Texas A&M University
Core Curriculum

Initial Request for a Course Addition to the Fall 2014 Core Curriculum

Foundational Component Area: Language, Philosophy and Culture

In the box below, describe how this course meets the Foundational Component Area description for Language, Philosophy and Culture. Courses in this category focus on how ideas, values, beliefs, and other aspects of culture express and affect human experience. Courses involve the exploration of ideas that foster aesthetic and intellectual creation in order to understand the human condition across cultures.

The proposed course must contain all elements of the Foundational Component Area. How does the proposed course specifically address the Foundational Component Area definition above?

Anth 204, Peoples and Cultures of the Ancient World, is a new course being proposed for inclusion in the Language, Philosophy and Culture area of the TAMU Core Curriculum. In this course, students gain an appreciation for the long-time depth of the human experience on Earth, the development of human cultural adaptations, and the rich fabric of human cultural traditions and diversity. Students learn what “Culture” is, using an anthropological perspective; and they learn how Culture evolved, through careful examination of the prehistoric archaeological record. First, the course traces what it means to be “human”, from the beginnings of humanity more than two million years ago to the development of urbanized and hierarchical “civilizations” two thousand years ago. Second, the course reviews the development of the world’s distinctive cultural traditions, covering not just complex societies in Mesoamerica, the Andes Mountains, temperate North America, southern Europe, southwestern Asia, Egypt, India/Pakistan, and China, but also non-urbanized societies in northern North America, southern Africa, Australia, and the Pacific islands. Special attention is placed on tracing the development of technology, subsistence, settlement organization, architecture, social organization, ideology, and worldview in these various cultural settings. Through this cross-cultural experience, students in the course learn to appreciate the diversity of the human condition, learning that “their way” of doing, interacting, and thinking is neither the only way nor the best way.

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Core Objectives

Describe how the proposed course develops the required core objectives below by indicating how each learning objective will be addressed, what specific strategies will be used for each objective and how student learning of each objective will be evaluated.

The proposed course is required to contain each element of the Core Objective.

Critical Thinking (to include creative thinking, innovation, inquiry, and analysis, evaluation and synthesis of information):

Although this is primarily a lecture course, its content is organized to introduce students to questions and issues related to human prehistory. As such, students are forced to grapple with complex questions like “how do we know when humans emerged”, instead of just “when did humans emerge”; or “how and why did humans become farmers”, instead of just “when and where did humans become farmers, and what kinds of animals and plants did they domesticate”. Since these “how” and “why” questions in archaeology typically reflect informed interpretations of evidence, students in the course are repeatedly introduced to alternative theories and perspectives, instead of just observations and facts. This means, then, that through the course students must learn to analyze, evaluate and synthesize new information, as well as to critically evaluate interpretations and theories based on that information.

Students’ critical-thinking skills will be evaluated in three ways. First, written exams have essay questions that require students to defend a thesis by critically evaluating archaeological evidence (e.g., “Neanderthals believed in an afterlife”; “the emergence of the Chinese cultural tradition can be traced to the early Neolithic, 6000 years ago”; “the Neolithic transition to farming always occurred in a context of human sedentism”). Second, students write two critical
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essays—one that considers the role of archaeology and the study of prehistory in human society today, and another that considers whether archaeological monuments should be protected and archaeological artifacts bought and sold. Third, students complete and discuss four archaeological problem-solving exercises, requiring students to interpret prehistoric human behavior, social organization, and interaction with the environment.

Communication (to include effective development, interpretation and expression of ideas through written, oral and visual communication):

In this course, students are challenged to practice all three forms of communication, written, oral, and visual. Each exam requires students to respond with written, argumentative essays that defend a thesis. Likewise, written assignments offer student the opportunity to conduct library research, create an argument, and write an essay again that defends a thesis. Students learn to follow a style guide, properly cite other works, and paraphrase accurately and correctly.

In a large lecture class, providing students with the opportunity to practice oral communication skills is difficult to accomplish; however, in this class it is done by (1) creating an interactive lecture environment in which students are encouraged to ask questions, answer questions, and comment on topics being presented in class; and (2) four times during the semester organizing the class into small, discussion groups in which students address issues related to take-home writing assignments. Obviously, in a class this size it is impossible to evaluate each student’s individual development in oral-communication skills, so that the only way that they can be evaluated is through class attendance, emphasizing days during which small-group discussions are held.

Visual communication skills are developed in this course through lectures. Frequently during lectures and reading assignments, students encounter graphs, charts, and maps summarizing archaeological observations and evidence (e.g., radiocarbon-dating charts, graphs displaying metric differences between wild and domesticated foods, maps disclosing associations of artifacts, animal bones, and architectural features). As a material-based field, the practice of archaeology is a very much visually oriented. Through these experiences, students learn how to interpret such visuals, and on exams they are tested by responding to questions that relate to a graph, chart, or map similar to one discussed in class.

Social Responsibility (to include intercultural competence, knowledge of civic responsibility, and the ability to engage effectively in regional, national, and global communities):

The content and goals of the course, as described at the top of this form, relate specifically to all three of these aspects of social responsibility. First, by exposing students to the long-time depth of the human experience on Earth as well as the rich diversity of deep cultural traditions around the world, students are offered the opportunity to become more interculturally sensitive and knowledgeable of other ways of doing, thinking, and being. Students encounter this aspect of social responsibility on a day-to-day basis in class lectures. Second, through two written assignments on the “Politics of Culture” and “Politics of Collecting”, students encounter the potential social and political power of archaeological evidence and archaeological objects, learning that many human societies use (and have used) archaeology to create a sense of ethnicity and nationalism, or to downplay another society’s claims of lands, resources, and even a past. Students learn that it is their civic responsibility as members of society to determine whether archaeological and historic monuments should be protected, and whether artifacts and objects of cultural patrimony should be possessed by individuals or society. Third, by learning about and appreciating the world’s major cultural traditions, students obviously become effective members of a global community, but they also learn how to engage in the increasingly diverse communities of Texas and the United States. Moreover, by learning about the 10,000+ years of American prehistory, students become more respective of our country’s Native peoples and cultures.

Of course it is difficult to directly evaluate a students’ sense of social responsibility; however, in this class, student performance on objective sections of exams is used as proxies of (1) their knowledge of the world’s varied cultural
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traditions, and (2) their emerging ability to function in a multi-cultural world. Moreover, the content of student essays is used to evaluate their intercultural competence and civic responsibility. On the final exam, students also respond to an ethical question that requires them to draw upon their cumulative experience in the class.

Personal Responsibility (to include the ability to connect choices, actions and consequences to ethical decision-making):

The two writing assignments in this course require students to consider two ethical issues related to archaeology and prehistory. First, they write an essay on the “Politics of Culture”, in which they consider how a modern society (or societies) perceives the deep cultural past—their own and others’, and use archaeology to cement their traditions, further their ideals, or form a sense of ethnicity or nationalism in the modern world. Second, they write an essay on the “Politics of Collecting”, exploring why people collect artifacts and objects of cultural patrimony, sometimes illegally, and why some cultural sites are considered significant and preserved, while others are not. In both of these writing assignments students will apply ethical decision-making when considering how to preserve the past in our post-colonial world, ensuring that not just the dominant culture’s heritage is preserved and protected, but also the non-dominant culture’s. Student learning of personal responsibility and ethical decision-making is accomplished through evaluation of content of these two written essays.

Please be aware that instructors should be prepared to submit samples/examples of student work as part of the future course recertification process.