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# REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON CURRICULAR REFORM

A TASK FORCE APPOINTED  
JOINTLY BY THE PRESIDENT, THE  
PROVOST, AND THE CHAIR OF THE  
FACULTY COUNCIL

OCTOBER 27, 2005



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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THE CORE CURRICULUM OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS  
AT AUSTIN SHOULD CREATE A COMMON INTELLECTUAL  
EXPERIENCE THAT LEAVES AN IMPRINT ON EACH GRADUATE  
OF THE INSTITUTION. TO A LARGE EXTENT, IT IS THE JOB OF  
THE CORE—THOSE COURSES REQUIRED OF ALL  
UNDERGRADUATES—TO PRODUCE INFORMED, CRITICAL  
THINKERS PREPARED TO SERVE AS CITIZENS OF THE WORLD.  
THIS REPORT IS THE FIRST COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF THE  
UNIVERSITY’S CORE CURRICULUM IN 25 YEARS.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The University of Texas at Austin is one of the nation’s preeminent public research universities and a leader in higher education. Nevertheless, our strengths as a large, diverse research university—outstanding faculty across many disciplines, exceptional research facilities and expertise, renowned museums and collections—too often play a limited role in the learning experience of undergraduate students, especially in their first and second years. The forces of increased specialization, advanced research, and graduate study tend to push these resources beyond the reach of many undergraduates. The University of Texas (UT) is not alone in this. As noted in the 1998 report of the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (*Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities*), other great research universities in the United States face similar challenges.

These challenges were also recognized by UT’s Commission of 125, a group of citizens who in 2004 completed a two-year study of the University and made the following observation: “The success of UT graduates throughout the disciplines indicates that they have received a generally sound education, and on its face, UT’s curriculum would seem to be doing a good job of keeping up with the times. . . . But the Commission believes that while the current system offers students myriad courses of study, it fails to equip undergraduates with a core body of knowledge essential to a well-balanced education. For too many degree plans, the current curriculum resembles little more than a vast à la carte menu.”

The Commission also said that the present core curriculum is outdated and that today’s graduates require a broader education, particularly in the areas of science, technology, the humanities, global cultures, multicultural perspectives, and leadership. The Commission was troubled that academic credit for much of UT’s core curriculum is granted for work done elsewhere, especially through advanced placement examination and transfer credit. The Commission believed that undergraduates benefit from studying shared academic topics and concepts to add richness to discussions outside the classroom and to create a bond among

students. The current curriculum lacks sufficient common intellectual experiences shared by all undergraduates, whatever their discipline.

We endorse the Commission's findings.

As universities throughout the United States have moved toward greater specialization, many have not placed a strong focus on core curriculum. This includes UT. As a consequence, departments too often do not assign their most accomplished and senior professors to teach core courses. Colleges and departments focus on specialization requirements at the expense of general education requirements and goals. Courses used to satisfy area requirements are often designed not as opportunities to educate and engage non-specialists but as entry-level courses for students within the disciplines.<sup>1</sup> Students sometimes must choose a major, or perceive they must choose a major, even before they attend their first day of class. To a great extent, students can obtain academic and career counseling only within their discipline. Students in one college or school face difficulty obtaining courses or other services in other colleges or schools. Degree requirements in individual disciplines are often so substantial that students have little flexibility to explore other areas and acquire a broad educational experience. The University does a superb job teaching specialized courses that satisfy degree-plan requirements. It is less successful in developing courses and programs for students outside their majors that offer breadth or that integrate knowledge from different disciplines.

We fully recognize that many external factors contribute to these problems. Enrollment and funding pressures have created a high student-faculty ratio, which limits the number of available courses, especially those that focus on writing and speaking and on other instruction-intensive skills. State regulatory requirements reduce UT's flexibility to design its own core curriculum. But in addition to these important external factors, two internal factors create strong centrifugal forces that propel resources away from a core curriculum.

First, the core curriculum is no longer central to the University's culture. Students and

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<sup>1</sup> Where it appears in these pages, the term "area requirements" refers to the courses that satisfy core requirements in these general areas: history, government, social sciences, natural sciences, composition, literature, mathematics, fine arts, and the humanities.

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faculty increasingly find their “homes” in specific colleges, departments, and disciplines, rather than in the University as a whole. Second, and contributing to the first, the University’s organizational structure undermines a strong and integrated common core. UT’s strongest structural forces are exerted by the colleges, schools, and departments. For example, most of the University’s funding, academic and career advising, and curricular requirements are focused on individual colleges, schools, and departments. Even new-student orientation, which helps set student expectations, is largely organized by colleges and schools. The incentives motivating those units often compete with the goal of a shared educational experience. In short, the core curriculum—indeed the overall core experience for the University’s undergraduate students—is an “academic orphan.”

We seek to change this. We seek to establish a core curriculum that does more than regulate the distribution of unconnected area requirements among the disciplines. The core curriculum should be a vehicle that brings the extraordinary resources of this great research university to all undergraduate students from the moment they arrive on campus and should continue to do so as they progress through their specific courses of study. It should serve to give coherence and integrity to a student’s overall undergraduate education. The core curriculum should serve as a “spine” that supports an undergraduate student’s overall educational experience.

The core curriculum must also respond to the many changes that have occurred in the 25 years since it was last reviewed. Our students live in a world that has undergone a technological revolution. They live in closer proximity to other nations and cultures. They live in a state and country that are more culturally diverse. And they study in an intellectual world where long-established boundaries between scholarly areas are less distinct. The core curriculum should draw strength from these changes. It should ensure that all of our students, whatever their areas of specialization, graduate with the flexible skills they need to be leaders in our communities.

A great research university has more than one priority. The core educational experience for undergraduate students is central to the University's mission, but there are other important elements. Graduate education is critical. Strong majors for undergraduates are important so that students gain in-depth learning within a discipline. Research is essential and, in turn, it enriches teaching at all levels. A core curriculum in a great, public research university must be aligned with these other important goals.

This moment in the University's history offers an exceptional opportunity. We can reconceptualize the very role of a core curriculum in undergraduate education and establish the University as a leader in undergraduate education among large, public, world-class research universities.

Make no mistake, revitalizing the core curriculum and undergraduate education generally will not be an easy task. It will require more than a handful of isolated new courses that satisfy area requirements. It will require organizational change. None of this can, or should, happen in a single stroke. Progress will require sustained and disciplined commitment over a period of five years or more, but it must start now. If the University truly wants to revitalize the core experience for undergraduate students, it must make this goal a top priority, not just in theory but in its decisions about where to spend its resources.

## **II. FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS**

To start on a path toward a richer, more coherent core curriculum, we make five recommendations.

First, we recommend that all undergraduate students take a specially developed course in each of their first two years. We call these courses "Signature Courses." These Signature Courses will expose students to broad issues that transcend individual disciplines and

demonstrate how different disciplines discover and expand knowledge. They will introduce students to top faculty and to the rich array of resources available only at a great research university. In short, from the moment they arrive on campus, students will benefit from a shared intellectual experience and will discover what makes a UT education distinctive. (See Part III.)

Second, we recommend a new approach to the core requirements so that they provide a more coherent and integrated structure for undergraduate education and equip undergraduate students with critical skills. Accordingly, we recommend a new set of requirements to train students in important skills and expose them to experiences that will prepare them for the complex world confronting them. The University should review and improve all courses that satisfy core requirements. Core courses should be coordinated into clusters, or “thematic strands,” that will provide a deeper, more coherent learning experience than does a group of unrelated courses selected from a vast menu. (See Part IV.)

Third, we recommend a set of changes that will enhance a student’s ability to use undergraduate education to find a path in life. Undergraduate students should have adequate opportunities to explore different areas of study before declaring a major. It is also crucial that undergraduate students have access to considerably more university-wide academic and career counseling. (See Part V.)

Fourth, we recommend an important change to the University’s administrative structure in order to create a guardian of core undergraduate education. Specifically, we propose establishing a new college, which we call “University College.” University College will provide a single portal for entering freshmen. It will also provide ongoing, focused, and sustained attention to core undergraduate education, which we believe is necessary to make meaningful progress. (See Part VI.)

Finally, to implement these recommendations, the University must generate substantial

additional financial resources for the core curriculum and undergraduate education. (See Part VII.)

### **III. SIGNATURE COURSES**

The Signature Courses will thus expose each entering UT student to the broad goals and possibilities of a university education, while promoting a greater sense of intellectual community among undergraduates. They will make students aware of the high standards necessary for college-level academic work and help students cultivate skills to meet those standards. These courses will also ensure that all students, in their first two years, will be taught by at least two of the University's finest teachers and scholars. Furthermore, all undergraduates will have conducted an intensive and comparative inquiry into distinctive objectives, methods, and discourses of several academic disciplines.

The freshman Signature Course, "Inquiry Across Disciplines: Nature," will help students start their education with enhanced communication skills, practice in independent inquiry, and an elevated sense of the academic standards and resources of a great university. This course will be taught in multiple topical sections that will differ in content and focus, depending on the particular interests and expertise of the faculty who design and teach them. However, all sections *must* satisfy three common criteria: They must negotiate the intersection of disciplines across a major divide, such as the divide between the humanities and the natural sciences. They must require students to communicate effectively, both in writing and in speech. (These are not courses in writing and speaking per se, but they will begin immediately to develop a culture of writing and speaking that will continue throughout the undergraduate experience.) Finally, the courses must require students to use evidence to corroborate or refute a theory in various disciplines, such as art, literature, natural science, or social science.

Sections of the freshman Signature Course will explore big questions related to nature (including human nature) that are of compelling interest to our students. Each section will have a structure that allows it to approach its subject without being limited by the boundaries that have grown between disciplines. At the same time, the course's structure will show students how scholars can cooperate or usefully disagree and how different disciplines can aid in the quest for knowledge by framing each other's questions, interpreting each other's results, and engaging in dialogue. Accordingly, the course ideally will involve some form of collaborative teaching that represents various disciplines. Faculty will propose topics to University College or be recruited by the College to teach the sections. For example, one topical section (possibly entitled "Global Climate Change") might investigate global climate change from the perspectives of earth science, social impact, world politics, and economics. Another topical section (possibly entitled "Conceptions of Nature in Science and Art") might investigate how scientists and artists construct theories and visions of the natural world.

To expand the breadth of the course, all students in all sections will be required to attend three major University Lectures or performances given by world-renowned academic or public figures. These will be related to the themes of the course, and each will be followed by an interdisciplinary panel that will discuss the lecture or performance.

The freshman Signature Course will be taught in large sections, each devoted to a specific topic. For example, 14 sections per semester, averaging 240 students, will accommodate 6,720 freshmen. Each section will be divided into groups of 20, which will meet weekly for discussion, oral presentation, and feedback on writing. These discussion groups will be led by experienced and specially trained teaching assistants, working closely with the courses' professors. The professors will also circulate among the discussion groups and actively participate in writing instruction and evaluation.

The sophomore Signature Course, "Inquiry Across Disciplines: Culture," will be introduced after the freshman course is implemented. It will progress logically from the

freshman course. The structure of this course, ideally taught in smaller sections, will be designed by University College to complement the freshman Signature Course.

The two Signature Courses will satisfy six hours of the 42 hour core required by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). The sophomore Signature Course will be used to satisfy one of the THECB area requirements in history, government, social sciences, or fine arts as deemed appropriate by the respective faculties and University College. The freshman Signature Course will not be used to satisfy an area requirement and will exist as a discrete component of the core.

Some programs might be so tightly prescribed that adding the freshman Signature Course will threaten timely graduation. Those programs and University College should work together to find an acceptable plan to integrate the freshman Signature Course into their curriculum without compromising their own degree requirements.

#### **IV. AN INTEGRATED AND COHERENT CORE**

Beyond the Signature Courses, the core curriculum should fit into an overall conception of the goals of a university education. These overall goals are accomplished partly in the core, but they are also accomplished in major courses of study. We seek a core that, coupled with the major courses of study, will fulfill these goals. We believe that an overall university education should provide all undergraduate students with proficiency in reasoning and analytical thinking, writing and speaking, working in teams to set goals and solve problems, a language other than English, and a selected academic discipline or interdisciplinary field. This education should also provide all undergraduate students with an understanding of important moral and ethical issues, the arts, humanities, mathematics, science and technology, cultural diversity within the U.S. and the world, and one's self and one's abilities and potential.

The current 42-hour core curriculum mandated by the THECB has two components: 36 hours of area requirements and six hours designated by UT. The area requirements include courses in history, government, social sciences, natural sciences, composition, literature, mathematics, and fine arts. Although the Task Force believes that UT should have greater flexibility in determining its core curriculum, we have focused our attention on improving our implementation of the 36-hour area requirement and changing the six-hour requirement at our discretion. We propose below a mechanism for continuing improvement of the 36-hour area requirement. And we recommend the discretionary six hours, currently devoted to a Substantial Writing Component course and a course in natural sciences, be fulfilled by the freshman Signature Course and a new science and technology requirement.<sup>2</sup>

But we need to do more. Beyond knowledge of broad subject areas, our undergraduate students must be proficient in writing, speaking, quantitative reasoning, and independent inquiry. They must understand ethnic and global cultures, and they must have a strong grasp of the principles of leadership and ethics. (In fact, the UT Task Force on Racial Respect and Fairness recommended that the University introduce an undergraduate requirement for a course on diversity.) Some of these skills, such as writing and speaking, will be employed in the Signature Courses. In addition, we recommend a set of skills and experiences that all undergraduate students must obtain in courses throughout the University, including the core, the major requirements, and electives. These requirements will provide undergraduates with substantial experience in writing, quantitative reasoning, global cultures, multicultural perspectives, ethics and leadership, and independent inquiry. Students will fulfill these requirements by earning “flags” for existing and new courses that have been identified as conveying appropriate skills and experiences. University College, in collaboration with the colleges, will determine which courses qualify for flags. These flags must be earned in residence.<sup>3</sup>

Specifically, students must earn flags for:

1. Writing—3 flags (in addition to Rhetoric 306 or equivalent)

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<sup>2</sup> See Figure 1.1 on page 25.

<sup>3</sup> University College will establish policy regarding flag requirements for students who transfer to UT from a community college or a four-year institution for their junior or senior years.

2. Quantitative reasoning (statistical fluency, formal logic, quantitative evaluation of evidence)—1 flag
3. Global cultures—1 flag
4. Multicultural perspectives and diversity—1 flag
5. Ethics and leadership—1 flag
6. Independent inquiry (formulate, analyze, and independently investigate a problem and present findings)—1 flag

These requirements do not specify courses in the above subjects per se, but rather highlight courses with substantial focus in these areas. For example, a history course might satisfy the global cultures requirement or a philosophy course might satisfy the ethics and leadership requirement.

We recognize that adding requirements can make it difficult for students to complete their education on time. It is essential that an adequate number of these skills and experience-related courses be offered. Moreover, it must be possible for students to satisfy these skills and experience-related requirements in courses that also satisfy the 42-hour core requirements or requirements in their major. For example, many courses that satisfy the social science core requirement could also carry a flag for global or multicultural perspectives. Many courses that satisfy the natural science requirement could also carry a flag for quantitative reasoning or for independent inquiry. And so forth.

In addition to these skills and experiences, we recommend that core courses be better designed for their broad educational purposes. Many current core courses are not high priorities of the departments that offer them. The courses are often insufficiently staffed. For many students, core courses in English literature, mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, fine arts, history, and government serve as both the introduction to and the final collegiate

experience in a subject or discipline. However, some of the more than 200 courses that satisfy the core requirements are designed as early building blocks in a progression of courses leading to a major, while others are watered-down versions of introductory courses.

Neither approach provides the best choices for non-major students who have but one opportunity to explore the subject or discipline. These core courses should convey the most fundamental ideas in their respective subjects and present them as a compelling, mind-opening intellectual adventure. For example, calculus currently satisfies the mathematics requirement, but calculus courses are often designed to hone technical skills required for more advanced mathematics courses. Students taking a single course in mathematics might be better served by a course in statistics or a course treating a variety of great ideas in mathematics. We recommend a review—coordinated with the respective departments—of all courses that currently satisfy core requirements. The new University College will assist the departments in improving the quality and pertinence of the core curriculum courses that shape undergraduate education.

We agree with the Commission of 125's statement that our students must have a strong grasp of technology. The current University core curriculum requires nine hours of courses in the natural sciences, three more than the THECB requirement. We recommend that the University redirect this three-hour portion of the natural sciences requirement to courses on science and technology that examine how those fields affect the problems facing society today and in the future. This will require faculty educated in the sciences and engineering to create suitable courses to meet this requirement, some directed to a general education audience while others are directed to science and engineering majors. The science and technology course complements the six-hour natural science requirement, which aims to give students a deeper exposure to the scientific method, its application, and its results, in a particular domain.

We also recommend a broader view regarding which courses satisfy other specific disciplinary requirements in the core curriculum. For example, the goal of the core mathematics requirement is for students to have an understanding of rigorous mathematical

thinking, and its use in problem formulation and problem solving. These goals can be effectively addressed in appropriate courses in computer science and statistics, as well as those offered by the Department of Mathematics. This principle should also be applied to other area requirements, such as history, government, and social science.

We also recommend that core courses be arranged in a coherent way. One of the greatest assets of our University is its size. Students enjoy the freedom to navigate through an array of course offerings whose richness, variety, and sheer immensity are unmatched. Indeed, substantial choice and the resultant capacity to accommodate the unique interests of almost any student are hallmarks of UT's core curriculum and should be preserved. Nevertheless, students need more guidance as they select the courses that satisfy their area requirements. As the Commission of 125 noted, the current core curriculum is often treated as a "vast à la carte menu," and "course-selection decisions are frequently driven by class availability, convenience, and whim rather than by a well-conceived plan of instruction." The University should harness the power of its vast curriculum by drawing connections between existing courses to create meaningful and coherent paths for students to follow.

To make the core more coherent, University College should develop thematic strands of courses throughout the core curriculum. Each strand should be organized around an interdisciplinary theme and identify sets of courses that meet core requirements in a related and coherent way. Each strand should also assist students in satisfying the flag requirements outlined above.

A typical strand will consist of three to five courses. For example, a strand organized around the theme of health policy might link core courses in government, economics, sociology, and history and carry flags in writing, diversity, and ethics. Strands might be developed for any number of interdisciplinary themes. UT's Bridging Disciplines Program has created several thematic strands that have been successful and should be adapted for more general use.

Each strand should be coordinated by a faculty committee composed of individuals who teach courses in the strand. These faculty members should be encouraged to develop their courses in innovative ways so that each course serves not only as a valuable experience on its own, but also as an integral component of a set of courses whose overall intellectual value is greater than the sum of its individual parts. All students should pursue a coherent path through the core curriculum, but students should not be limited to established strands. Some students will be interested in augmenting strands with additional experiences. Related research opportunities, internships, and service learning projects should be available for each strand and should be encouraged through advising.

Our goal is to implement a common core curriculum that, coupled with major courses of study, will provide undergraduate students with a rich and coherent educational experience and give them the basic skills and foundations necessary to achieve roles of leadership in society. We are cognizant, however, that the array of requirements confronting students cannot become overly burdensome and complex. It is essential that the area requirements, the skills and experiences requirements, and the major requirements be coordinated in a way that allows students to graduate in four years. This task will require imagination, hard work, and cooperation from the faculty and leadership of colleges and departments. And it will require substantial additional resources.

## **V. ENHANCING STUDENTS' ABILITY TO FIND THEIR WAY**

At a University as large and complex as the University of Texas, the challenge for students to find their way to an appropriate major is enormous. While some students come to the University knowing what they will eventually study, many others flounder while searching for a fitting program and major. This is not a small problem; more than 65 percent of UT students change their major at least once. In our examination of this problem we find that the

structure of advising and wayfinding at UT makes a student's path even more difficult because most advising is located in the individual departments and colleges and is intended for their own majors.

The Task Force on Enrollment Strategy found that frequent major changes are an obstacle to timely graduation, and that undergraduates need more time to make informed choices. A key part of the problem students face in finding their way is that they feel they must declare a major before they have enough information to make an informed decision. In many programs, undergraduates are encouraged to choose majors even before they attend their first day of class. Furthermore, degree requirements in many disciplines tend to monopolize students' academic schedules, leaving little flexibility to explore other areas through electives.

Most high school seniors do not have the information or experience to choose the major right for them. Many of the fields in which UT offers majors are not even mentioned in high school. First-year students will benefit from more time to explore the academic landscape and discover their intellectual interests and passions. Consequently, we recommend that all first-year students, regardless of their advanced placement or transfer credit, defer the declaration of a major until no sooner than registration for their third semester in residence.

We are mindful that students aspiring to earn degrees from UT's restricted colleges desire some assurance that those paths are open to them, and that such an opportunity plays a role in choosing whether to attend the University or some other institution. For that reason, we recommend that individual colleges be permitted to grant guaranteed second-year admission ("pre-admission") to freshmen upon admission to the University. These students will not officially declare a major until their sophomore year, even though their spot in their chosen program is guaranteed. They may, however, begin major-specific coursework in the first year. Other students, whether or not they have been pre-admitted to a major program, are also eligible to begin major-specific course work in their freshmen year. To ensure that students have a reasonable opportunity to explore and then still gain admission to a restricted college,

however, at least 20 percent of the capacity of an entering class in a restricted college (or one place for every four pre-admissions) should be reserved for students who have not been pre-admitted. We are cognizant that some programs have special needs. Consequently, programs may apply for an exception to the 20 percent set-aside where a high degree of specialization and prior training makes this provision impractical, such as for students majoring in cello performance.

Many students believe that their choice of major must be determined by their career interest. Indeed, some students report that they choose their major based on access to a career services office within a particular college. This tends to eliminate the possibility of a student choosing a major of academic interest while still pursuing a different career choice. For example, students who want to pursue careers in business might be well served by pursuing their passion for anthropology or chemistry, combining it with a cluster of basic business courses. Indeed, employers state that they value a broad-based education. UT currently has programs, such as Business Foundations and UTeach, that offer career preparation for students seeking a degree in another academic discipline. We recommend that this type of program be expanded and be taught by senior faculty. In addition, successful participants in these programs should have access to advising and career services in the host colleges.

Finally, to help students find their way, we recommend that the University develop a program of university-wide advising. Advising plays an important role in the process by which students enter the University. This is especially important at a very large university such as UT. Students need advice when they apply to the University. They need advice if they choose a college or major prior to arriving on campus. The advice they receive during freshman orientation is critical to their entire university experience. The University currently has many excellent, innovative programs designed to ease the transition to college, but they are scattered throughout the campus. We need a university-wide advising and career center that coordinates and expands these programs. As the single portal for entering students, University College can

perform this task.

Nevertheless, we applaud and endorse the many college-specific activities now being performed by the colleges and departments to welcome students to the University, and to provide orientation and information programs, social events, academic advising, and career counseling. These programs should continue. By providing university-wide services of this nature, University College will free many of the college-specific programs to do an even better job of concentrating on students who have made an informed commitment to their respective majors.

## **VI. UNIVERSITY COLLEGE**

Currently there is no administrative unit whose primary responsibility is maintaining the core curriculum. It is crucial that the core curriculum not be an academic orphan over the next 25 years. The core curriculum needs a home and champion to exert gravitational forces back to the core, to manage and oversee reform over the long run, and to keep the goals of broad-based undergraduate education high in the University's priorities. History teaches that none of the reforms recommended in this report is likely to be implemented or maintained without a strong, stable home for the core curriculum and without a new, integrated concept of the core curriculum. Consequently, our most important recommendation is a new structure, University College, to serve as a home and champion of the core curriculum. We have noted that the reform we recommend cannot be implemented in a single stroke, but instead will require sustained, focused, disciplined effort.

University College will serve as a guardian of the core curriculum, will create a single portal for all entering students, and will provide advising and career counseling that will enable students to chart a coherent path in the University. As in other colleges, University College will be led by a dean who will report to the provost. The dean will be responsible for overseeing the

remainder of these recommendations. University College will require a staff and budget sufficient to carry out its mission.

University College will have the following attributes:

1. It will have executive committees of faculty appointed for a finite term. The executive committees, which will provide guidance for University College, will be selected according to a process to be determined by the president and provost.
2. It will oversee the core curriculum by: (a) soliciting and approving Signature Courses proposed by the faculty; (b) working with colleges and departments to develop and improve other core courses along the lines we have recommended; and (c) implementing strands and flags as outlined above.
3. It will develop and oversee university-wide academic and career advising.
4. It will serve as the home for all entering freshmen for the first two semesters.
5. It will not award degrees, and it will not have a separate faculty.<sup>4</sup> All faculty members are responsible for the core curriculum and therefore will be included as members of University College.
6. Its dean will sit on the University's Promotion and Tenure Committee.

To be successful, the work of University College must be attractive to faculty and to their colleges and departments. Incentives will be established to encourage faculty to develop and teach Signature Courses or other special core courses and to assist in the work of University College. University College will also provide funding to departments that contribute faculty to teach the Signature Courses and support the work of University College. That funding will be sufficiently predictable and enduring to allow the department to hire new tenured and tenure-track faculty. This will enable departments to recruit faculty to add breadth and depth to their programs and thereby strengthen the University as a whole. These faculty will be hired on the

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<sup>4</sup>We considered making certain faculty, such as those teaching the Signature Courses, special members of University College under the title of University Professor. We ultimately rejected this idea because we do not want to create a division between teaching and research faculty and between faculty who are responsible for core undergraduate education and faculty who are not. Research and core undergraduate teaching are the responsibility of all faculty.

basis of their exceptional ability both as scholars and teachers.

We envision University College as an evolving structure within which many core courses and programs will be developed and grow, not because they are mandated, but because they reflect the goals and aspirations of existing colleges, schools, and departments. For example, the College of Fine Arts and the Performing Arts Center (PAC) have expressed an interest in developing courses that focus students on the ways various arts provide windows into different cultures around the world. Such a course might involve performances at the PAC. This course would be ideal both to provide a humanities area requirement to students outside a humanities major and to provide students with a rich and meaningful experience about global cultures. University College funding for faculty who teach the course would in turn allow the College of Fine Arts to build its faculty in other areas. In short, University College could harness existing enthusiasm to help strengthen the core and the College of Fine Arts. This type of collaboration should occur across the campus.

University College, as guardian of the core, should confront an important issue that extends far beyond this campus. The common experience and rigor of the current core curriculum are compromised by accepting too much credit by examination and by transfer, as the Commission of 125 observed. Indeed, high school preparation for advanced placement examinations has usurped college-level education, especially in writing and composition courses. For example, in the spring of 2005, only 22.6 percent of core rhetoric and composition credits were satisfied through courses taken at UT. The problem is less severe in other disciplines. In history, 39.5 percent of core curriculum credits were earned in residence. In mathematics, 41 percent; in English, 43.9 percent; in government, 61.4 percent; in social sciences, 74.4 percent, in natural sciences, 77.5 percent; and in fine arts, 85.9 percent.

The natural migration of material from the University curriculum to the high school curriculum has been going on for generations. For example, college algebra is seldom taught at UT anymore, and most of its content is included in high school mathematics courses.

In this and many other areas, universities have come to expect better preparation in entering students, which makes room for deeper, richer, and more advanced material in the University curriculum.

Increasing numbers of entering students arrive at UT with substantial advanced placement and transfer credits for work performed in high school. Some students see this as an opportunity to cut a year or more from their university education, walking away early from an extraordinary intellectual banquet provided by society. The Task Force has also noted that the common experience and rigor of the core curriculum are compromised when a large fraction of the student body places out or transfers in credits for much of the core curriculum.

We recommend that University College work with individual colleges and departments to establish limits on the number of examination and transfer credits that can be counted toward graduation, and to find ways to use the better preparation of our entering students to strengthen each program. We recognize that such policies will interact in complex ways with University responsibilities and resources, so implementation will require time and care.

University College should build on the success of existing programs that help enrich the freshman experience. For example, the First-Year Interest Group (FIG) program, which enrolls small groups of first-year students in common sets of courses, has helped build community and promote academic success. University College will expand such cohort registration beyond the FIG program, which now often segregates students by majors, with the goal that members of every discussion section in a freshman Signature Course will be concurrently enrolled as a cohort in other basic or core courses. These interdisciplinary cohorts will facilitate social and intellectual interaction among diverse groups of freshman students who will find a sense of place within the larger University community and develop friendships that will continue beyond the first year.

We are mindful and cautious about the cost of adding more bureaucratic structures to

the University. We considered the possibility of using existing structures or establishing a less ambitious university-wide committee to oversee the core curriculum. In the end, however, we rejected those approaches. A university-wide committee would simply not have the *gravitas* to fight the centrifugal forces currently propelling resources away from the core. Existing structures have many other responsibilities and are already overburdened. Being the guardian of the core curriculum is a full-time job. A new structure needs to be created to provide sustained and focused attention on the core curriculum.

We believe that meaningful progress requires a guardian of core undergraduate education that possesses the authority of the University's most fundamental and powerful structures. Those structures are colleges. Only a college can manage these changes with a sustained and focused effort over time.

## **VII. INCREASED RESOURCES**

We are mindful that implementation of our recommendations will require substantial new resources. Developing and maintaining core courses, including the Signature Courses, as recommended will be labor intensive and expensive. We will need to hire new faculty. A dean, an administrative staff, and adequate physical facilities for University College will increase the cost of these recommendations. We will need additional classrooms and teaching assistants.

We need a plan to develop the required resources. As existing budgets grow naturally, a high priority should be given to reforms in the core curriculum. We strongly believe that improving our students' core undergraduate experience can only be achieved if the University's budget priorities are aligned with these efforts.

Funding the core curriculum, and especially the new University College, should be the central focus of an ambitious new capital campaign to create a permanent endowment. The

possibilities for external support for this cause seem to us to be extraordinary.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Although this Task Force can call for making core undergraduate education a higher priority, it cannot do the continuous work of balancing competing demands on resources or of assuring that the demands of core undergraduate education are heard. Nor can a single committee, at a single time, design an entire curriculum. Excellent courses are designed by excellent professors who are skilled researchers and teachers. Strong course sequences and synergistic course groups are designed by outstanding faculties. Core educational goals of the University cannot be accomplished merely by relying on a set of core courses. They must also be woven into the fabric of each degree program. Refinement of the core is a constant process of review and revision.

We believe that the five recommendations in this report will greatly improve the value of the core curriculum to our students and, indeed, to the undergraduate experience as a whole. The University should adopt these recommendations.

Moreover, the success of colleges and departments in implementing these recommendations must be assessed when deans review their goals, objectives, and funding with the provost. That is, a college's contributions to the goals of the core curriculum should be a meaningful part of the regular evaluation of each college's performance. Likewise, deans should make contributions to the goals of the core curriculum an important measure in the evaluation of each department.

We have sought to balance large ambitions with achievable recommendations. As a result, our five recommendations do not address all areas for improvement. Several promising ideas surfaced in our discussions that are not described in detail in these pages. We list them

here, and we recommend that the administration and faculty give them careful consideration.

Within degree plans, it is much easier to add requirements than to subtract them. As a result, some degree plans may contain requirements that have outlived their usefulness. The colleges and departments should review their degree plans every five years to ensure that each degree requirement fulfills its intended goal and to remove those that are outdated.

The flag requirements described in Section IV are an indication of educational priority. Even beyond the flags, these skills and experiences need to be reinforced throughout the curricula of every degree plan. The academic departments should see that proficiency in writing, quantitative reasoning, and independent inquiry, as well as a strong understanding of global cultures, multicultural perspectives, and ethics and leadership are intrinsic to a UT education.

Colleges and departments should develop capstone experiences for upperclassmen. These capstone experiences could take the form of service-learning projects that take students off campus and into the wider community, internships, research projects, performances, and opportunities for international study.

A fundamental obstacle for undergraduate programs is our current high student-faculty ratio. The University is already working on this problem. The Task Force on Enrollment Strategy has made recommendations about the size of the student body, and the University is engaged in a program of adding 300 faculty members over ten years. The University needs to reduce the student-faculty ratio even further to improve the quality of undergraduate education.

The University should work with the State's political leadership to gain more flexibility in core requirements so that we can further develop programs that meet the specific needs of our students.



Curricular reform, once in place, may erode or become ossified if it cannot continue to attract attention and energy. It would exist on paper, but not live and breathe in the overall educational experience of students. University College is our attempt to counteract this problem.

Curricular reform, without sustained resources, will fail. Departments that provide faculty to assist University College must receive funding to hire replacement faculty. These new faculty members can be used to fill critical scholarly needs in the departments and will expand the cadre of professors who can teach the core curriculum courses in the future.

There is a reason why curricular reform has been undertaken only at 25-year intervals at this University and why it is undertaken infrequently at most others: it is difficult. Now is the time to overcome institutional inertia, territoriality, and habit. The University has been charged to do so by the Commission of 125. We have the encouragement of the administration and many of the most influential friends of the University. Most importantly, it is in the best interests of our students and the future of the institution.

Let us seize this opportunity.

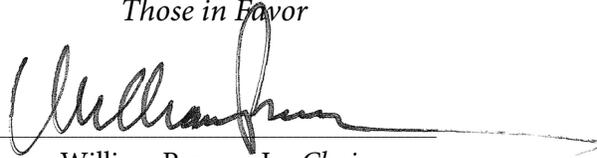


FIGURE 1.1 AREA REQUIREMENTS BASED ON THE  
TEXAS HIGHER EDUCATION COORDINATING BOARD

Component Areas	Current SCH*	Proposed SCH*
<b>010 Communication</b> (English rhetoric/composition)	6	6
<b>020 Mathematics</b> (logic, college-level algebra equivalent, or above)	3	3
<b>030 Natural Sciences</b>	6	6
Humanities & Visual and Performing Arts must include:	6	6
<b>050 Visual/Performing Arts</b>	(3)	(3)
<b>040 Other</b> (literature, philosophy, modern or classical language/literature and cultural studies)	(3)	(3)
Social/Behavioral Sciences must include:	15	15
<b>060 U.S. History</b> (legislatively mandated)	(6)	(6)
<b>070 Political Science</b> (legislatively mandated)	(6)	(6)
<b>080 Social/Behavioral Science</b>	(3)	(3)
Additional Semester Credit Hours at the Discretion of the Institution		
<b>011 Communication</b> (composition, speech, modern language communication skills)	3	0
<b>031 Natural Sciences</b>	3	0
<b>090 Institutionally Designated Option</b> Freshman Signature Course	0	3
<b>031 Natural Sciences</b> (Focus on Science and Technology)	0	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>

\*Semester Credit Hours.

*Those in Favor*



William Powers, Jr., *Chair*



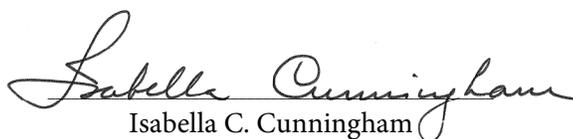
Lawrence D. Abraham



Andrew R. Carls



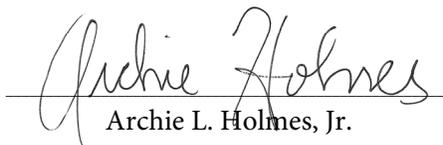
Evan B. Carton



Isabella C. Cunningham



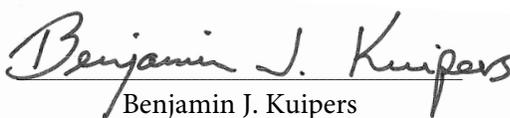
Linda D. Henderson



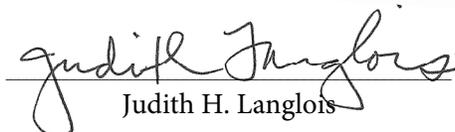
Archie L. Holmes, Jr.



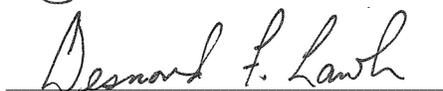
Brent L. Iverson



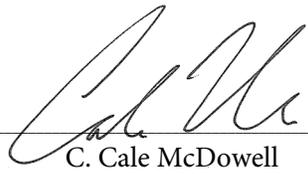
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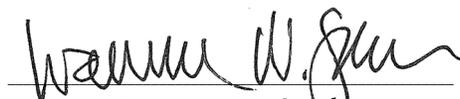


Desmond F. Lawler

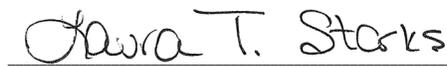
  
C. Cale McDowell

  
Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez

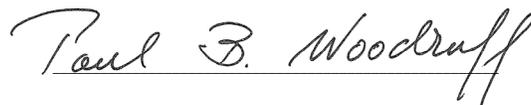
  
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Lawrence W. Speck

  
Michael P. Starbird

  
Laura T. Starks

  
Samuel M. Wilson

  
Paul B. Woodruff

*Dissenting*

  
David M. Hillis





## **IX. APPENDIX**



SUBCOMMITTEES

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**Early Experience and Signature Course**

**Committee**

Paul B. Woodruff, Chair  
Linda D. Henderson  
Benjamin B. Kuipers  
C. Cale McDowell  
Lawrence W. Speck  
Michael P. Starbird  
Laura T. Starks

**Organizational Structure**

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Evan B. Carton  
Isabella C. Cunningham  
David M. Hillis  
Judith H. Langlois  
William Powers  
Samuel M. Wilson

**Outcomes and Core Curriculum**

**Committee**

Archie L. Holmes, Chair  
Lawrence D. Abraham  
Andrew R. Carls  
Desmond F. Lawler  
Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez  
Megan Seaholm

SUBCOMMITTEES

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Matthew R. Barry  
Business Council

Taylor C. Castello  
Engineering Council

Joseph R. Grasso  
Communication Council

Nicole E. Trinh  
Natural Sciences Council

David S. Yount  
Liberal Arts Council



**ALTERNATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS**

submitted by

David M. Hillis,

Alfred W. Roark Centennial Professor in Natural Sciences,  
Section of Integrative Biology

The majority report of the Task Force on Curricular Reform begins by reviewing and endorsing the findings of the Commission of 125 regarding the need to modernize UT's undergraduate curriculum. I agree with the intent of the Commission (and the majority report) to modernize the core curriculum, and I applaud the efforts of the Task Force to direct focused attention on undergraduate education at UT. I also agree with the majority report's recommendations to provide a more coherent and integrated set of requirements and skills to all undergraduates, and to develop substantial new financial resources to support undergraduate education.

Although the other members of the Task Force and I share the same ultimate goals with respect to undergraduate education, I am concerned that the majority report's recommendations have some problems that will preclude a full and effective realization of what we hope to achieve. In particular, I see problems with two of the major recommendations of the majority report: the creation of University College and the signature courses that University College is expected to develop. As proposed, both of these recommendations require substantial new financial resources, a drain on highly trained faculty, and a significant increase in administrative bureaucracy. There is good reason to suspect that these factors alone will result in more harm than improvement to the undergraduate educational experience at UT. My purpose in writing this minority report is to suggest alternatives to these recommendations that I think will better address the Commission's objectives, will require fewer diversions of resources from other areas of undergraduate education (or will allow better use of new resources that may be developed), and will better serve the needs of UT undergraduates.

My two substantial objections concern proposed changes to University administration (namely, the proposal for University College), and the principal proposed change in course curriculum (the signature courses). Below, I will elaborate on the bases of my objections and offer alternatives for each point separately.

## **University College**

The majority report recommends the creation of a new college, called University College (henceforth UC). Under this proposal, all faculty and all incoming students will be members of this college. The UC will not offer degrees or have a particular academic focus. Students will not be permitted to declare majors until their sophomore year. The UC will have a Dean, who will sit on the University Promotion and Tenure Committee, and an executive committee to oversee the core curriculum and the development of signature courses. The UC will also develop and oversee a university-wide Advising and Career Center.

Creating a new college is a complex and expensive proposition—a proposition that should not be considered without substantial justification. However, the proposed UC is entirely redundant with the University of Texas, because everyone, faculty and students alike, will be members. The redundancy of the UC is clear from the fact that all faculty and all students are already members of an administrative unit. We also already have an office that is in charge of academic programs, including the core curriculum (namely, the Provost's office). I can see the importance for some (but not all) of the proposed functions of the UC, but I do not see any reason why these functions can not be undertaken by the Provost's office or another existing administrative entity. Proposals for new administrative entities may appear to be progressive and stimulating, but in the case of UC,

the new entity is either unnecessary, or substantially increases the administrative burden and thus may hinder undergraduate education. To see why, consider the proposed functions of the UC:

a. Function 1: *An executive committee of faculty, selected according to a process to be determined by the president and provost, will oversee the core curriculum.* Why is a new college needed to achieve this objective? A committee of faculty who focus on problems of the core curriculum is reasonable, but a new major administrative unit is not needed to accomplish this function.

b. Function 2: *The UC will develop and implement the signature courses, as well as changes in core requirements.* As discussed below, I do not believe that the UC signature courses would be an improvement to undergraduate education. Changes to the core requirements should be considered by the Faculty Council, and do not require a new college for implementation.

c. Function 3: *Develop and oversee university-wide academic and career advising.* UT had a university-wide advising center (without the existence of a separate college) called the Undergraduate Advising Center. It was terminated in 1997 because advising was found to be more effectively administered within individual academic colleges. It is difficult enough for advisors to be aware of all the requirements, courses, and options within colleges, and unrealistic to expect effective advising across the entire university. In any case, if there is a role for a university-wide advising center, there is no reason that it could not be developed and administered by the Provost's office.

d. Function 4: UC *“will serve as home for all entering freshmen for the first two semesters.”* If all UT faculty and all UT students are members of UC, in what sense is the UC a “home” for freshmen in a way that UT is not? How will students feel a part of a college that has no academic programs or distinct academic mission? Won't UC just be a place where students feel lost until they find their actual homes in academic colleges? Will UC be perceived as a home, or just a necessary hurdle on the way to a home? Students feel part of academic colleges because colleges represent academic homes that students share with like-minded peers. All students will be part of UC, so it will not serve in any way to make UT seem like a smaller place, and students will recognize that it is not their academic home.

e. Function 5: *The Dean of the UC will sit on the University Promotion and Tenure Committee.* Since many faculty will not teach in the signature courses (the only courses for which the UC is directly responsible), the reasons for this recommendation are unclear. Currently, contributions to undergraduate education are a required and major component of the promotion and tenure process. There are many ways that faculty may contribute to undergraduate education, including but not limited to participation in the core curriculum. Currently, contributions to undergraduate teaching are evaluated by student evaluations, faculty peer evaluations, department chairs, college P&T committees, and college deans. If the UC is created, the Dean of this new college will have less information on the contributions of most individual faculty to undergraduate education than are available from any of these other sources, except for the few faculty who have taught UC signature courses. If that is the case, why should the Dean of UC sit on the university P&T committee, when none of the deans of academic colleges do so?

*Hindrances to undergraduate education.* In addition, the UC will produce several outcomes that are directly opposed to the recommendations of the Commission of 125:

(1) By delaying the ability of students to declare their majors, some students will not begin working toward the requirements for a specific degree until their sophomore year. Since many degrees require a four-year course of study, this has the potential to delay degree completion beyond the traditional four years. The majority report does suggest that work can begin toward courses in the major during the freshman year, but delaying declaration of majors and reducing directed advising will work against this option.

(2) Requiring a delay of declaration of the major will slow a student's ability to find an academic home. Time to reflect on an appropriate major is undoubtedly beneficial and desirable for many students, and students should be allowed, and in some cases even encouraged, to delay their declaration of a major. However, we should not discriminate against the students who come to UT ready to begin a directed course of study. Some of the academic colleges have developed numerous effective programs for undergraduates, beginning with the freshman year, that help make UT seem like a smaller, friendlier place and to help them find the most appropriate major if they are in doubt about their choice. The College of Natural Sciences Freshman and Transitional Advising Center was created for just these reasons. We should encourage students to participate in these programs; the UC plan would have the opposite effect.

(3) Creating a separate college that is responsible for core education suggests that the core curriculum is no longer a responsibility of the academic colleges. A likely consequence of this will be that the deans of academic colleges will pay less attention to the core curriculum when it is the responsibility of another dean. The majority report notes that core undergraduate education is the responsibility of all faculty. Likewise, it is also the responsibility of all colleges, and many colleges now take this responsibility seriously. All college deans report to the Provost, but they will not report to the dean of the UC. Therefore, the Provost is the appropriate administrator to ensure that academic colleges participate appropriately in undergraduate education. Delegating this responsibility to a new college and dean will detract from the university's ability to focus all colleges on common goals of undergraduate education.

(4) Finally, creation of a new college will divert limited and critical financial resources from more important objectives for undergraduate education. Before we begin to create new, redundant administrative entities, we should fix existing problems in our course offerings and teaching infrastructure. We should be focusing our efforts on reducing class sizes, increasing interdisciplinary opportunities, emphasizing inquiry-based learning, updating teaching facilities, and providing opportunities for individual undergraduate research. I would place all of these objectives well ahead of creating a new and unnecessary college.

### **Signature Courses**

The majority report recommends that two new "signature courses" be added to the curriculum (one in the freshman year that will replace a substantial writing course requirement in the core curriculum, and a second in the sophomore year that will meet one of the existing core requirements in history, government, social

sciences, or fine arts). The proposed titles for these courses are “Inquiry Across Disciplines: Nature” and “Inquiry Across Disciplines: Culture.”

I support the concept of a signature experience for all UT students, and I also strongly support the idea of providing interdisciplinary educational experiences to undergraduates. Nonetheless, I believe that the structure and content of these proposed courses does not provide an effective means to satisfy the stated objectives of the signature courses, and that the cost of the new courses is prohibitive. Consider the following problems:

(1) The courses are designed to be enormous lecture courses, with many smaller discussion groups led by graduate teaching assistants. Individual contact between UT staff/faculty and undergraduates will mostly be through graduate teaching assistants in the smaller discussion sections, where the courses are expected to provide experiences in writing, oral presentation, and discussion. The delegation of writing and speaking instruction to TAs seems to move UT in a direction away from faculty input and violates the spirit of the Commission of 125 report. I do not believe that this is the kind of “signature” experience we want for UT.

(2) The courses will have no common theme, outside of the vague bounds of “nature” and “culture.” Every course taught by a different instructor will be on a different topic. This will not provide a common experience for UT undergraduates (unless we want the common experience to be enormous lecture courses in which personal contact only occurs with TAs). In fact, it will exacerbate one of the primary problems identified by the Commission (the vast *à la carte* menu of courses in the core).

(3) The new resources required for these courses are enormous. The report suggests that 28 lecture sections of 240 students each would be needed for the freshman signature course, and that these sections would each consist of 12 discussion sections of 20 students each (for a total of 336 TA-led discussion sections per year). The report further states that faculty who teach in the signature courses would be replaced in their home departments with funding for new tenured and tenure-track faculty (through the proposed University College). Therefore, the funding required to implement the freshman year of this recommendation would require at least 28 new faculty (56 if courses are team-taught across disciplines) and enough graduate students to lead 336 discussion sections (where writing and speaking instruction would occur). If graduate TAs led two discussion sections each (a heavy load given the writing and speaking instruction), the graduate student TAs alone would require over \$2,500,000 per year for the freshman signature course (for TA salaries and benefits). Faculty salaries would add at least another \$2,000,000 to the price tag, since faculty would be replaced in their home departments. If the University intends to develop an endowment to pay the ongoing costs, this would require an endowment of nearly \$100 million. Alternatively, tuition can be raised to cover the \$4.5 million annual price tag for the proposed freshman course. One has to ask if this one new freshman course provides enough of a positive experience to UT undergraduates to justify this cost. The details of the sophomore signature course are not specified in the majority report, but presumably considerable additional financial resources would be required to support that set of courses as well.

Raising an endowment of \$100 million to support undergraduate education would be a transforming event for the University. Indeed, I hope that UT can raise an even larger endowment to support undergraduate education. However, I suggest that such an endowment (or alternative source of income) would be better spent by adding interdisciplinary experiences to smaller courses within every major, or in developing signature research experiences for undergraduates, than by adding a single large freshman course. If we can develop the resources that would be required to fund the freshman signature courses, those resources could be used much more effectively to fund interdisciplinary or research experiences in smaller courses, where undergraduates would have better opportunities to interact directly with UT's leading faculty. We do not currently have the resources to provide as many field, laboratory, and interdisciplinary experiences in our curriculum as we need to offer, and it is a mistake to redirect limited resources into an untested, unnecessary, and possibly counterproductive freshman experience. Even if the increased effort is needed primarily at the introductory level, the freshman and sophomore courses could be constructed without the 20-person TA-led discussion groups, with little or no loss in benefit to undergraduates. The signature of UT should not be writing and speaking instruction of freshmen by graduate teaching assistants. However, even without the graduate-student led discussion and writing sections, I do not believe that the unstructured nature of the recommended signature courses provides the kind of direction and common experience that the Commission had in mind when it presented its report. UT is in a position to offer undergraduates something that other kinds of colleges cannot: experience doing research with truly outstanding scholars. A UT "signature experience" should focus on this strength.

In summary, I am in complete agreement with the majority report of the Task Force in calling for a renewed and sustained emphasis on undergraduate education, including the development of substantial new funding directed to that purpose.. However, I am concerned that the administrative component of University College is seriously redundant with our existing structure with no added benefit, that the proposed signature courses risk damaging the undergraduate experience at UT, and that the costs associated with these proposals will preclude funding for other kinds of clear, and more economical, improvements to undergraduate education. We have a need to focus our attention, efforts, and resources on smaller classes, inquiry-based learning, quality interdisciplinary experiences within the major, and capstone research experiences.



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David M. Hillis, member of the Task Force on Curricular Reform