

**The Evolution of the Core Curriculum:
An Account of its History and a Case for its Future**
Butler University, Fall 2024

Introduction:

Founded in 1855 in Indianapolis, Indiana, Butler University has become a nationally recognized university serving over 5,000 undergraduates and graduate students across seven academic colleges: Jordan College of Arts, the Lacy School of Business, College of Communication, College of Education, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, and Founders College (launching Fall 2025). Butler is known for providing small classes, experiential education, and opportunities for students to engage directly with faculty and with the broader Indianapolis community. At the heart of a Butler education is the University's Core Curriculum exemplifying the belief that integrating a high-quality liberal arts tradition with innovative professional education will lead our students to make both a good living and a good life.

This white paper aims to provide a brief account of our Core Curriculum's evolution in terms of its administrative and curricular structures and scope. Additionally, this paper seeks to highlight the Core Curriculum's prominence and importance to both current faculty and students as well as prospective ones. Our Core is a dynamic, living curriculum, steeped in the history and tradition of a liberal education, but not stuck in the past. We aim to ensure continued understanding and appreciation of the Core Curriculum as a vital aspect of Butler University's educational mission and a collective responsibility of all faculty and administrators. The governance and administrative structures that support the Core must be equally dynamic. We seek to ensure that the Core Curriculum is guided by faculty voice and visions, and that the operational structures do not themselves become an obstacle to delivering on its promise. Toward that end, this white paper will describe a few misperceptions about the value of the Core Curriculum, the history and evolution of our Core Curriculum, its role in the overall educational mission, and our history of responsiveness to the context and conditions of the world. The paper will conclude with a call to continue envisioning ways to deliver a Core Curriculum anchored in the best aspects of a relationship-rich, human-centered liberal arts education.

(Mis)Perception of a Static, (and perhaps) Endangered Core Curriculum

The Core Curriculum has been a cornerstone of Butler University's educational approach since its inception in 1945, nearly 80 years ago—which is just under half of our university's lifespan. However, while not overtly stated, there seems to be a misperception by some that the Core Curriculum is a static relic of the past, one not relevant or cost-effective during a time of hyperfocus on streamlined pathways and workforce readiness. There is also a growing fear-based perception among faculty in higher education institutions like Butler that in the face of the demographic cliff and budget shortfalls, key elements of a liberal arts education like the Core Curriculum are in danger of being cut. While budgets and enrollment trends are absolutely a real and true challenge here and elsewhere, it is crucial to call out these concerns, to bring them into the light for examination, and to move forward in a way that will maintain the Core's integrity and highlight its continued relevance and importance.

Historical Context and Evolution of the Butler University Core Curriculum

The Core Curriculum at Butler University has undergone significant transformation since its inception, marked by three distinct eras.

The Original Core (1945-1982): The initial Core Curriculum was established for all undergraduates in 1945 and included courses across various disciplines, emphasizing a broad-based education. The creation of the Original Core came at a time in history when universities were distinguishing more between associate and bachelor's degrees. The Original Core curriculum then was that curriculum which had been associated with Associates of Art or Associates of Science. The associate's degrees required as many as 62-68 credit hours. This became the Core Curriculum for students moving toward a Bachelor's degree. The Core Curriculum essentially remained consistent regarding divisional structures with minor variations until 1982. What held the Core Curriculum together was the belief that a liberally educated student needed to have a general education across a breadth of disciplinary fields. It was a Core divided into distinct disciplinary categories (Divisions) and courses were administered by the respective departments. No regard or distinction was made whether students in the course were enrolled for a major requirement or a general distribution requirement. An example of the original core from 1969-1970 is showcased below:

- Division I: Freshman English (two courses, EN 101 and 102)
- Division II: Psychology, Philosophy, and Religion (6 CH)
- Division III: Laboratory Science and Mathematics (15 CH)
- Division IV: Social Science (12 CH)
- Division V: Language, Literature, and Fine Arts (8 CH)
- Division VI: Physical Education and Military Sciences (previously variation on Games Education/Health Education) (4 CH)
- Division VII: Electives (11 CH)

University College Era (1982-2004): A second generation of the Core Curriculum was established in 1982 under the leadership of a University College Dean, Dr. Paul Valliere. The University College was established to administrate the Core Curriculum and to serve as the academic advising home to all first- and second-year students. Core Curriculum divisions and distributions were revised and redefined to include the Change and Tradition (C&T) element and toward more interdisciplinary connections. This marked a philosophical shift in the approach to Core Curriculum as intentionally more interdisciplinary and global in its perceptive. This period saw the introduction of courses that encouraged critical thinking and interdisciplinary learning. The division structures evolved further and the Core Curriculum credit hour requirement ranged from 33-53 hours.

- Division I evolved into EN 101 Composition and EN 102 Critical Reading, a total of 6 CH
- Interdisciplinary sophomore Change and Tradition (ID 201 and 202, 6 CH) requirement was added
- Evolution of distribution groupings required work in two of the three groups
 - Literature, fine arts, foreign language, philosophy, and religion (5-11 CH)

- economics, general psychology, geography, history, political science, sociology & anthropology (8-15 CH)
- life sciences, math, physical sciences, experimental psychology, astronomy (8-15 CH)

By 1987, the distribution requirement had evolved further to include five groupings roughly aligned with mathematics (and related topics), natural science, social science, humanities, and the arts. This was the basic arrangement until “the New Core” was proposed in 2005.

The “New” Core Curriculum (2005-present): The third – and current – generation of the Core Curriculum was proposed in 2005 by a faculty task force in Faculty Assembly. Piloted incrementally and fully launched in 2010, the “new” Core Curriculum reflected a modern educational philosophy of integrated and interdisciplinary Areas of Inquiry. This “new” Core Curriculum was structured by learning objectives as opposed to disciplines and central to this iteration was the notion that “the Core Curriculum belonged to and was taught by the whole university.” While the Core Curriculum was no longer housed under University College, the faculty task force called for the new Core Curriculum to be led by a Senior Core Administrator with the assistance of the faculty to manage it. The “new” Core Curriculum became a responsibility held by an Associate Provost with multiple Faculty Directors who were responsible for required courses like First-Year Seminar (FYS) and Global and Historical Studies (GHS) as well as the Areas of Inquiry. While the document stated that the ultimate authority for curricular oversight would belong to the UCC and Faculty Assembly, the task force proposed a faculty committee—Core Curriculum Council—to assist in curricular and operational matters. In the years between the proposal of a new Core and its implementation in 2010, Faculty Assembly gave way to a Faculty Senate and a Core Curriculum Committee (the CCC) was established as a standing committee of this new and more representative mechanism of faculty shared governance. Launched for students matriculating in fall 2010, the “new” Core Curriculum consisted of FYS, GHS, five Areas of Inquiry, and four additional graduation requirements. This iteration of the Core Curriculum came in at approximately 30 hours and allowed for some exemptions or alternative means to fulfill some Areas of Inquiry based on a student’s major coursework.

- First-Year Seminar (6 CH) - Conceptual and practical revision to composition and reading courses in the previous Core
- Global Historical Studies (6 CH) – Revision, modernization, and expansion of Change and Tradition
- Texts and Ideas (3 CH)
- Perspectives in Creative Arts (3 CH)
- Social World (3 CH)
- Natural World (5 CH)
- Analytical Reasoning (3 CH)
- Physical Wellbeing (1 CH)
- Butler Cultural Requirement (BCR; 8 events before graduation)
- Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC; 1 designated course)
- Speaking Across the Curriculum (SAC; 1 designated course)
- Indianapolis Community Requirement (ICR; 1 designated course)

In 2016, the Faculty Director of the Core along with the Area Core Directors established the Core Operating Manual in an attempt to establish consistency, continuity, and replicable

procedures and administrative oversight across the Core. The goal was to provide those serving in Faculty Director or coordinator roles with an authoritative guide for administration of the Core within the framework of a Faculty Senate governance structure. Further, it established a process to revise the Core Curriculum elements where no clear process existed.

From its proposed structure in 2005 until 2020, the “new” Core Curriculum was guided and governed by structures that sought to embrace the faculty-led vision for a Core Curriculum that remained responsive to the human condition. The 2016 Core Operating Manual provided a blueprint for revising the Core Curriculum that belongs to and is taught by everyone. It also undertook the enormous task of collecting process and procedures from each area of the core to attempt to standardized operating procedures across the Core Curriculum to ensure consistency and continuity. While the Core Operating Manual was approved by the Faculty Senate in October of 2016, in March 2020, Faculty Senate passed a resolution to consolidate the Core Curriculum Committee with the University Curriculum Committee. Therefore, the Faculty Senate standing committee of elected representatives to the Core Curriculum Committee was functionally dissolved. The structures for faculty leadership in the Core Curriculum have continued to be responsive and to evolve in the form of a Core Governance Council who lead the Core and maintain the guiding Core Operating Manual while the governance of the Core Curriculum follows the UCC Guide to Curriculum Authority and Review to revise, eliminate or add new elements to the Core Curriculum as part of our shared faculty governance. Since this change was implemented, the Core Curriculum has seen several updates, including changes to learning objectives, the addition of new requirements, and the elimination of outdated ones. Some notable revisions to the Core Curriculum include:

- Spring 2018 Documented updates to AR Student Learning Outcomes
- Fall 2020 Addition of the Social Justice and Diversity (SJD) Requirement
- Spring 2021 Elimination of the WAC and SAC Requirement
- Spring 2024 Revision to PWB to Well-Being
- Spring 2024 Revision to FYS Student Learning Objectives

In addition to these changes in particular requirements, the Core has grown considerably in the options of courses that can satisfy them. When launched officially in fall 2010, we offered 79 unique courses in the Core. At present there are more than 180 approved courses in the Core Curriculum, with around fifteen of them being offered for the first time in the past three years.

The Future Core Curriculum (2025-Beyond): The Undeniable Value of the Core Curriculum

The evidence from the past 15 years of our “new” Core Curriculum reflects a deep commitment from faculty and administration to provide a foundational and adaptive approach to education, ensuring that the Core Curriculum remains relevant and effective in preparing students for a rapidly changing world. The administrative structure of the Core Curriculum has also evolved as the Core has matured, enhancing faculty involvement and ensuring robust guidance and governance so that decisions regarding the Core are made collaboratively with input from experienced faculty members actively engaged in teaching Core courses. There is no debate and no doubt that the Core Curriculum at Butler University is of high value.

As shared in current Core Operating Manual, the value of a Core Curriculum has been demonstrated in multiple studies. As just one example, according to Richard Detweiler (whose study, published as *The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs*, surveyed a thousand college graduates), taking a large number of courses outside one's major (particularly courses in the humanities which are well represented in Butler's Core Curriculum) is strongly correlated with a number of important outcomes, including becoming a lifelong learner, getting an advanced degree, having a fulfilling life, reporting job satisfaction, and regularly finding enjoyment in concerts, the theater, museum exhibits, literature, and music.

Such an education also correlates strongly with professional success later in life in terms of rank and salary. In fact, the top factor associated with a six-figure salary, according to Detweiler, is not college major, but rather whether a student takes a large share of their classes *outside of the major*. Moreover, the effect of such an education on future success is particularly substantial for students with lower SAT/ACT scores and students whose families, in high school, had a lower socio-economic status, suggesting that a strong Core Curriculum can help level the educational and vocational playing field to some degree. The data suggest this is particularly true with a strong First-Year Seminar program, which every Butler undergraduate takes in their first year.

What can be said about the Core overall can also be said about particular aspects of it. Students who had frequent conversations with other students about issues of significance to humanity, or who had frequent discussions with students of differing beliefs and views in college (something we do particularly well in the core, especially in FYS and Texts and Ideas) are more than 25% more likely to act and be perceived as leaders later on in life. Students who frequently discussed issues of peace, justice, human rights, or equality with students outside of class (conversations spurred across our core curriculum, but particularly in SJD courses) are 56% more likely to become lifelong learners and 33% more likely to enjoy the arts and attend cultural events. Similarly, students who frequently discussed issues of importance to humanity and for whom learning about people of other cultures was an important part of college (something we do well in the core, particularly in GHS) were 39% more likely to report enjoying the arts and attending cultural events. The core is therefore absolutely critical to the future success, well-being, and happiness of Butler students and perhaps a healthier society as a whole.

We know that our Core Curriculum is the ongoing result of our mission to boldly innovate and broadly educate students in a rapidly changing world. We know that our Core Curriculum exposes our students to a more diverse set of students, faculty and therefore perspectives than a more narrowly focused curriculum can. We know that chance favors the prepared mind, and the joy of serendipitous discoveries are made possible by an education intentionally designed to nurture curiosity. We know that a Core Curriculum fosters ability to think independently and make interdependent connections to people and ideas for a lifetime of learning. The development of soft skills (such as problem-solving, teamwork, written/oral communication) desired in all workplaces are forged in educational spaces that require their use and application. The Core Curriculum is the first and a foundational space for these soft skills to be practiced. These are adaptable, transferable, and transformative skills that are not outdated

Next Evolutions:

With the confidence that the Core Curriculum's value is known and its future as a fixture in the institution is secure, we aim to continuously look at the how best to deliver this experience in ways that respect, invite, and rely on the perspective and expertise of those faculty who teach in and are committed to it without making it unmanageable or so administratively burdensome that we can't afford to offer it. The Core Curriculum at Butler University is a dynamic and essential component of its educational framework. It has evolved significantly since its inception and the faculty continue to amend it in response to the changing needs of students and society. The administration and faculty remain committed to maintaining and enhancing the Core, ensuring that it remains a distinctive feature of a Butler education. By raising awareness of the Core's ongoing development – in terms of its content and administration – and sustained institutional support, we can dispel misconceptions about its static nature and vulnerability. The Core Curriculum is not only valued, but also essential for preparing students for a successful and fulfilling future. Those of us working to deliver it must continue the tradition of ensuring good stewardship of our dynamic, ever-evolving Core Curriculum.