

Dear UC Santa Cruz Academic Senate Committee,

I received an email the other day explaining that you were considering increasing the size of Stevenson's Core's *Self and Society* class from a discussion group of about 20 students to a lecture hall of 55. Rumor has it, you are also considering reducing the number of credits Core is worth from a possible 15 over two quarters, to 2 or 3 per quarter. In essence, this says one thing: that you do not consider this class to be valuable.

I and everyone I know who actually took Core disagree with you. When I posted about this on Facebook all of my friends from Stevenson responded with fury. They started posting stories, testimonials, memories from this class that we took ten years ago. They encouraged me to write this letter to you to tell you about why these changes would decimate the purpose of Stevenson Core.

The first few weeks of college are a thrilling party of flitting from person to person, arms outstretched and open, learning what we have in common with each other--music, movies, majors. But in our very first college class, in Core, we explored something just as important: what drives us apart.

Because it is a required class for kids of all backgrounds and majors, Core's different than your average discussion section. You sit with kids you see all the time--who live in your building, who you stand next to in line for omelettes--but who you'd never otherwise talk to. Their hair might be all wrong. Their t-shirt offensive. But here it was our job to find out, on an extremely intimate basis, how they felt the world should be organized.

We read the Qur'an, the Bible, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Rousseau, Freud, Nietzsche, The Tao Te Ching, Sor Juana de la Cruz, Malcolm X, *Maus*. And through it all, we participated in facilitated discussions—and sometimes, fiery debates—as we tried, with our naïve 18-year-old hubris, to answer: What is the purpose of civilization? What values does being part of a society impose on us? How do race, gender and religion impact the way our society operates? And above all: what are our responsibilities as citizens in our society?

After watching the Dave Chapelle sketch about the blind black man who thinks he's white, I made an offensive joke about Asians in class. A white classmate told me that I was disrespecting myself and my people by making that joke. I told her she didn't have the right to tell me how to respect my people. The next week, we talked about *The Communist Manifesto*. Some students agreed with the idea that we should all raise someone else's child instead of our own, in order to prevent nepotism. I said, "Do you honestly think that would work?" Someone responded, "You're a fascist." We glared at each other. We argued about something new. I was right. Then I was wrong.

Engaging in these tough discussions was foreign to me. Prior to this, I'd thought that the point of arguing was not to learn. It was to win. But in Core, I began to see: often, there were no teams,

no winners. No other students I always sided with. We all had just one thing in common: we wanted to be considered *good people*. We wanted to have answers about the best way to build societies that *worked*, that bred other good people. But we changed our minds from week to week, with every new book we read, about what those answers were.

Which is why Stevenson Core was the most valuable class I took in college. It taught me critical thinking skills. It taught me how to advocate for my opinions in a group setting. It exposed me to important texts. But most importantly, it taught me about the value of questioning why people believe what they believe—and then applying those questions to myself just as rigorously.

It's now my job to ask those questions. As a journalist who focuses on documentary-style storytelling, I frequently have to empathize with people I might personally disagree with. And I never cease to be surprised by how much I learn from my interviewees.

Years ago, I paused before I walked to an interviewee's house. He had a giant sign out front that said: TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT. I was afraid of him when we started. He said he had a gun in every single room in his house, even under the seat of his truck, and to prove it, reached out and grabbed a handgun with a laser sight, then pointed it to a picture above my head. But as I spent an afternoon with him, I learned that he'd been in a shoot-out with a militia who tried to take over his property. He was shot and held hostage in his own home. The experience was traumatic for him, and he lived with a constant, vigilant fear of being overtaken again. I spent all afternoon with him. At the end, I understood: "Oh, right. That sign out front means something very different to you than it does to me." And I was thrilled when he took me out back and taught me how to shoot his shotgun revolver. We left that experience friends. I sent him a Christmas card the next year.

The seed for that conversation was Core.

I have a friend who, for his Core final, disappeared into the woods for a couple of days. He didn't eat much, and he felt anxious at night about the strange sounds he heard outside his tent. When he came back to the dorms, he wrote an essay about what he'd learned that quarter, and from that experiment: that *we need each other*. That we are stronger, better and safer *together* in this society.

I think that we often forget, especially now in our divided America, about this important responsibility as citizens of this civilization--to understand that since we share our society, regardless of whether we like it or not, it's our duty to attempt to understand those we feel the strongest differences towards. Which is why it's more important than ever to preserve Core in its current capacity. Because Core teaches students something terrifically difficult, but invaluable... something far more more important than how to win. It teaches them how to disagree.

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-Stephanie Foo

Stevenson '08, w/Stevenson Honors

