



Transforming a Core Curriculum—and Minimizing the Battle Scars

By: Patricia M. Dwyer

It is notoriously difficult to change a core curriculum. As credit hours and course requirements are revised, politics quickly come into play and turf battles arise to create obstacles. In my experience, there are two default approaches to curricular change. The first is simply to “tweak” an existing core—renaming a few courses here and there, or sequencing them differently, but keeping the curriculum essentially the same. The second default approach is for the president or the vice president for academic affairs to assign a committee or task force to explore current trends, attend conferences, and develop a curriculum for the faculty to review and, ultimately, approve—or, at least, that’s the plan. More often than not, two or more years of committee work culminate in a proposal that the faculty does not support; after all, they haven’t attended the conferences, listened to the speakers, or discussed the committee’s innovative ideas. Accordingly, the faculty object to the proposed curriculum on the grounds that it would involve too many changes, or that it does not include the right mix of courses, or that it is not financially feasible, or that they like their courses the way they are.

Between 2010 and 2013, the core curriculum at Wesley College was successfully transformed through an entirely different process—a process that left all involved with far fewer battle scars than typically result from major curricular change efforts.¹ Wesley is a Methodist-affiliated four-year college in Dover, Delaware, with a total enrollment of approximately 1,500 students, high percentages of whom are first-generation students and students of color, and approximately eighty faculty members. The new core, which was fully implemented in 2014, replaced a curriculum that had been in place for more than twenty years.² Rather than taking either of the default approaches identified above, we approached the revision of the core through a process that can best be understood by applying the eight-steps for leading change devised by John P. Kotter, the Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership, emeritus, at the Harvard Business School.³

Step 1: Create a sense of urgency

When a new strategic plan for the college was launched in 2008, revision of the core curriculum was identified as a prominent goal. The following year, a Middle States accreditation visit resulted in a strong suggestion to revise

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the core and align it with student learning outcomes. Both factors provided the urgency needed to start a conversation about a change to the core.

As it stood at the time, Wesley's core curriculum offered students a plethora of choices under an umbrella made up of five thematic strands. To fulfill core requirements, students could opt for course choices throughout their college careers that were all at the one hundred level, with the single exception of a literature course at the two hundred level. There was no clear development of skills, knowledge, or dispositions over time, and no real sense of how the curriculum helped shape a Wesley graduate. Previous attempts to change the curriculum were driven by the administration with no solid participation from the faculty. Perhaps inevitably, these efforts did not result in lasting curricular change.

When I arrived as the new vice president for academic affairs in the spring of 2009, I knew that reforming the core would be a major task on my plate. But the prospect excited and challenged me. Before going to Wesley, I had read an article in *Liberal Education* about a campus community that had taken a fresh approach to changing a core curriculum.⁴ Instead of creating the ubiquitous committee, campus leaders decided to bring experts to campus so that everyone could hear the latest on trends in general education. Faculty were invited to participate, but only as facilitators of the process, not as generators of content. In the article, the authors describe energetic conversations among all campus constituencies about curriculum and pedagogy, and while I thought that might be too much to ask, this approach made perfect sense to me.

Step 2: Build a guiding coalition

This brings me to Kotter's second step in leading change, which is to build a guiding coalition or team. The operative word here is "guiding." I wanted to ensure that we did not fall into the common pitfall that results when a committee "owns" the content. But I also needed faculty buy-in. Where to start?

The first item on the agenda was making myself and a faculty leader more aware of the landscape of general education reform and establishing contacts with speakers who would eventually come to campus. In the spring of 2010, I invited the elected faculty chair of the academic affairs committee to join me in attending the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) General Education and Assessment conference in Seattle. There, we attended a variety of sessions that helped us understand the current research related to the development and reform of core curricula. One especially helpful session was presented by a panel of faculty from Roanoke College who had just completed a major revision of their core. At the session, we discovered that, in June, Roanoke was to host a workshop through which teams from other colleges and universities could learn about the process and results of Roanoke's curricular revision. Here was an opportunity to expand our guiding coalition. We sent the chair of the academic affairs committee along with

three other Wesley faculty members to the four-day workshop. They returned to campus invigorated by the possibilities and with the names of several potential resources for our own transformation.

Step 3: Create a vision for change

That August, during a daylong workshop for the full faculty, we began to develop our vision. We invited Paul Hanstedt, professor of English and director of pedagogical innovation at Roanoke College, to help facilitate our discussion. Paul had recently returned from Hong Kong, where, as a Fulbright Scholar, he had worked with universities seeking to transform their general education programs. We asked Paul to present the “big picture”—not to convince us that any one way was better than another, but to give us the range of possibilities based on current best practices. This began to generate excitement and energy among the faculty. They began to see the reform process as a way to create a core curriculum that would challenge and engage our students, helping them develop more nuanced skills and knowledge over time, and that would incorporate our mission-related values of ethical living and social responsibility. In other words, they began to ask, “What do we, as a faculty, want a Wesley graduate to look like?” The natural next piece of the conversation was to identify the skills, knowledge, and dispositions our students would need to achieve that vision.

Following the August workshop, members of the team that had participated in the earlier workshop at Roanoke College, along with several faculty volunteers, assisted in facilitating small group gatherings during the month of October. The purpose was to organize the ideas related to learning outcomes that had been generated during the August faculty workshop. While those group sessions provided a better sense of faculty priorities, there was significant overlap and a need to synthesize. Here was another opportunity to expand the guiding coalition.

We invited faculty volunteers to work with the material from the workshops, cutting out the overlap and developing what we called “value statements”—recurring themes related to learning outcomes. Five faculty members worked on this project between November and January. Then, in January, we again invited Paul Hanstedt to facilitate discussion at a daylong faculty workshop. Beginning with the listing collated by the small faculty group, the full faculty worked in interdisciplinary groups to create more precise student learning outcomes for each value statement. In February of 2011, after a little more work on the part of our synthesizing group, the learning outcomes for the new core curriculum were presented to the faculty and approved.

This seemed like the ideal time to send a Wesley team to the AAC&U Institute on General Education and Assessment. The team included the chair of the academic affairs committee and four other faculty members representing a variety of academic departments and professional programs. The members of the team knew that their job was to facilitate the next step in the process, not to return to campus with a plan for Wesley’s core. The

goal was to gather as much information as possible, meet as a team to discuss the process, and identify the best ways to relay new information to our colleagues.

Step 4: Communicate the vision

Because faculty were consistently involved in the yearlong development of learning outcomes, communication was built into the process. However, as the process moved forward, new people joined the faculty and others left. In any multiyear process, people forget where they have been and, at times, where they are going. It was, therefore, critical to keep a running list of the outcomes and decisions from the various workshops, conversations, and presentations. It was even more important to keep alive the vision of an innovative and substantial core curriculum that would be a defining element of a Wesley College education. With so many false starts over the years, many faculty were skeptical that this could be achieved.

The participation of the Wesley team in AAC&U's 2011 institute was, without a doubt, a game changer in terms of moving the process forward. With approved learning outcomes in hand, we attended sessions focused on the elements of different models, the use of high-impact practices to enhance student learning, case studies about successful processes (and potential pitfalls), and ways to make assessment of the core meaningful. Probably most valuable, however, was the time we had to talk together as a team about Wesley's unique challenges and opportunities, as well as our next steps. One charge at the institute was for the participating teams to develop action plans based on the current status of the change process on their campuses. Our plan included a presentation to the full faculty on various model elements, such as the inclusion of a first-year seminar, the design of integrated courses, the addition of cocurricular opportunities, and the incorporation of undergraduate research. After discussion by the full faculty, workshops were held throughout the fall to get a better sense of the faculty's priorities.

Step 5: Remove obstacles, empower action

Kotter's fifth step is sometimes called "removing obstacles," and sometimes called "empowering action." Wesley's process involved a little of both. One way to remove an obstacle to change is to build the change into a practice that already has buy-in. A good example at Wesley is the inclusion of undergraduate research as a component of the first-year seminar. Undergraduate research was already an important component of the Wesley College experience, particularly at the junior and senior levels. For years, Wesley had hosted an annual Scholars Day during which students from all classes presented papers, exhibits, recitals, and posters. These events generated energy and excitement from faculty and students alike, and over the years, undergraduate research had been expanding to include all disciplines.

As faculty discussed the new core curriculum, they voiced interest in developing a first-year seminar that would be

topical in nature but with common learning outcomes. Individual faculty members would choose a topic about which they felt passionate, one that would engage first-year students. Topics ranged from bee-keeping to poetry writing, from learning about the local Dover community to reading mystery thrillers by international writers to gain insight into their cultures. The inclusion of some form of undergraduate research in the first-year seminars was a natural extension of an already existing strength at Wesley. The idea was to introduce students early in their college careers to the excitement and rigor of solving problems and also to enhance Wesley's growing reputation as a school with a signature educational experience for all students.

Kotter's notion of "empowering action" was realized on many levels. A new permanent core curriculum committee was added to the faculty governance structure and charged with reviewing and approving new courses based on learning outcomes and the inclusion of high-impact practices. Teaching institutes were held in the summer and between semesters, giving faculty not only the time and professional development they needed to learn about new pedagogies and create new courses, but also providing opportunities for faculty to collaborate across departments. Faculty received small, grant-funded stipends to attend the institutes, where outside facilitators helped with course development. Jeffrey Osborn, dean of the School of Science and professor of biology at the College of New Jersey, worked with the faculty to create first-year seminars that incorporated undergraduate research; Paul Hanstedt returned to help faculty design integrative courses with writing assignments that promoted critical and creative thinking. New course development also drove new pedagogies, which became part of the discussion at the institute.

Step 6: Create short-term wins

All along the way, the process was punctuated by short-term wins that helped sustain the change energy. A faculty team presented the new core outcomes and components at a meeting of the board of trustees and received very positive feedback. Several faculty members preparing to pilot new first-year seminars were energized and excited—and shared this energy and excitement with their colleagues. The faculty realized that with fewer credits in the new core, more students could take minors. Transfer students could more seamlessly enter Wesley because the new core was simplified and more unified. Fears about faculty losing jobs dissipated as they saw opportunities to teach new first-year seminars or courses in the second and third tier of the core program. Through the efforts of the director of sponsored research, Wesley also began gaining recognition and grant support for core innovation through outside organizations like the National Science Foundation. Faculty proposals to present the core's transformation were accepted at national conferences. A PBS television station in Philadelphia showcased Wesley's new core in a segment on Delaware colleges and universities.

The new core focused on the development of skills at each

level of the student's four-year program; with each new level, the desired skills are more sophisticated and complex. In the first year, students take courses in essential skills with learning outcomes focusing on communication and inquiry. These include the first-year seminar; a quantitative analysis course that prepares students to apply statistics to everyday life; Frontiers of Science, a course designed to introduce the scientific method; and two writing courses, one focused on writing skills and the other on research skills.

In the second year, students experience the richness of the traditional liberal arts disciplines, as well as the connections among and between them, by taking integrative courses in four categories: Art and Culture, Religion and Philosophy, Literature and Languages, and History and Social Sciences. Instead of a history or English survey course that covers hundreds of years, for example, students take an integrative course like Literature and the Great War or Psychology and Sports. This enables them to see connections among the traditional liberal arts disciplines, which is one of the identified learning outcomes.

In the third year, students choose three courses at the three hundred level from different disciplines in a "concentration." Concentration themes are directly related to core outcomes focused on social responsibility and understanding diversity. The core is then completed with the capstone course in the major, a course that synthesizes learning and often includes an application of skills and knowledge in an internship, undergraduate research project, student teaching, or nursing clinical.

The changes to the core curriculum had a significant impact on majors. The typical practice before implementation of the new core was for departments to require students to "choose" specific courses that complemented courses taken in the major. Thus, there was no unified core curriculum for all students, and the countless variations in core options based on departmental requirements caused significant scheduling difficulties. By contrast, faculty wanted the new core to be a signature experience for all Wesley students. After much discussion, however, a compromise was reached regarding math and science options, ensuring that students take courses that are both challenging and appropriate.

Step 7: Implement and sustain the change

The new core curriculum was approved by the faculty in February of 2013, after almost three years of work. Twelve first-year seminars were piloted in the fall of 2013, and the new curriculum was officially implemented in the fall of 2014. Implementation continued in the 2015 academic year, and the prospects are high that the new core will be sustainable and will result in increased student engagement, persistence, and graduation.

Step 8: Incorporate the change into the institution's culture

The three years of conversation about the new core led to a more broadly shared understanding of Wesley College's liberal arts mission. Because it is grounded in values already embraced by the faculty—undergraduate research, strong liberal arts exposure for all students, integration, social responsibility, and the celebration of diversity—the new core curriculum became not only a part of the culture, but actually helped define distinguishing components of the culture.

In retrospect, the beauty of the process was that when the new curriculum ultimately came to a vote, there were no surprises; faculty had been part of the conversation all along the way. And probably 60 percent of the faculty had been directly involved in the process in some way. Without doubt, this change could not have happened without the dedication and perseverance of many faculty leaders and the faculty as a whole. Was the process perfect? Not at all. It left some battle scars and fatigue, and there were messy moments. Some might argue that including the full faculty in such an immense undertaking is unrealistic and inefficient. But the outcome at Wesley was a core curriculum that is consistent with our original vision, that challenges and engages students, and that energizes faculty to teach new courses in innovative ways.

Notes

1. While so many Wesley faculty contributed to this reform effort, special recognition goes to Jeff Gibson, chair of the academic affairs committee during the change process and currently provost at Wesley, and Malcolm D'Souza, who directed sponsored research at the time and currently serves as associate dean for interdisciplinary/collaborative sponsored research. Their leadership during the core's development and implementation, as well as their support of new initiatives through grant funding, was critical to the success of the project.

2. More detailed information about the new core curriculum is available online at <http://wesley.edu/academics/programs/undergraduate-programs/core-curriculum>.

3. See John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 1996).

4. See Susan Gano-Phillips and Robert W. Barnett, "Against All Odds: Transforming Institutional Culture," *Liberal Education* 94, no. 2 (2008): 36–41.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

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