We were invited to visit the Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi (TAMU-CC) campus on November 19-20, 2006 to review the core curriculum and learning communities programs. We submit this report based on
• our review of the materials shared before and during the meeting and
• our conversations with students, faculty, administrators, and staff with whom we met during the visit.

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi has a national reputation for excellence in serving first-year students, and our visit confirmed the excellence of the Learning Communities and of the Core Program in enhancing student academic achievement and persistence.

The Program Review Committee has recommended the following fourteen initiatives for program improvement. We have added our observations and recommendations to each of these fourteen initiatives as follows:

1. **Increase faculty development opportunities.** Across all focus groups, we heard what we interpreted as a concern about the absence of faculty development opportunities for core curriculum and learning communities faculty. Without such opportunities, the coordination of the curriculum is difficult in both core courses and in learning communities.

   Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi’s has grown considerably in student population, but not in funding, not in faculty, and not in staff. As a result everyone is working hard. They enjoy what they are doing and believe in the mission of the institution and the promise of the students, but are feeling stretched. Because of these growth pressures, faculty development for the core curriculum and learning communities faculty has been back-burnered. Because these programs both address the front end of the student experience, investing in a strong faculty development program would actually increase teaching effectiveness and efficiencies in workload and create the context for common learning outcomes across the core and learning communities.
Therefore, we strongly believe it imperative to increase faculty development for both the learning communities and for the core program. It does not appear that those persons who teach core program courses outside the learning communities have support. We recommend both formal programming offered by professional development specialists and contexts for faculty to share best practices and assessments with one another. It is our experience that we faculty most often teach to majors and prospective majors. Given that students in core classes are most often taking those courses as part of the core curriculum and are pursuing other majors, it is especially important to identify means to support faculty development for the core faculty so that the curriculum is integrated and so that learning outcomes assessment can be more uniformly planned and executed.

We encourage TAMU-CC to consider the following:

- Offer regularly scheduled and structured faculty development activities for both new and experienced faculty in both the core curriculum and learning communities programs;
- Think about ways to develop undergraduates to be used to teach first-year undergraduate students. With some leadership training, students become excellent partners in classroom situations;
- Have the core faculty meet to assess elements of the core. This could be a qualitative assessment asking their perceptions of the core as a whole, getting impressions of how integrated the classes’ curriculum is or could be;
- Increase the resources for core faculty. Apparently there are no set asides for this; and
- Consider calling the core courses gateway courses or some other suitable label. At IUPUI core classes are called gateway courses and this works well.

Students’ concerns could be addressed in training programs for faculty. For example, in our discussions with students, they expressed concerns about the confusing nature of writing the same paper for a grade in two or more classes. They didn’t understand why they could get a high grade in one class and a low grade in another. They didn’t understand that a paper could be well written but have inaccurate content resulting in two very different grades. Faculty development would increase individual faculty’s awareness of the different purposes in each of their disciplines, something that could then be communicated to students. This—it seems to us—is the heartbeat of such learning community common assignments. The faculty need the opportunity to also develop as communities of learners themselves.

Currently, the seminar demands—goals, objectives, and expectations—vary a lot by discipline and by section. Faculty development could address these by developing a common set of goals and activities (see appended set of goals, objectives, and sample activities). Some students expressed that reflective assignments are not popular. They felt that they should be looking ahead not back. They don’t want to reflect on how they got to college. They are here and want to keep working at staying.
Faculty development also serves a social function, creating an identity for the core and learning communities faculty. Activities such as these bring together those who teach immature learners, i.e., entering students, and provide forums for core faculty, i.e., the faculty who teach core classes. It gives them the venue for sharing best practices, problem solving, and developing curriculum.

2. **Work with academic programs to improve UCCP assessment.** We affirm the importance of this recommendation. Appended is a “best practices” inventory that might be useful in thinking about other items to include. Also appended are overviews of faculty development programming, reports on student academic success, and reports on academic support programming. These documents might be useful as the campus further considers developing a comprehensive overview of programming to enhance these courses and as a platform for the assessment which will result in improving instruction and learning in these classes.

The U.T. System has asked academic component institutions to administer the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) as a tool for assessing the learning outcomes for campuses. Rather than assess individual students, this instrument assesses the campus on a number of measures. While we are not recommending this instrument, it is an option to review.

It is important to assess the core as a whole, not as a collection of independent courses. This accumulated set of learning outcomes can be addressed in a number of ways, including the Professional Ethics capstone course that TAMU-CC currently has in place.

In addition, some groups that we interviewed expressed concerns over specific courses being removed from the core without a proper process in place for either adding or removing courses from the core curriculum. It is unclear where additions or deletions to the core originate, how the process works, and who has final authority for approving these recommendations. For example, if the core is revised, we understand that the public speaking course might be removed despite the anecdotal information that employers consistently say that students need better speaking and other communication skills. It would seem unwise to remove the public speaking course—or other individual courses—from the core without an assessment of the course’s value in students’ overall preparation for the workplace or graduate school.

Because many changes to the core could be driven by the Texas move toward 120 semester-credit-hour degree programs, having an assessment plan in place is important. This should drive the future of the learning communities program and the core curriculum program. To this end, both qualitative and quantitative assessments of the core would be appropriate.

3. **More university support and resources for program assessment.** Our experience has been that it is a complex task to do program assessment. Often the extraction of data
is the more difficult task (one of us just had a six-month delay in a key project in trying to “solve” data extraction issues). The provision of university support for the extraction of data which can then be analyzed by faculty and staff in order to identify areas for program improvement should result in long-term gains for the campus.

For example, an investment in the assessment and evaluation of the following would give TAMU-CC insight into and information about both learning communities and the core curriculum program:

- Student learning outcomes
- Core curriculum revision policies and procedures
- National salary survey of seminar leaders and core curriculum faculty
- Faculty and student perceptions of the core curriculum
  - its elements
  - integration of courses
  - learning outcomes of students
- Student perceptions of required learning communities
  - consistency of structure in learning communities. For example, two-class versus four-class learning communities; the extent to which integrated curriculum is consistent across learning communities; and the value of the academic preparation of the learning community faculty team
  - consistency in goals and requirements in the seminar
- Definition of the first-year college student
  - behavioral/discipline issues with first-time on campus students who enter as sophomores because of dual credit, AP and other accumulated college credit
- Evaluation of the university seminar
- Re-examination of how a revised core fits into major curricula if Texas requires a 120 hour undergraduate degree
- An institutional capacity study to address square footage and resources available for an institution that is growing.

4. Continue development of Professional Ethics as a core curriculum capstone course. We strongly affirm this discipline-based approach to addressing ethics in the core. The Greater Expectations project of the Association of American Colleges and Universities articulated the importance of thinking about general education across the undergraduate curriculum, not separating out the “gened” core and the “major” as if they are somehow in opposition. By having the professional ethics offered both as part of the core and as part of the capstone experience of seniors, the campus will be able to affirm that aspiration. We recommend that such a course count both as a requirement in the core curriculum and in the major. We urge TAMU-CC to consider other contexts where students can take courses that meet requirements both in the core and in their majors. On our campuses, for example, anatomy and physiology simultaneously meet science and
nursing student learning outcomes. Such an approach serves students well and provides a setting for overall core curriculum learning outcomes to be assessed.

5. **Recommend that the FC3 use the information in the program review to consider adding College Algebra to the core curriculum offerings in mathematics.** It is our understanding that the campus has made this addition.

6. **Tutoring services need to be made available for Economics 2301.** We affirm the need to inventory all courses, perhaps in the context of a review of unsuccessful outcomes in the core classes, in terms of academic support. An index might be the D-F-W rate, first articulated in the Supplemental Instructional Program developed at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UM-KC). There is now national and even international use of this measure of student success. The researchers at UM-KC claim that campuses have too often labeled students as “high risk” and that it could be more productive to label environments as “high risk.” They have defined high-risk environments as classes where the DFW rate is over 30%, where fewer than 70% of the students in a class have a successful outcome (defined as an A, B, or C).

7. **Recommend that the Faculty Core Curriculum Committee consider expanding learning communities beyond the first year.** We affirm this recommendation. Attrition is not limited to students in the first year of study, particularly when students seek to enter highly popular majors where space is limited. Learning communities for second-year students can help them make major and career choices, clarifying their goals and remaining on campus. Often, other powerful pedagogies (e.g., undergraduate research, study abroad, internships, service learning) often fulfill these goals. But, learning communities, solidly part of the culture of the campus, have much potential for the campus. In addition to enriching and integrating the curriculum, learning communities provide the natural framework for students to develop social networks that lead to the formation of study groups and campus friendships. On campuses like TAMU-CC, these are important relationships because students often need role models for being successful in college.

National models exist that place students into major cohorts also. This provides the same type of framework for student success as do the first-year learning communities. These cohorts of students are all moving together toward completion of their majors and their degrees.

8. **Edit the wording of the UCCP Goals.** We recommend revisiting the assessment of student learning. Are the objectives of the core the student learning outcomes the faculty hope to see for students?

9. **Consider adding a cultural diversity requirement like the University of North Florida.** We recommend increasing attention to diversity in the curriculum, but we do not recommend a separate stand-alone course. Rather, we recommend means for infusing
diversity across both the curriculum and the co-curriculum, perhaps including more specific attention in both the first-year seminar and in the ethics capstone course.

10. **The component area exemplary objectives are not readily available in the catalog or UCCP webpage nor are the directly alluded to in the core curriculum goals.** We again stress the importance of articulating student learning outcomes across the curriculum, including specific attention in the course, core curriculum, and major levels, and most importantly, at the undergraduate level—in order to increase coherence in the curriculum for students and for the institution. The State of Texas has articulated mandated learning objectives for each component of the core curriculum. These are good starting points for the institution’s exemplary objectives.

11. **Designate the UCCP office suite as a computer lab so there is more money for computers.** We don’t fully understand TAMU-CC’s institutional budgeting constraints but strongly support provision of computer equipment for these faculty and staff so strongly in leadership positions in serving the entering students and supporting their learning. As faculty make increased use of technology and as students are expected to make increased use of information technology for research and for classroom work, the instructors must have full technical support.

12. **Consider future office space for the UCCP.** We did not have the chance to visit the present space. It is our understanding that it is one room. We recommend central and adequate space, very accessible to students and faculty, for the program.

13. **Have mail delivered to the UCCP.** It is our understanding that this has been corrected.

14. **Have all academic advisors attend workshops on advising for the First-Year Learning Communities Program.** We strongly support professional development for advisors. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) is an excellent resource for such training. In addition, the Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience is another excellent resource for training and educational opportunities. Last, visiting and conferring with other institutions is an excellent way to learn ways of advising in very specific environments.

**Additional Suggestions**
Some other strategies that have worked well on our campuses include the following:

- **Joint positions.** Consider consolidating all professional advisors in one advising center but then assign a portion of their work in the degree-granting units or to the first-year seminar. Sharing positions as advisors and seminar instructors give the students ready and regular access to their advisors.
• **Student leadership training.** Because successful undergraduates make excellent role models, using them in the classroom as part of the seminar’s instructional team is very valuable. They are given very specific leadership development, and then placed into the classroom with the seminar instructor. Continuing training occurs throughout the semester. First-time students in the seminar will find it much easier to ask questions of and share problems with a student than with even the most approachable faculty member.

We very much enjoyed our visit to your campus and observing your commitment to excellence in serving students. If we can be of any further assistance, please let us know.