

The Hunter College Response to the Draft Recommendations for the Common Core of the CUNY Task Force on Pathways

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Hunter College's comments on the Draft Recommendations of the Common Core are informed by a deep appreciation of the concerns that drive the Pathways initiative, specifically the need to improve the retention and graduation rates of our students and ease transfer across colleges.

Long admired as an excellent center of liberal arts education, Hunter is proud that our academic profile and national rankings are on the rise thanks in large part to the high quality of our programs and our overall educational philosophy. We are committed to discerning opportunities that will further our undergraduate mission: namely, to provide a rigorous and distinctive education for our students in all schools, an education that includes vital breadth in the liberal arts and depth of majors or professional programs of study. We want to ensure that Hunter College continues to prepare its students to be engaged and productive citizens of a globalized world, students who will achieve great success in employment and in post-baccalaureate studies. We would like to avail ourselves of some of the intriguing pedagogical opportunities presented by the Pathways initiative: for example, the reduction in general education credits required will make it possible for students to strengthen their portfolios for post-baccalaureate pursuits by completing second and even third majors and/or correlate certificates and minors.

We are pleased that the CUNY Task Force on Pathways has elected to promote writing with 7 credits, and allot 4 credits to each of mathematics/quantitative reasoning and science in the Required Common Core, as Hunter College championed. But we remain deeply concerned as a community that the proposed framework makes it so difficult—if not impossible—to preserve our requirement that students demonstrate proficiency equivalent to two years of a language other than English—the very minimum one needs to learn another language. We regard such a requirement as fundamental to the preparation of students in the contemporary world, where international and inter-cultural understanding has never been so important.

The proposals below are guided by our commitment to continue offering a highly distinctive liberal education of the highest quality, one that will continue to allow Hunter College to assume its place of distinction in the landscape of higher education, while also improving the academic prospects and experiences of our transfer students. They reflect our overall concerns for flexibility, depth, and substantive focused exposure within the recommended framework.

These proposals emerged from a highly consultative process that drew from multiple meetings of each of two committees: the Presidential Task Force on Pathways, chaired by the Dean of Arts and Sciences, and the General Education Subcommittee of the Hunter College Senate. The Pathways initiative was also discussed at meetings of the Arts and Sciences Advisory Committee meeting for department chairs and program directors and in a well-attended open forum of faculty, administrators,

students and staff held on November 9, 2011, and were amended in light of an extensive, constructive discussion across the Hunter community.

Our proposals are organized in order of priority.

I. Proposals Concerning the Prescribed Common Core.

1a. Proposal: Within the prescribed core (English Composition, Math and Quantitative Reasoning, Science) we should permit exemptions and substitutions at a higher level for students qualified to do more advanced work. Completing the course work at the higher level would fulfill the corresponding requirement in the Common Core.

Rationale: The Pathways project intends to facilitate student progress. One of the great assets of CUNY is the diversity of its students, who come to the University with a great variety of experiences and levels of preparation. We will discourage better-prepared students, many of whom apply to Hunter College, and unnecessarily delay their progress, if we do not create academic pathways that meet their particular needs. Students will benefit from having the opportunity to demonstrate competency as a means of satisfying the requirement; for some students this might mean allowance for substitutions of courses not ordinarily approved for "Core" areas. For example, the student who arrives at the College and passes a placement test that determines that her/his skills meet or exceed those outlined in the required core area for English Composition might be granted a substitution for a course in creative writing, although the College would not normally allow such a course to satisfy the requirement.

1b. Proposal: We should permit colleges to approve substitutions for transfer courses for requirements in both Required and Flexible sections of the Common Core.

Rationale: Many of our students come from outside CUNY and have taken courses that have no direct counterpart at Hunter. Some of these courses, however, meet the learning outcomes of various sections of the Common Core. Requiring a student to take additional coursework in this situation is burdensome and unnecessary. For example, take the student who has successfully completed a 4-credit course in Botany at a non-CUNY institution. Hunter offers no courses in Botany. If the appropriate department at Hunter determines that the course meets the learning outcomes of 1.C., the student should be granted credit as having fulfilled 1.C.

2. Proposal: We recommend that students be allowed to choose two courses from a single discipline to fulfill the Flexible Core. We further urge that each campus be allowed to determine when disciplinary duplication does or does not occur.

Rationale: The current rules governing the Flexible Common Core prohibit taking "more than one course in any particular discipline." This rule ensures that students will not be able to achieve substantive exposure in any one area in the Flexible Core, including the important case of foreign language study, where it is widely recognized that a single, one-semester course is of limited use in language learning. Enabling students to select any discipline for the fifth course would allow interested students to take one full year of foreign language under the Flexible Core rubric, without sacrificing breadth of exposure in any meaningful way.

There is a larger issue here regarding what constitutes a discipline. Some disciplines like psychology and geography are inherently multidisciplinary. Moreover, some major fields like neuroscience may

be housed within psychology at one college and within biology at another. Given this, it makes sense to allow individual colleges to determine whether disciplinary duplication has occurred within the context of their own disciplinary/departmental structures.

3. Proposal: We ask that senior colleges be permitted to require the 12-credit "College Option" of all students, including transfer students, regardless of the number of credits transferred in. We strongly recommend against reducing the requirements for the College Option under any circumstances. These 12 credits are few enough in number, but they will represent the distinctive signature curricula of the institutions from which students ultimately seek their degree.

Rationale: The "College Option" will allow the senior colleges to provide distinctive common experiences and educational opportunities, to build on knowledge and skills gained from the Common Core. It provides a measure of depth within what is otherwise a flat general education framework, thereby aligning with what are widely regarded as best practices for general education curricular design. We believe all students should have that this experience and that it cannot be achieved in any meaningful way with two or three courses, needlessly forcing a choice between breadth and depth within the College Option. We recognize and support the need to improve the efficacy of transfer as well as well as remove unnecessary academic impediments to graduation. However, the CUNY Common Core significantly reduces overall general education credits, enabling 30-48 credits of electives in a student's course of study. Requiring all students to fulfill a 12 credit College Option enables colleges to retain, tailor, and articulate those aspects that are specific to each college's identity and directs students in their elective coursework while achieving the goal of enhanced efficacy of transfer and graduation within CUNY.

4a. Proposal: Reduce the number of learning outcomes that must be met for the Flexible Common Core from the 3 required of all 4 categories to 1 of 3 for all 4 categories.

Rationale: This part of the Common Core begins with the stipulation that "[a]ll Flexible Common Core courses must meet the following three learning outcomes. A student will be able to:

- Retrieve, evaluate, and interpret information from a variety of sources and points of view.
- Evaluate evidence and arguments critically.
- Produce well-reasoned written or oral arguments using evidence to support conclusions."

The Pathways initiative and its Common and Flexible core framework are aimed, inevitably and appropriately, at foundational and introductory courses. One could argue that it takes students the better part of their entire college experience to develop the three abilities suggested in the learning outcomes above, or perhaps, to put it somewhat differently, that these three, taken together, are major-level, not introductory course-level learning outcomes. As such, it may not be feasible to achieve (or indeed desirable to pursue) all three of these learning outcomes in a single introductory-level course. A thoughtful reduction in learning outcomes for introductory level courses would enable faculty and students to address each learning outcome in a more meaningful way, thus ensuring stronger academic foundations.

4b. Proposal: Replace the additional learning outcomes outlined in the November 1st version of the Flexible Common Core with those listed in the summary of the October 21st meeting for all four areas of this section of the Common Core Structure.

Rationale: There are significant differences between the additional learning outcomes of October 21st and November 1st in all four areas of the Flexible Common Core: World Cultures, U.S. Experience in its Diversity, Creative Expression, Individual and Society. The latest guidelines emphasize analysis and the application of fundamental concepts and research methods of (inter)disciplinary fields, tasks that typically require previous and sustained intellectual training. In contrast, the earlier guidelines stress goals that are more consonant with the scope and methods of the foundational coursework that the Pathways initiative encompasses: by targeting goals such as understanding, developing informed perspectives, demonstrating knowledge, thinking critically, and identifying, examining, explaining and evaluating information, the additional outcomes proposed on October 21st better enable students to acquire the content base and cognitive abilities needed later for more focused learning and research.

5. Proposal: Rules governing graduation requirements should restrict the number of credits earned at the 100 level to no more than 60 of the minimum of 120.

Rationale: Since the Common Core both replaces and reduces all non-major requirements for graduation, we currently run the risk of having students misguidedly fill out most or all remaining coursework (approximately 48 credits) with 100-level courses. This would severely decrease the rigor and value of undergraduate education and make our students far less competitive for both employment and graduate study. We urge that our rules prohibit a random accretion of low-level courses and that we encourage students to avail themselves of one of the truly exciting curricular possibilities of the Pathways initiative; namely productive supplementation of Common Core and major requirements with additional areas of extended study. The Common Core offers some breadth to the liberal arts education of our students while opening the intriguing opportunity for ‘clustering’ areas of study outside of the major in certificate programs and minors that may closely be associated with and productively supplement majors.

6. Proposal: While Hunter College accepts four credit science courses from other CUNY colleges that have three-hour lecture and three-hour labs, we urge that our 4 1/2 credit laboratory courses continue to fulfill the Life and Physical Sciences Common Core requirement.

Rationale: At Hunter College, biology, chemistry, physics, and geology courses with laboratory, appropriate for the CUNY Core, are 4 1/2 credits, three for a three -hour lecture and 1 1/2 for a three-hour laboratory. This complies with New York State Education Department regulations.

Our final proposal concerns implementation of the Pathways initiative.

7. Proposal: We propose that CUNY Central create and maintain a database of which courses at each college fulfill the requirements of the Required and Flexible Common Cores, and that each student’s record is somehow tagged with her/his status within the CUNY Common Core.

Rationale: For the Pathways initiative to succeed in easing transfer among colleges, it is essential that campuses are effective and efficient in evaluating transfer credits, advising students, programming DegreeWorks and auditing degrees, and so on. In order to achieve this, a solid logistical solution must be in place from the start of implementation.