

Comments on *Core Competencies Working Group Report*

**Ad Hoc Working Committee
Economics Department
November, 2010**

A. Introduction

Every year the Economics Department admits a good number of students who are not prepared for our structured Majors program.. As a quantitative social science we would prefer to deal with entering students having solid analytic skills who are able to read and assimilate material of a conceptual nature. The reality is sometimes otherwise. So we have made adjustments. Introductory courses have tutorial sessions, as do key courses along the way. Progress is measured via successful completion of intermediate theory courses in microeconomic and macroeconomic theory. Maturity in economic thinking is developed via capstone courses all having the intermediate theory pre-requisites. Half the entry class (some-a good number- of whom have transferred to JMSB) graduate with what we think is a credible degree at least as compared with the economics education offered elsewhere. How does it all happen? There is an element of the unexplained in education- progress just happens when young people confront researchers with experience in a discipline who try to convey their appreciation of the discipline. It is the first time in their education that students become engaged by instructors that have obligations other than being good teachers. The subject carries the day.

Of course, the reality remains that entering students have problems and talk of the mystical nature of education may seem curiously romantic coming from economists. There remains room for some intervention in helping students locate themselves within their programs. How can this be done? Accordingly, a few years ago, the Department investigated past student performance results to isolate possible correlations between entry competence in math or in language or in whatever we thought relevant on the one hand and eventual success in our programs as measured simply by graduation on the other. We had the picture that there would be a cut-off point in entry qualifications that would adequately predict future success or failure. It turned out that no such picture is accurate. Lots of really poor students do succeed; lots of students who are marginally better do dreadfully. In our experience, there is no measure of core competency that has much predictive value except at the extremes. It is this finding that suggests that the whole edifice of the Core Competencies document rests on shaky foundations.

Why this is so may relate to the delivery of secondary and CEGEP education. Or perhaps some students may perform badly at CEGEP just because they see no reason to do otherwise and somehow they can't be knocked off this view. But the university environment can have a "magical" impact -as long we continue to let it. And we should also realize that some students perform badly simply because the university environment is just not for them. There is no litmus test to distinguish the two classes.

The *Core Competencies Working Group* does address these points with commendable enthusiasm. The work was prompted by the decision to put to rest the University Writing Test which had achieved the twin distinction of being a joke and an

embarrassment, whereby students could display singular linguistic ineptitude after having completed the course requirements of the degree. Accordingly, there are two issues that had to be addressed by the Working Group - how to deal with “lack of readiness” at the outset and how to assure baseline competence on exit?

Let us state at the outset that in its current form we do not think the document a success.

We give some general impressions first; a more detailed reading of the Report follows below.

1. The Report's objectives seem to point in sensible directions on immediate reading. But the proposed recommendations invariably have a significant bureaucratic bottom line. In short, the Report promotes more administrative overlay for the University. On the recommendations of the Report, the School of Extended Learning would occupy a central position in the University. An Office of Teaching and Learning - as proposed by the Vice-Provost, Teaching and Learning – will be located prominently on campus.
2. The invisibility of academic units in the Report is quite striking. The recommendations are essentially pan-University, and some could even be construed as monitoring and orienting Department activity in significant ways in the name of vague objectives.
3. Indeed, programs will be required to offer three courses in communication-intensive material. A University workshop will assist Departments in mounting these efforts.
4. The Report focuses on the learning process as an end in itself. Issues of content, knowledge and specific academic objectives that are the domain of experts in their field play second fiddle to more general objectives that are to be measured and monitored notwithstanding their essential vagueness.
5. In acting on its profound concern for marginal students, the Report proposes an educational environment – at the core of which is a bureaucratic regime devoted to the enhancement of “learning objectives” – that is not particularly attractive in so far as it perpetuates a pre-university sensibility.
6. There is little sense within the Report that its recommendations would entail considerable resource re-allocation within the University. The idea that the Report is circulated before any costing is performed is bad policy.

Our response is admittedly detailed. But the devil sometimes can only be found in the details. We first review the Report's recommendations [Part B], sketch by way of contrast an alternative vision [Part C] and offer some conclusions [Part D].

B. The Report's Recommendations

The thirty-four recommendations of the Report are grouped under six objectives. Let's start with the first objective: it appears sensible enough.

Objective 1: Create mechanisms to better address some entering students' lack of readiness in foundational areas that are essential to success in university.

Overview:

Recs 1-4 present an admissions dynamic whereby all incoming students are tested on some agreed upon set of competencies which, it turns out, are variants of reading, writing and arithmetic. The testing is not admissions testing but placement testing or diagnosis of what courses entering “threshold” students should take in order to elevate themselves to preparedness.

Rec 5 Here's the rub: it appears that these courses will be provided by the School of Extended Learning by its own instructors; see below. The School of Extended Learning will have expanded capacities.

Rec 6-7 There is some issue as to whether these courses would count for program credit or be some precondition for entry.

Rec 8 suggests that we investigate the use of student learning profiles to isolate particular needs and styles and at the same time “provide faculty with actionable information about how their students learn best.” We are referred to one of the many appendices of the Report for elucidation and discover that there are innovative learners, analytic learners, common sense learners and dynamic learners. Such information would somehow be passed on to faculty.

Rec 9-10 return to the ongoing task of creating work for the non-academic sector of the University: we should “prioritize initiatives” to align our expectations with the education offered by the feeder CEGEPs, and establish an “institutional research agenda” to collect data and monitor progress on “university readiness initiatives.”

Comments:

In the name of “readiness”, Objective 1 subjects incoming students to diagnostic testing in order to place the “threshold student” in pre-program courses to be offered by non-program instructors in the School of Extended Learning. Along the way a learning profile is determined and handed to the program so that faculty will adapt teaching to fit the profiles. This model of educational development is unduly intrusive. What student would want to endure all this? The idea of accessibility is to give students a chance, not to have them run fitness laps in some ersatz training exercise that is perceived as appropriate preparation for work in say Economics. Don't the authors realize that if an introductory stats class is ill prepared in math that the instructor and Department now take appropriate steps without compromising the integrity of the course, and somehow that the process need not be particularly sensitive to the distribution of Common Sense learners in the course relative to the Dynamic Learners. Instruction in the School of Extended Learning from professionals in readiness preparation may dampen whatever enthusiasm the “threshold” student may have had for coming to Concordia. Moreover, unless there are credits associated with these courses the students involved will surely not have much incentive to abandon their threshold status - so, ultimately, what's the point? On the other hand, if there are credits allocated to readiness preparation, then the quality of the program is diluted.

Objective 2: Reinforce the University's commitment to cultivate a broad set of skills and abilities that all Concordia undergraduates are expected to attain by the time of their graduation.

Overview:

Rec 11 suggests that fundamental learning outcomes should be defined - these include knowledge, skills, values and dispositions – and are to be common to all programs. Bachelor-level abilities in these competencies are to be expected from graduates.

Rec 12-14 deal with the implementation of these targeted learning objectives. We have curriculum review, the goal of consistency across programs in their introductory courses, and a focus on the merits of “high impact” education practices.

Rec 15 wants innovative approaches to support student learning.

Comments:

The material in these recommendations varies from motherhood (the issue with “high impact” teaching practices such as seminars is cost) to meddling (what could it possibly mean to develop a consistent approach to program introductory courses - what we teach in introductory Economics is dictated by what the profession thinks is important and the capacity of our students to take in this material) to murky (how are we to determine the content of fundamental learning outcomes relating to attitudes and ethics). But as with Objective 1, the recommendations supporting Objective 2 create work for the non-academic sector: to define objectives, to develop consistent approaches, to pilot new initiatives.

Objective 3: Prioritize the development of student's communication skills.

Overview:

Rec 16-17-18-19 advocate the adoption of writing/communication courses as part of each program, suggesting three such courses. These courses are to help programs meet communication/writing requirements that are to be established inside all programs. A campus-wide workshop will help programs in implementing these requirements, the details of which will be elaborated in university-wide guidelines. The courses would be worth 4 credits each.

Rec 20 advocates the adoption of a certificate to recognize high achievement in writing.

Rec 21 suggests a graduate-level program in composition and rhetoric.

Comments:

So 10% of our programs will be devoted to the communication/writing objective [The Report always offers the caveat that its recommendations must be in line with the demands on accredited programs, such as those offered by JMSB and Engineering, where presumably students have to learn some professional skills]. One could be permitted a little scepticism as to the content of Communications I. II. III and worry about who will teach these courses before the graduates of our Rhetoric program are ready. Notwithstanding such concerns, the upshot: less university, more CEGEP and of course more administrators to determine guidelines and ensure their implementation.

Objective 4: Develop comprehensive plans for assessing student learning outcomes and using assessment results to improve student learning.

Overview:

Rec 22-23 further the development of an institutional master plan to assess whether the learning objectives have indeed been met. The plan will be easier to implement if we have in hand an “assessment resource clearinghouse” that will “spur the adoption of best practices.”

Rec 24-25-26 suggest that we pilot the use of “Collegiate Learning Assessment” as a “broad-stroke” mechanism for assessment. Appendix N makes the issue somewhat comprehensible: students are to write exit exams to evaluate their ability to think critically etc. Along the way it appears we will have “rubric assessment” [Appendix O offers some web links to help uninitiated faculty make sense of a proposed instrument that will help us “better coordinate student achievement across programs.”] Finally, all this information is to be fed back into program design to complement information from student teaching assessments.

Comments:

Whatever good will that may have survived through the recommendations of Objectives 1 through 3 can now be seen to have been completely misplaced. We have master plans, assessment strategies, feedback mechanisms all based on schemes that pretend to measure the un-measurable attribute of good writing and effective communication. Of course, all this structure is otiose, so many knobs that don't do very much. And it appears that after all there will be an outside-program assessment of whether the generic learning objectives have been met. Of course, everyone will succeed. Structures that don't work are a bureaucratic impossibility.

Objective 5: Provide incentives for programs and faculty members who have keen interests in innovating with respect to students foundational abilities, learning outcomes, high-impact educational practices, etc.

Overview:

Rec 27-28-29 create incentives for faculty to support the previous proposals for the enhancement of student success and particularly those directed to students with lower levels of ability and aspirations. One award would recognize effective teaching enhancement programs; grants would be offered for faculty to attend conferences sponsored by, for example, the Engaging Departments Institute. Teaching releases would be offered for tenured faculty to “facilitate intensive professional development in teaching.”

Objective 6: Develop a communication plan to ensure that core competency initiatives are feasibly conceived, well understood, and widely endorsed.

Overview:

Rec 30-31 ensure that students will not miss the point of the University's core competency agenda by implementing a communications plan. The plan will make full use of “value propositions” underscoring the relevance of university education. The message can only be furthered if all University efforts regarding core competencies

are aligned and consistent: standard visual representation in course syllabi, marketing and recruitment documents are to be the order of the day.

Rec 32 proposes to devise “mechanisms that allow students to visualize their progress on attaining graduate attributes ...”

Comments:

Students who overlook that they have been tested for core competencies, profiled as to learning style, followed three communications courses within their program, and been subjected to rubric assessment and survive prodding and poking to ensure that they think critically and imaginatively will surely appreciate University efforts to underscore that all these efforts on their behalf are aligned. The visual suggestions of the four circles offered in Appendix Q will certainly serve to underscore, we suspect, the core appreciation, an objective of Bachelor-level sensibility, that knowledge does have its limits.

Objective 7: Pursue the two additional recommendations noted below that help to ensure and pro mote effective development of students' core academic abilities.

Overview:

Rec 33 wishes to devise mechanisms “to foster a sense of shared responsibility for student learning and development” among key contributors including School of Extended Learning instructors who teach preparatory courses.

Rec 34 proposes to establish an Office of Teaching and Learning to be located prominently on campus “to signify the centrality of teaching and learning at Concordia.”

Comments:

The symbolism seems rather heavy handed.

Part C An Alternative Vision: Development within the Department

We agree that students entering the Economics Department are not on the whole as well prepared as we would like them to be. However, it is not as if those of us who do teach turn a blind eye to the challenge. As indicated in Part A, the Department has made adjustments and created a program structure that if successfully followed ensures that our graduates have had access to good training as economists at the Bachelor's level. In an era of mass education, we can't guarantee anything. C-level students are not likely to be brilliant communicators and creative problem solvers. But they have been exposed to good material, have passed their courses and can move on with their lives.

Some ten years ago there was an initiative to replace our core Introductory Statistics sequence by an interdisciplinary course that would be taught online. The Department resisted, arguing that students benefit through the exposure to material taught by practitioners who actually use statistics when doing empirical work. There was no question of offloading this task.

Due to developments in informational technology, the Department is now more open to the idea of having on-line courses or using on-line support for courses taught in a

traditional manner. But the *sine qua non* for any such initiative is that the courses retain their status as economics courses, organized and monitored by economists.

In this vein, some faculty in the Department have proposed the development of on-line course material to be covered under the heading *Methodologies in Economics*. The methodologies in question, it has been suggested, would involve three streams: quantitative methods, computer methods and qualitative analysis. Each stream would have several levels: entry, intermediate, pre-graduate level. Entry-level quantitative analysis would cover the algebra of supply and demand, essentially pre-Cal but presented entirely in an economics context. The rudiments of calculus can be reviewed in the context of reasoning-at-the-margin. The challenge is to locate the skills within an economics context. For us, Pre-Cal belongs in the high school or CEGEP; at university, for us, the material belongs to the economics curriculum, motivated by theoretical or empirical economics. The catch up, where necessary, must have an economics context. A similar approach may be readily adopted for qualitative analysis. There is no lack of material: entry-level methods-articles can be taken from the Economist, the Financial Times. Higher-level material can be found in myriad reports and journals aimed at a wide readership.

The challenge of this approach would be to develop in an interactive computer context step-by-step learning via myriad examples taken from economics; a testing component would be offered as well. Such a project is certainly feasible. The former GAMBA program in the JMSB offered a full slate of courses in a distance learning environment. We would have students work through the different levels of the *Methodologies* course within their program of studies where certain levels of competency are prerequisites for given courses. Such progress is straightforward to track. The Department could offer face-to-face support via tutorial sessions. In this way, competency training would be part of our program and not sit elsewhere in the University. This proposal represents the germ of an idea that must still be fully developed to see how it could be incorporated within our programs in a fashion that does not jeopardize the utility of our program or takes us too far a field from the mainstream of the discipline.

Resources are needed to implement such courses. But there is a steep learning curve in such course development. In some cases, the material could be shared with suitable modification with other Departments; Finance comes to mind. The point is that as the courses would be developed within our program and with Departmental expertise the bureaucratic cost would be minimal. Administrative focus could then be directed to oversight rather than to production and the imposition of guidelines.

Part D Summary and Conclusions

The earnestness of the Core Competencies document can hardly be challenged. It is motivated by a genuine problem; namely, the lack of adequate preparation on the part of some of our students for university training at the front end of their student careers and the apparent inability of some of our graduates to demonstrate skills naturally associated with university training at the back end. It is felt that something dramatic

must be done to tackle the problem: the government is presented as restless and the University must react expeditiously to pre-empt some bureaucratic intrusion from the Ministry of Education. And so, we have the Report on Core Competencies originating from the Office of the Vice-Provost, Learning and Teaching which comes with vision: “we, as a community, must refocus intently on the learning process as the defining activity of our institution.”

The Report, it must be said, is true to its vision which is elaborated with some fervour in its thirty-four recommendations. The point of departure is the characterization of the Core Competencies that are the object of attention. These are variants of reading skills, quantitative skills and communication skills. The learning process embodies these skills and the defining activity of our institution is to focus hard on the skills. How do we do so? What is on offer from this Report— some accounting is in order.

1. Proposals Relating to Student Entry to the University

Incoming students will be evaluated along the three competencies on entry to the University. If need be, “threshold students” will be directed to courses offered by instructors in the School of Extended Learning before they start their programs. The content of these courses is not elaborated, but it seems clear that it is program-independent. Nor is it clear what would happen to those students who demonstrate no progress in these courses. Finally, students will be profiled for learning styles that will be passed on to professors once they begin their program of study.

2. Proposals Relating to Student Progress Through Academic Programs

The Report recommends that each program offer three (possibly four-credit) courses in developing communication skills as part of the program. Introductory courses must display consistency with those in other programs in promoting the targeted learning objectives. Students will be monitored inside the program. Student teaching evaluation regarding student learning outcomes will be part of the program appraisal process. Students will be tested on exiting the programs on achievement relating to the core competencies.

3. Non-Academic Sector Mandates

These are myriad.

- a. An institutional research agenda should be established to collect data and monitor progress on “university readiness initiatives.”
- b. Fundamental learning outcomes or targeted learning objectives should be defined.
- c. Curriculum review should be undertaken in light of these targeted objectives; introductory courses programs across the University should display consistency in addressing these objectives.
- d. Innovative approaches to support student learning should be pursued.

- e. A campus-wide workshop should be set up to help programs implement the three new courses in communications within their programs.
- f. An institutional master plan to assess whether the learning objectives have indeed been met should be developed. The plan will be supported by an “assessment resource clearinghouse” to “spur the adoption of best practices.”
- g. Procedures for monitoring student progress relating to the core competencies are to be developed.

4. *Miscellaneous Suggestions*

- h. the University adopt a Writing Certificate to honour achievement in communication.
- i. the University introduce a graduate program in Rhetoric and Communication.
- j. a certificate be created to honour particular competence in writing/communication
- k. faculty be encouraged to focus intently on professional teaching development via conferences and teaching releases.
- l. an Office of Teaching and Learning be established.

This bureaucratic impulse that animates the Report must be resisted. Bureaucracies have managers whose remits take on independent life. All sorts of pan-University activities are reserved for the bureaucracy, some of which will be extremely expensive. The issues of cost and source of funds are not part of the Report, and constitutes a major (and revealing) blind spot.

A second concern is the ease with which the Report is inclined to dilute program offerings. A key recommendation will reserve some 10% of each program for courses in Communications/Writing, the content and monitoring and evaluation of which are all part of the bureaucratic mandate.

We have Departments that are quite capable of attending to the issues raised in the Report. Good administration would not be inclined to gather all these tasks under an administrative umbrella. Good administration would by contrast charge the academic units to attend to the challenges as they affect their unit, and give them sufficient resources and flexibility to deal with the problems in a manner consistent with program objectives.

Finally, it strikes us that students will not appreciate the extent and the manner to which they will be assessed and monitored under the Report's proposals. The “threshold students” could easily view themselves as second-class citizens on arrival.

Those who have been allowed into the building could naturally wonder why so much of their program is devoted to communication/writing in contrast with similar programs followed by their friends in other universities.