Memorandum

To        Peter J. Galie, Chair, Faculty Senate
From      Herbert J. Nelson
Subject   New Core Curriculum
Date      April 11, 2007

Thank you for your March 26 transmission of the core curriculum approved recently by the Faculty Senate.

I have compared the new Faculty Senate core to the current core curriculum and to the proposal advanced in February, 2005 by the Core Curriculum Task Force. My comparison has been guided by what I said about core curriculum revision in my November 8, 2002 memo to the Canisius Community on Core Curriculum Review. In that memo I announced the members of the Task Force and offered some reflections about the core revision process and about the core curriculum. Those reflections offer a pertinent basis for judging what has now emerged from the process that began at that time. I provide here a link to the 2002 document for those interested in a more detailed version of the general considerations that have guided my review.

The new Faculty Senate core stands in obvious continuity with the current core curriculum and the 2005 Task Force proposal, bearing the imprint of each. But the Faculty Senate’s new core differs significantly from each of those antecedents as well. On the whole, I find that those differences make the new Faculty Senate core superior to both the current core curriculum and the Task Force proposal, on both of which the new core builds.

In 2002 I had urged that the core curriculum should be a Canisius core, not the captive of any special interest. I recommended hearing lots of opinions, both in the early listening and gathering stages of the process but also in the later tentative drafting stages as well. I suggested that ideas would need to be collected and heard and considered, and then preliminary drafts would need to be shared and tested and revised. I said that the task for drafters of a revised core was not to climb a lonely mountain, find the truth, carve it in stone tablets, and then descend to reveal it to the rest of us. I saw the task instead to be that of focusing the conversation toward the creation of a broad base of agreement on the core curriculum.
Five years later I am firmly persuaded that the new Faculty Senate core is indeed a Canisius core, representing the collective wisdom of the Canisius faculty of today. Anyone who has not been heard during the Faculty Senate’s process has chosen not to be heard. Especially during the past year, earlier versions have been circulated and subjected to intensive and extensive scrutiny that has in turn resulted in significant modifications leading to a final version that has methodically addressed many earlier criticisms in intelligent and comprehensive ways. The new Senate core has been tested and refined through faculty debate to a quite uncommon but admirable degree. Of course, there are faculty members whose judgment I greatly respect who are not happy with the new Senate core. But even their critiques have contributed to improving the new core and broadening faculty support for it.

The new Faculty Senate core’s attention to learning goals and assessment marks a clear advance over the current core and the Task Force proposal. There is, no doubt, much work yet to be done in this regard in order to implement the new core. And living out the new core will almost certainly involve a continuing series of incremental improvements to the assessment procedures that it calls for. But in the spirit of the magis the new core advances a curriculum designed to make such incremental improvements natural and intentional.

Adaptation to the needs and opportunities of a particular time and place is a characteristic feature of Jesuit education. The new core displays such adaptation to the present curricular needs of Canisius in a number of ways. I mention in particular the adaptation, in the spirit of Ignatius Loyola, of best practices from the broader world of higher education. As Ignatius looked especially to the University of Paris as a curricular model, so the Faculty Senate has looked to adapt the concepts of the first-year seminar and the capstone course to the Canisius instructional environment. Each of these also helps to provide somewhat more structure and coordination to our students’ core experiences.

The revised core takes a new approach to the development of good writing, and adds attention to oral communication, echoing the earliest Jesuit emphasis on what then was called eloquentia perfecta. Also receiving more attention is what now is called information literacy. The manner and the content of effective communication are central to our educational task and our Jesuit heritage and are therefore appropriately emphasized in the new core.

The new core’s attention to issues of justice, ethics, diversity, and global awareness supports our commitment as a Jesuit college to broaden student perspectives beyond the local and the self-centered. Together with other elements in the curriculum, this should help our students engage in serious, informed, and rooted reflection on important issues of value and culture. In this regard, the new core, for the world of today, seems both wise and pragmatic, as its Jesuit heritage calls it to be.

In sum, the new core seems to deal effectively with just that variety and diversity that a good core curriculum should seek to hold in balance. It will draw our
students into productive encounters with the perennial and the current, the pragmatic and the idealistic, the local and the global, the personal and the social, the immanent and the transcendent. In a word, it offers more focused opportunities for our student to begin to achieve that balance that is at the heart of the good life. The new core is certainly not perfect; no curriculum is. Perhaps when a number of student cohorts have experienced the new core in its full implementation, and with the advantage of accumulated assessment data, a future Faculty Senate may look for ways to improve yet further what this Faculty Senate has accomplished. But for our students of today and the years immediately ahead, this Faculty Senate has constructed a very good core curriculum. I endorse it enthusiastically and look forward to its implementation.

In reviewing these years of gestation, I note that both the Task Force and the Faculty Senate have strongly urged that reduction in the size of the core should be coupled with greater student access to free electives, and not be the occasion for majors to expand the scope of their requirements. So I am hereby restricting any change in major programs that would have the effect of increasing the credit hour or course requirements which their majors must satisfy. No such change will be introduced into the college catalog or be made official without the prior approval of the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Such approval will normally be given only after review and advice from the appropriate dean and the Academic Programs Board. This restriction is to take effect immediately and to remain in effect unless and until the Vice President for Academic Affairs should decide otherwise.

Finally, I offer my sincere thanks to Chair Dan Jamros, S.J. and the other members of the earlier Task Force, to Chair Peter Galie and the other members of the current Faculty Senate, especially to Chair Rita Capezzi and the other members of the Educational Policy Committee, and to all of the many faculty members who over these last years have with their passion and ideas energized and enlightened the process that forged this new Canisius core.