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.

How does the proposed course specifically address the Foundational Component Area definition above?

Geography 301 describes and explains the geographic structure of the United States. Geographic structure denotes the system of routes, places, and cultural regions that constitute the geography of the United States. The course explains this structure as a complex artifact, constructed over the course of centuries by diverse peoples, and expressive of the changing technologies, economies, and cultural attitudes of these peoples. Emphasis is placed on the ways in which this geographic structure has been affected by cultural evaluations of physical environments, alien peoples, and the meaning of the “good life.” Students are taught how to interpret the political, religious, and cultural meanings that are inscribed in the human landscapes of the country’s several regions, and are encouraged to appreciate the bold and subtle beauties of its natural landscapes. Students who complete this course understand that the patterns they see on a map, and the landscapes they see out the window, are products of an ongoing process of interaction between the many cultures and environments of this vast and varied land.

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.

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

Critical thinking is, essentially, the habit of identifying and questioning assumptions, and of refusing to take anything as simply “given.” It is particularly important in human geography because spatial patterns and built landscapes appear to the untutored eye as natural and necessary aspects of a taken-for-granted reality. Geography 301 explains the constraints nature places on human action; but it also emphasizes the cultural and historical contingencies that have contributed to shaping the United States as we know it. Moreover, it encourages students to identify and question the assumptions that were implicit in the human decisions to develop the country’s regions in the particular ways that they were developed. For example, they learn why the landscape of New England is a distinctively New England landscape.

Student mastery of critical thinking will be assessed by an exercise in which they evaluate three “counterfactual geographies.” This will build on an existing lecture, but will also require to student to creatively synthesize new information and render a critical judgment.

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

Geography 301 employs a large range of communication media. Students are taught how to interpret historic and contemporary maps and photographs, how to understand and appreciate landscape paintings, how to read
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graphs and statistical tables, and how to make use of historical documents and texts. It is doubtful that any class taught in this university makes more extensive and substantive use of such a wide array of visual and verbal media. Unsurprisingly, maps are a medium of particular importance, and students are required both to read and make many different types of map.

Student mastery of visual communication media will be assessed in each of the three examinations, where a substantial section (worth 42 percent of the total) requires the student to interpret and draw maps. Student mastery of verbal and visual media will also be assessed in an exercise in which they interpret and appreciate a landscape painting.

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

This course explains the geographic structure of the United States as the product of human intellect and labor, and makes it clear that, just as our predecessors are responsible for the geography and environments we inhabit, so we will be responsible for the geography and environments inhabited by those who will come after us. It pays due attention to geographic expressions of social segregation and economic and environmental exploitation, but these are explained as part of a larger national story in which the student should feel proud to play his or her part. Our students will go on to serve what they have been taught to love, and while this course does not deal in comforting fairy tales, it is designed to deepen and mature the students' love of country.

Student mastery of social responsibility will be assessed in an exercise that cultivates and tests intercultural competence. Students will be supplied with a first person account of life in a non-Texas region and required to write a brief essay identifying and explaining how life in that region differs from Texas.

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

Personal responsibility grows out of a determination to live a life of quiet dignity. Very few of us will be famous, and few of our noble actions will be noticed, much less remembered; but men and women with a sense of personal responsibility conduct their lives with quiet dignity in spite of this. Few things kindle this determination like reflection on the quiet dignity with which so many other "little people" have lived. Geography 301 doesn't have much to say about famous men and women. It tells a story of nameless, although not entirely faceless, ordinary people who labored in mines and factories, forests and farms, offices and homes. Pictures of their anonymous faces often look out at the students from the projection screen, and although these faces are often dirty and tired, they are also very often quietly dignified. And there are many occasions to remark how many of these "little people" kept their promises, paid their bills, raised their children, and tried in their own small way to leave this land a better one than they found it. Students learn that these are men and women they would do well to emulate, not pity or scorn.

Student mastery of personal responsibility will be assessed in an exercise that requires them to obtain another person's "personal history" and then situate that history in the geographic structures described in the class (i.e. within the context of a culture region, against the backdrop of a regional landscape, as part of a geographic movement). Whenever possible, students will use the personal histories of older family members.

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