

## WHY THE STRUCTURE OF THE STEVENSON CORE COURSE IS ESSENTIAL TO ITS FUNCTION

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Many courses at UCSC are extremely enlightening -- but none offers as transformative an experience as the Stevenson core course.

**The mission of the Stevenson core course cannot be met by a shorter course with larger sections.**

Most of us who have taken the core course would agree that it is not just the content but the *structure* of the core course that profoundly impacts how Stevenson students approach subsequent studies.

**The core course introduces students to numerous fields of study at the very beginning of the college experience -- making it possible for students to make intelligent choices in their selection of general education courses thereafter.** While almost all colleges have a general education requirement stipulating that students take a selection of courses in fields outside of that of their major, too often students select these courses randomly, without an appreciation of how one field informs another. Stevenson students, on the other hand, sample writings from numerous disciplines in considering the dynamic between the self and society.

**An interdisciplinary core course necessarily involves team teaching. One of the most wonderful things about the Stevenson Core Course experience is being introduced to a large number of professors from whom one might take courses in the future.** Taking the core course is like attending a TED lecture every week, where each professor strives to engage and entertain and otherwise validate their particular field of study. The course introduces students to not just dynamic ideas but to dynamic people.

**The interdisciplinary core course is particularly eye-opening to students who are not yet committed to a major.** The core course gives naive students some insight into the types of questions that are investigated in different fields of study.

**The core course helps build a community for incoming freshmen.** Because everyone in the freshman dorm is reading the same books at the same time, students who might not otherwise have much in common have something to talk about. This dialog is enhanced by the experience of meeting in small sections to discuss lectures and readings. The small classrooms at UCSC provide an ideal space for Socratic dialog.

**The core course gives incoming freshmen desperately needed experience reading and analyzing primary sources.** Today's readers much too readily allow textbooks and news programs and websites to synthesize information for them. Many students taking the core course finding the reading very challenging, but once they get into it are enlightened and impressed by the logic and narrative of the deep thinkers. Many students would not get through it were it not for the small-section environment

requiring that students be prepared to discuss the readings. I recall, for example, that Freud's CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS generated a great deal of somewhat aggravated discussion in section. But in the end, it advanced our critical thinking skills. Being required to tease out and challenge the lessons in Freud's treatise is a far more intellectual enterprise than taking a multiple-choice quiz after reading a textbook in which Freud's key observations are presented in a numbered list.

**The small-section format ensures that instructors get to know individual students and have the time to influence and direct their writing and analytical skills.** Back when I took the course, students were required to write 5-page papers every two weeks, which were read and commented upon by the prof leading their section. At that time, no grades were given. Instead, the strengths and weaknesses of our papers were pointed out. For those of us who were used to getting A's, the experience of being pointed in the direction of further improvement was humbling. The process had an immeasurable impact on the standard I set for myself moving forward.

**While the small-section format is costly given the number of faculty and facilitators required to pull it off, the benefits outweigh the costs.** The orientation and skills imparted to students in section are akin to a dose of preventative medicine; the guidance and stimulation provided by close interactions among students and faculty in beginning of the student's college experience engenders productive academic involvement in all studies that follow.

**The proposed restructuring the Stevenson course threatens to rip the soul out of the residential college concept on which UCSC is founded.** Core courses define the individual colleges of UCSC, and set UCSC apart from other universities. The size and layout of each college was formulated to accommodate the socialization and intellectual development of relatively small groups of students. A move to narrow the scope of the Stevenson core course will reduce both the number of disciplines to which freshmen are exposed and the number of professors they get to meet. A move to increase section size will stifle Socratic dialog and will make it impractical for instructors to read and comment upon lengthy essays, depriving students of the crucial benefit of one-on-one feedback and guidance at the point at which they need it most.