

cover feature

a new  
**Core Curriculum**

for the 21st-century student

BY DIANE M. STERRETT





With the goal of more closely connecting the Core Curriculum to the institution’s Catholic and Dominican tradition, Providence College now has a new and revitalized Core Curriculum to meet the learning needs of 21st-century students.

College President Rev. Brian J. Shanley, O.P. '80 signed the landmark Faculty Senate legislation outlining the new Core this spring, capping off a 4½-year process. The Core Curriculum Review Committee, chaired by Dr. William E. Hudson, professor of political science, initiated the collaborative administration/faculty effort.

“The revised program will, I believe, re-energize academic rigor within our foundation course offerings in a way that has not happened since the Core was introduced more than 35 years ago,” said Father Shanley. “Yet it retains and revitalizes the distinctive and memorable elements of the Development of Western Civilization (DWC) Program.”

Scheduled for full implementation at the start of the 2012-13 academic year, the new Core incorporates some new elements as well as revisions to existing components. Major elements include:

<p>THE ADOPTION OF CORE MISSION-RELATED LEARNING GOALS</p>	<p>A REVITALIZED DWC WITH THREE SEMESTERS CENTERING ON ORIGINAL-TEXT “GREAT- BOOKS” STYLE DISCUSSION AND ONE SEMESTER OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY THEMATIC COLLOQUIUM</p>	<p>A STUDENT-SELECTED CORE CONCENTRATION OF COURSES LINKED BY DISCIPLINE OR THEME</p>	<p>THE ESTABLISHMENT OF LEARNING PROFICIENCIES</p>
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The overarching goal of the new Core, which was last updated in 1981, is to develop more active, engaged learners who are better prepared for a 21st-century world with improved skill sets.

**A brief recap**

Adopted in 1971 at a time when many institutions were questioning the value of a common liberal arts foundation, PC’s Core Curriculum is rooted in the idea of education for its own sake, intended to open the mind and cultivate the intellect. It drew from the rich intellectual and spiritual heritage of the Order of Friars Preachers, or the Dominicans, who traveled throughout Europe sharing their knowledge. The Core is geared to teach students how to think, not what to think, and to share the fruits of their study for the benefit of others.

The Core was fashioned as a multi-disciplinary approach to the liberal arts for all students with DWC as its cornerstone, linking past to present and teaching critical-thinking and communication skills. Other required courses in philosophy, theology, the natural and social sciences, mathematics, and the fine arts expanded and enriched the academic experience. The original model was based on daily lectures to large classes with smaller weekly seminar sessions. Over the years, the Core has been reviewed several times, most recently in the mid-1990s, but the campus community never reached a formal consensus for significant change.

## why change?

Today's students live in a world where technology is ubiquitous, communication is instantaneous, and the global community is smaller and more competitive. These challenges require students to be prepared to question assumptions, engage in self-reflection, think critically and analytically, and communicate effectively. New methods of teaching and learning, as well as best practices, change continually.

To ensure the College is responsive to these changes, PC began an effort in 2005 to update the Core while remaining committed to keeping the humanities as a major component. To achieve those anticipated outcomes for students as they are exposed to a new curriculum, the Core Curriculum Review Committee created nine key learning goals as the underpinning of the new Core. [See adjacent box.] Key among them is an emphasis on engaged learning opportunities in which students become active participants in learning through class participation, research, scholarship, service, internships, and other immersion experiences locally, regionally, and abroad.

"I feel the mission-related goals are the most innovative and exciting part of the new Core and will guide us as we assess it and make changes as we move along," said Dr. Hugh F. Lena, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs. "It's our vision of what a liberal arts education at Providence College means and why it's distinctive."

## what's in the new core?

DWC remains the cornerstone of the Core. It is a two-year, intellectual rite of passage for each undergraduate student, spanning the freshman and sophomore years and covering the ancient, medieval, and modern periods of Western Civilization. Under the new Core, the first three semesters will be organized around seminar-style classes, allowing greater student participation in focused discussion and intensive writing.

The fourth and final semester of DWC presents the most significant change. It will be a team-taught colloquium dedicated to a specific contemporary issue in the context of the Western tradition. Students will choose from a variety of colloquia according to their interests. Topics that extend the interdisciplinary approach beyond the humanities and which relate Western history and culture to the histories and cultures beyond the West will be emphasized.

Throughout the four semesters, DWC will seek to help students develop the intellectual habits and skills central to the liberal arts: deep reading, thoughtful reflection, and the written and verbal articulation of reasoned arguments through an increased emphasis on the disputed question—a hallmark of the Dominican intellectual tradition.

As a teaching and learning device, the disputed question, or *disputatio*, will guide students in exploring all sides of a question, considering alternative perspectives, then

deciding for themselves the truth and error of all arguments presented. This promotes the free exchange of ideas and respectful discourse.

"With the pedagogy of the disputed question, which is a quintessential Dominican tradition, students are going to have to more critically engage the central questions that have animated the history of Western civilization in search of a broader understanding of important truths," said Lena, who is also a professor of sociology.

The revitalized DWC will result in smaller class sizes where students have more responsibility for their own learning, more primary text reading from both Western and world civilization sources, and additional intensive writing. The number of mandatory credit hours in DWC has been reduced from 20 to 16 (except for the Liberal Arts Honors Program), allowing students more flexibility in scheduling and giving them greater choice in selecting courses to fulfill the Core requirements.

### A new Core Concentration

One distinctively new element of the Core Curriculum is an innovative, two-course Core Concentration that will allow students to learn about a topic in greater depth and develop interdisciplinary knowledge about that topic in one of two ways.

Students can focus on a discipline in the liberal arts of their choosing by taking two

more courses in one of the Core requirements. “If they’re interested in social sciences, for example, they can take two more social sciences courses. Part of the reason we created this is to give students room in their schedule to take a foreign language if that is their focus area,” Lena explained.

Or, students can delve into a singular topic by taking two courses from different disciplines linked by a common theme.

“The topic could be almost anything. Say someone is interested in global issues related to women. They could take two courses, one in sociology on poverty in global perspective, and one on women in literature in developing countries,” Lena outlined.

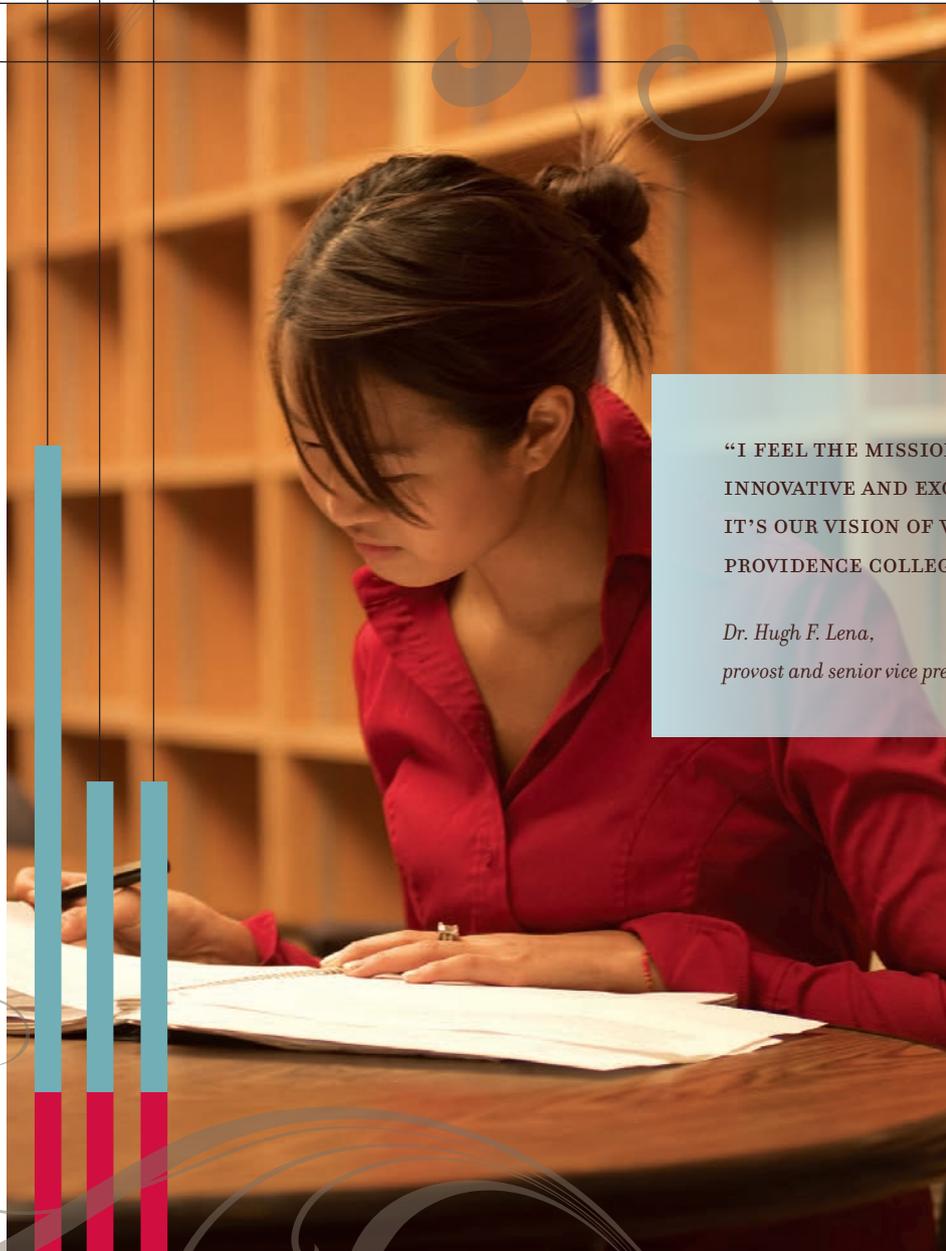
Plans for how the concentration will be implemented continue to evolve with faculty input.

## MISSION-RELATED LEARNING GOALS

The nine mission-related learning goals that were adopted under the new Core Curriculum directly link the College’s Catholic and Dominican identity and intellectual tradition to specific teaching and learning goals. In an abridged version, they are:

- an understanding of the essential compatibility of faith and reason;
- a commitment to civic engagement and service to others;
- an understanding of how philosophical and theological questions inform and guide the pursuit of truth;
- a capacity for moral and ethical reasoning;
- the ability to engage with issues using the pedagogical tradition of the disputed question;
- an integrated understanding of the historical, cultural, religious, and scientific events, ideas, and traditions that have shaped the world;
- fundamental skills in critical, logical, and quantitative reasoning expressed in verbal and written proficiencies;
- an appreciation for the aesthetic dimension of the human mind and spirit; and
- an appreciation of the Core Curriculum as a way to illuminate the key questions of human existence relating to life’s purpose and meaning.





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### **New learning proficiencies**

As part of the new Core, students will be required to demonstrate proficiency in four areas to develop and enhance the personal and professional skills they will need to thrive in an increasingly global environ-

ment. They are: Intensive Writing, Oral Communication, Diversity, and Civic Engagement. The goal is to embed the proficiencies within existing requirements.

“In this Core, the idea is that all of us can improve in what I call the transferable skills,” said Lena. “We would like to develop courses for students’ majors or in the Core that, by their nature, would have a diversity element to it or a writing component. So we’re not asking students to take more courses in the proficiencies, but rather courses that meet the proficiencies on their way to doing something else.”

### **Other foundational courses**

In addition to taking the DWC and Core Concentration courses, students will pursue studies in theology, philosophy, natural science, social science, quantitative reasoning, and fine arts. Core-designated courses in each of these disciplines will provide students with both foundational and advanced knowledge in the subject areas essential to a comprehensive liberal arts education.

## what's next?

While full implementation is two years away, professors have already begun thinking about and implementing key aspects of the new Core and will continue to do so. [See related story on the next page.] Lena said that head start will be helpful going forward.

“For example, interdisciplinary colloquia were developing around diversity topics, and increasingly, departments were adding Capstone courses to their majors in which students were required to do original research, write papers, and present them,” he said.

Lena continued, “Those are all proficiencies that are now explicitly mandated in the Core. Before, there wasn’t the authority to go full bore with it; faculty often were not released from their own department obligations to go and teach with somebody in another department. With the legislation in place, that experimentation is affirmed.”

Four committees are working on different aspects of implementing the new Core: the

Core Administrative Curriculum Implementation Team, the Core Curriculum Committee, the DWC Program Committee, and the Humanities Building Committee. Throughout this academic year, faculty and department chairs will be working closely with the DWC and Core Curriculum committees to review and approve all courses that will meet a Core requirement.

“The new Core will require faculty to come up with new and creative ways of presenting their courses given the new Core structure ... for instance, how to build in writing or diversity proficiencies,” Lena explained.

The approved legislation creates a permanent College committee, the Core Curriculum Committee, responsible for overseeing the Core in its development and continually assessing and adjusting it to maintain its integrity over time.

“This is critical to our success. It’s important that we think of the new Core as organic, a living, growing entity, and regularly assess it as the world evolves,” Lena said.



Top: Dr. Hugh F. Lena  
Bottom: Rev. Brian J. Shanley, O.P.

*Diane M. Sterrett is a Providence College Magazine senior contributor from Tiverton, R.I.*

# Beginning the transition

*DWC faculty teams demonstrate early success*

During the last academic year, some teams of professors in the Development of Western Civilization (DWC) Program began implementing aspects of the updated Core Curriculum that was under review by the Faculty Senate.

“In some ways, the Core has been morphing and evolving over the last 35 years,” said Dr. William P. Hogan, associate professor of English and DWC director. “For example, some professors already focus on primary texts. But we knew the new curriculum was being debated in the Senate and what was in the legislation, so we thought, ‘Why wait?’

“To me,” continued Hogan, “the process was about upholding the Catholic and Dominican intellectual tradition by getting back to the core principles of reading, writing, and discussing. To begin transitioning, I matched up some teams who were interested in seminar-style approaches and more common primary reading.”

Rev. R. Gabriel Pivarnik, O.P., assistant professor of theology, and Dr. Tuire M. Valkeakari, associate professor of English, taught second-year students on the same faculty team. They focused on testing seminar approaches.

“We wanted to work in a truly student-centered, discussion-intensive, and writing-intensive mode,” Valkeakari said. “In my view, it worked really well. Last year, I saw my DWC students take responsibility for their own learning and at the same time, truly work as a team. Week after week, they assisted and constructively challenged each other in the seminar, working together toward a



shared goal—a deeper understanding of the subject matter and a continuing improvement of their academic skills. They were enthusiastic, and their feedback at the end of the year was truly positive.”

Father Pivarnik agreed.

“The two-hour seminar format that we tried was hugely successful from my perspective,” he said. “In my case, I set the bar high and said, ‘I’m not going to sit here and talk at you for two hours. I expect you to talk with each other.’ So, they had to come into the class ready to discuss the actual text. The students seemed to react positively to that opportunity to get into a text for two hours rather than a 50-minute period where, by the time they were just getting into the topic, they were being dismissed.”

The professors had two primary goals for the seminar: stressing writing ability and discussion skills. Each week, students had to write a two-page reaction paper to that week’s reading.

“I think we really honed their writing skills,” said Father Pivarnik. “When you have students for an entire year, it makes a big difference in how you can analyze and promote their writing ability. Secondly, because of the two-hour format, we had a chance for everybody to speak at some length, so we began to hone their ability to speak well in public and to articulate their thoughts in the spoken word better than they could when they came into the class.”

### Shift inspires careful thought

Dr. Darra Mulderry, assistant professor of history, was on another second-year team that assigned one major primary text per week and implemented a three-lecture/two-seminar schedule.

“With the intensive focus on one text per week in both lectures and seminar, students had the opportunity to develop a more intimate and nuanced understanding of the assumptions, animating concerns and

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ideals—and contexts—of some of the most influential thinkers of the last four hundred years,” noted Mulderry.

“After spending a week poring over Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, for instance, my students were able to gather for themselves what Tocqueville believed were the strengths and potential weaknesses of democracies, and the practices and values that Tocqueville believed sustained democracies.

“Moreover, in seminar, they ‘argued’ with Tocqueville—and each other—about his claims, spontaneously applying them to contemporary situations in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the midterm exam, they also wrote captivating, highly intelligent imaginary dialogues between Tocqueville and his critics,” Mulderry recalled.

“This format helped us unify the approach to debate and resulted in really interesting essays by students. It helped lay the foundation for a narrative throughout the course. We gave them a genealogy of the big questions the country is talking about now in American politics, so they could engage in better informed debates of contemporary questions,” said Mulderry, who found the team’s approach—the lectures as well as the focus on primary texts and the two intensive seminars and essay writing—worked extremely well.

DWC faculty actively look for new, ever more effective ways to work with students, Valkeakari pointed out.

“This is an active, living, and continuing process for all of us—and a truly meaningful one,” she said. “It is our goal and hope that our students emerge from their DWC experience with new insights, with greatly improved academic skills, and with a desire and ability to make connections between what they have learned in the classroom and what they see and experience in their daily lives.”

## Faculty, students embrace Core's potential

As Providence College committees work on the details of implementing the new Core Curriculum, faculty and students involved in the review process are optimistic and enthusiastic about its potential.

"I think it opens up some nice avenues, giving students more freedom to explore their major and perhaps do minors. But it will also make demands upon students with the proficiencies and the Core Concentration, which I think is one of the more exciting aspects of the new Core," said Dr. James F. Keating, associate professor of theology.

He was involved in the review effort in many ways, primarily as head of the Academic Affairs Committee of the Faculty Senate.

Another exciting part of the new Core will be the opportunity to relate Western history and culture to those beyond the West for a more global perspective in the fourth-semester Core colloquium, Keating said. "PC is known for its more traditional approach to classical Western Civ and that's great, but we have to recognize that we must train our students to look beyond the West as well," he offered.

In his view, the revised Core also will better prepare students for a 21st-century world.

"Most people think of the 21st century as a more global one, and in that sense we've allowed students to fulfill their Core require-



ments through taking a language, I think that's very important, as well as the proficiencies in community involvement and cross-cultural diversity," Keating said.

The benefit of the new proficiencies will be a student better prepared for the workplace.

"In an economy where you have to show yourself as somebody valuable, where less and less you'll be on a grooved career track, we're giving students some skills they will need to be competitive," Keating said.

Dr. Sheila Adamus Liotta, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences and associate professor of chemistry, agreed that the new Core will be beneficial to students entering a workforce that has changed dramatically.

"I think a liberal arts education is sometimes thought of as not very practical," she said. "But a survey by the Association of American Colleges and Universities showed employers want more of the transferable skills that students learn in a liberal arts setting such as better communication skills. Now we have oral and written learning proficiencies as part of the new curriculum.

"Students," continued Liotta, "want a better understanding about a diverse workplace, and now we have a diversity proficiency. These are the skills that make students valuable in today's workforce. You don't get one job and work there fifty years anymore; you have to be flexible. So, I really like the proficiencies. Consistent with our liberal arts mission of academic excellence, these transferable skills will also be useful for

students as they go out beyond Providence College."

#### Administrative oversight lauded

An important aspect of the legislation for the future success of the Core was the creation of a permanent administrative structure through a College committee, said Dr. William E. Hudson, professor of political science and chair of the Core Curriculum Review Committee.

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"It will oversee the Core in its development and maintain its integrity over time," explained Hudson. "What typically happens in reform is a Core Curriculum is established, then basically is dismantled, or falls apart over time, as the specific goals and objectives of various departments take precedence. Having an administrative structure responsible for overseeing it will hopefully prevent that from happening."

Hudson also felt the creation of a defined Development of Western Civilization faculty committee will be beneficial. "They will have the capacity to influence the nature of the Civ program in the future, including

altering it, and a role in selecting the director of the Civ program, which we didn't have before. It's an investment in the program, and I think that's very positive."

#### Students envision improved experience

Student Congress also had the opportunity to be a part of the Core review process, reviewing drafts and responding with student perspectives. Liane T. Nadeau '11 (Walpole, Mass.), president of the 61st Student Congress, feels the resulting legislation will improve the academic experience, adding a new element of depth to the liberal arts education.

"The response from students was overwhelmingly positive. Congress ultimately passed a statement of support, and this very much reflected the general student consensus," she reported.

"Overall, this Core will help launch PC into the academically rigorous and thriving institution I know we can be. Personally, my favorite new element is the seminar approach and the concentrations ... smaller class sizes will facilitate more meaningful discussion. It also fosters a learning environment where students feel responsible for their assignments outside of class, knowing that they will be called on and asked to speak. The concentrations are a unique way to combine learning with the passions of students," said Nadeau.

Liotta summed up the new energy the Core has created on campus.

"It's been a long road to get here and not always easy," she said. "But I think when we look back in five or ten years, we're going to see something great came out of this."

Above, left to right: Dr. James F. Keating, Dr. William E. Hudson, Dr. Sheila Adamus Liotta, Liane T. Nadeau '11