </ul>			
<b>History (6 credit hours)</b> HIST 1335 – World Community I HIST 1336 – World Community II	OR		
<b>Social &amp; Behavioral Sciences (6 credit hours)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Choose from economics, geography, international studies, political science, psychology and sociology</li> </ul>			
<b>Natural Sciences (8 credit hours)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two 3-credit hour lectures with corresponding 1-credit hour lab</li> <li>Choose from biology, chemistry, environmental science, geology, physics &amp; astronomy</li> </ul>			
<b>Mathematics (3 credit hours)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MATH 1331 – Pre-calculus or higher level math required</li> <li>MATH 1315 – Intermediate Algebra and MATH 1337/1338 Contemporary Math III do not satisfy core</li> </ul>			
<b>Oral Communication (3 credit hours)</b> <i>School of Arts &amp; Sciences</i> COMM 1331 – Public Speaking OR COMM 2332 – Persuasion and Argumentation	<i>Cameron School of Business</i> BSAD 3320 – Business Communication <i>School of Education</i> MS 3333 – Oral Communication		
<b>Fine Arts (3 credit hours) from the following:</b> <i>School of Arts &amp; Sciences</i> ARTHS 1350 - Introduction to the Visual Arts ARTHS 2351 - Survey of Art I ARTHS 2352 - Survey of Art II Any upper-division Art History course DRAM 1330 - Introduction to the Theatre DRAM 3329 - Screenwriting DRAM3331 - Playwriting	DRAM 3339 - History of the Theatre FPA 1332 - Survey of Fine Arts I FPA 1333 - Survey of Fine Arts II MUSC 2363 - Basic Musicianship I MUSC 3340 - Music and Western Civilization Upper-division Music course <i>School of Education</i> MS 3376 – Essentials of Fine Arts		
<b>Some majors may require or recommend specific courses within the core.</b>			

# Core Proposal of the Task Force



# *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*: How it Informs the New Core Curriculum

- The new Core takes the hours agreed upon by the Task Force and organizes them according to themes found within *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.
- Additionally, it identifies several fundamental questions typically posed by liberal arts.
- These questions ideally should be addressed throughout the core curriculum through the lens of each of the disciplines along with philosophy and theology as integrating disciplines.

# *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*: How it Informs the New Core Curriculum

- Some basic questions to be addressed in the core courses are:
  - *What is a human being?*
  - *Can human beings know truth?*
  - *Does God exist and what is he like?*
  - *Where do human beings and the universe come from?*
  - *What is the origin and meaning of human suffering?*
  - *What should human beings do to be happy and to do good?*
  - *What is the destiny of human beings and what becomes of them following death?*



# A Breakdown of the New Core

**Introduction:** Freshmen Symposium: Educating Leaders of Faith and Character (1 hour)

## **I. PURSUIT OF THE TRUTH** (37 hours)

### **1. God & the Human Person**

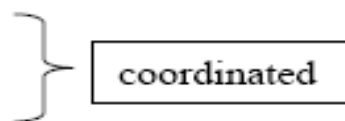
Social Science (3)

History I – II (6)

English I – II – III (9)

Philosophy I (3)

Theology I (3)



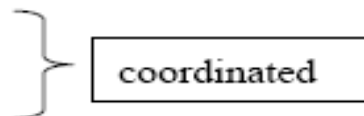
### **2. God & Nature**

Natural Science (4)

Math (3)

Philosophy II (3)

Theology II (3)



## **II. ENCOUNTER WITH THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD** (16 or 18 hours)

### **1. Encounter with culture**

Drama, Art History, or Music (3)

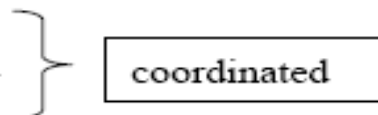
Communications or Social Science (3)

Natural Science (4) or 2 Foreign Language (6)

### **2. Human action in the world**

Philosophy (3) - Ethics

Theology (3) – Moral Theology



## **III. SYNTHESIS COURSE** (3 hours)

# Distribution of the New Core

<b>■ <u>Proposed Credits</u></b>	<b><u>Hours</u></b>	<b><u>Integration</u></b>
■ Leadership Course		1
■ Theology		9
■ <input type="checkbox"/> Coordinated courses in Philosophy/Theology		
■ Philosophy		9
■ Synthesis Theology, Philosophy, or Catholic Studies		3
■ English		9
■ History		6
■ Natural Science		4
■ Mathematics		3
■ Social Sciences		3
■ Drama, Art, or Music		3
■ Communications or Social Science		3
■ Natural Science or Foreign Language		4 or 6
<b>■ Total Core Curriculum</b>		<b>57-59 hours</b>

# Task Force Recommendations Regarding the New Core

- In order for the core to be effectively implemented, the Task Force recommended:
  - that the university commit to dedicated and ongoing faculty oversight of the core curriculum that includes the formation of faculty groups to oversee integration.
  - that the university commit to hiring for mission with the new core in mind.
- They also recommended:
  - that a service component be explored by the committee for core implementation

# Relationship of Goals in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* to the New Core

<b>Aspirations of <i>Ex corde Ecclesiae</i></b>	<b>Where They Are Implemented</b>
The natural desire to know truth	1. Initial philosophy course
The wonder and mysteriousness of reality	1. Initial philosophy course 2. Natural science courses 3. Scripture course which treats creation
The joy of understanding the truth	1. Initial philosophy course 2. Throughout the Curriculum
Respect for the various academic disciplines and their characteristic objects, methodologies, and insights.	1. Throughout the Curriculum
Asking and answering fundamental questions	1. Initial philosophy course 2. Throughout the Curriculum
Dialog between reason and faith	1. Relation of sciences/philosophy with theology in the curriculum 2. Final Integration Course
The central importance of revelation, especially Christ, to Catholic liberal arts	1. Theology course which includes Christology 2. Final Integration Course
The mutual enrichment of disciplines	1. Throughout the Curriculum 2. Final Integration Course
Achieving an integrated worldview	1. Final Integration Course
Confronting important contemporary problems	1. Throughout the Curriculum 2. Courses under "Encounter with Culture"
Teaching Ethical and Religious Principles	1. Ethics 2. Moral Theology
Social Teaching of the Church	1. Moral Theology
Professional Ethics	1. Final Integration Course
Dialog of faith with cultures of our time	
Dialog of faith with modern sciences and technology	1. Natural Science and Math 2. Social Sciences and communications; 3. Moral theology
<b>Secondary Topics from <i>Ex Corde</i> Addressed</b>	
Vocation (EC 31)	1. Final Integration course
Leadership (EC 23)	1. Freshmen Symposium

# Some Final Thoughts...

- So what did we at UST actually *learn* from the three years of trench warfare on core reform?
  - ❑ Core reform is not easy, that's for darn sure...
  - ❑ Everyone must be on the same page – metaphorically, physically, and spiritually. Rowing in the same direction never hurts.
  - ❑ Faculty “buy-in” is absolutely essential to core reform.
  - ❑ Such “buy-in” is only possible with strong and *effective* leadership at the top – from the Board, the President, and the Academic VP

# Some Final Thoughts...

- So what did we actually learn from the three years of trench warfare on core reform?
  - University leadership **MUST** be able to explain effectively **in both a collegial and cogent manner** why core reform is both necessary and important.
  - Top-down leadership, which treats the faculty as the “hired help” rather than partners in both shared governance and the core curriculum, will readily facilitate distrust, dissent, discord, and defeat.

# Some Final Thoughts...

- So what did we actually learn from the three years of trench warfare on core reform?
  - ❑ *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is integral to the core reform process at a Catholic university.
  - ❑ The vision of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is that the most comprehensive understanding of reality is achieved when disciplines collaborate and enlighten one another.
  - ❑ Any core reform proposal must anticipate that core courses will be carefully modified to facilitate conversation among the disciplines.

# Some Final Thoughts...

- So what did we actually learn from the three years of trench warfare on core reform?
  - Changes should only be undertaken with the assistance of the faculty via something akin to a core implementation committee.
  - Since core courses also convey material not directly related to core-related questions, prudent accommodations must be made so that subjects can both contribute to integrating the core and communicate effectively the knowledge peculiar to their disciplines.



# References:

John Paul II (1990). Ex Corde Ecclesiae.

Melanie M. Morey and John J. Piderit (2006).  
Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis. New  
York, NY: Oxford University Press