

U. of Houston is Planning Big Cuts to Its Core Curriculum. Faculty Aren't Happy.

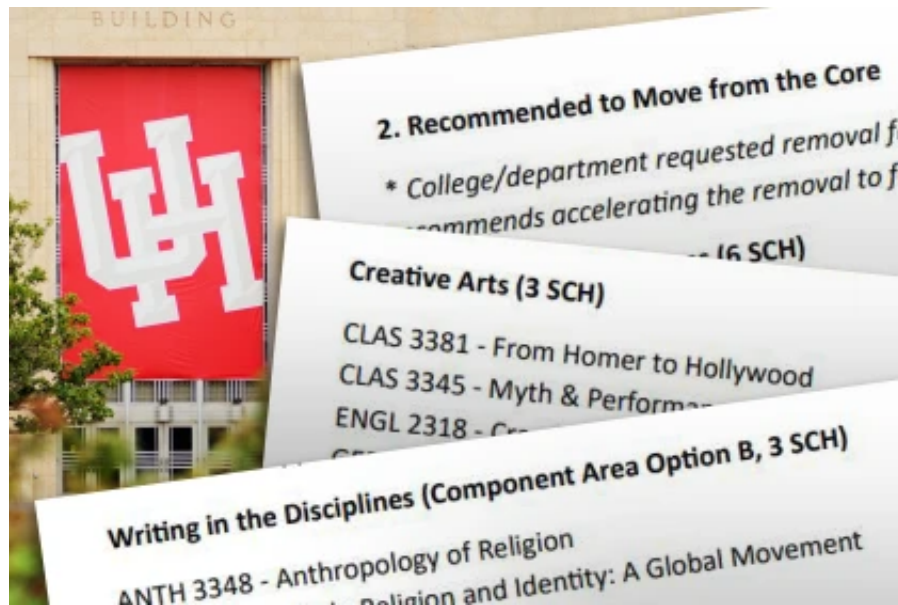


Illustration by The Chronicle; Photo by Getty

The University of Houston could soon shrink its core curriculum by 40 percent to comply with a state law that has seen many Texas universities overhaul their offerings.

Houston's provost convened a working group to review the university's core courses over the summer, according to documents obtained by *The Chronicle*. That group's recommendations, which were shared with the faculty this month, are to be considered by the system's Board of Regents in August. The recommendations cap a curriculum-review process at Houston that has been underway since the fall. But the latest installment of that work has been done in secret, faculty critics say, raising "serious concerns" about violating shared-governance principles and whether the university's interpretation of state law is overly expansive. In a Monday [letter](#), the

campus chapter of the American Association of University Professors asked administrators to halt the review process.

A campus spokesperson said in an email to *The Chronicle* that the group's recommendations "are just one step in a broader review process and do not represent final decisions." A feedback form is open to faculty members until Tuesday, and campus leaders will review the recommendations before bringing them to the university system's Board of Regents in August. The spokesperson did not respond specifically to the AAUP letter or to a list of questions from *The Chronicle*.

The 101 courses that are slated to be removed from the core cover a wide range of topics and disciplines. They include "Intro to Global Climate Change," "Black Liberation Theology," "American Literature to 1865," "Introduction to Women's Studies," "Technology Entrepreneurship," and "Applied Technical Statistics," among others.

Cut Off From The Process

The nine members of the "Core Curriculum Working Group" held five "extended working sessions" during which they reviewed each course's description and syllabus for compliance with Texas' Senate Bill 37. Passed last year, the law gives Texas public colleges' boards of regents significant jurisdiction over general-education curricula while stripping faculty senates of decision-making power. Houston's core curriculum consists of 42 credit hours; that set of courses, the [law](#) states, must be "foundational and fundamental to a sound postsecondary education," "necessary to prepare students for civic and professional life," "equip students for participation in the workforce and the betterment of society," and "ensure a breadth of knowledge consistent with applicable accreditation standards." Those criteria are reflected in a "review framework" that the Houston committee

used to make its decisions; in early July, the provost, Diane Z. Chase, shared that framework and the group's recommendations with the full faculty.

The AAUP letter accuses the university of "interpreting SB 37 expansively in ways that go well beyond what the statute's text requires." While the working group's framework requires each course to meet all four of the law's criteria to remain in the core, the AAUP says the law requires only that the core curriculum as a whole must do so.

The review process was also shrouded in secrecy, several faculty members told *The Chronicle*: Chase selected the group's members and instructed them not to speak to their colleagues or the media about the work. Instructors of the courses in question were not asked for their input, nor were department chairs, several of whom learned from Chase's July message that their courses were recommended for removal. (*The Chronicle* contacted each of the group's members; those who responded declined to speak on the record.)

"As chairs, we have been completely shut off from the process," said Alessandro Carrera, chair of the department of modern and classical languages. The group recommended 23 courses in Carrera's department be removed from the core, a number he said would pose a significant threat to the department's success when coupled with major restructuring it's undergone in recent years.

"It's important for us that these courses are considered the core curriculum, because otherwise many of them cannot make it," Carrera said. "It's as simple as that." If they were removed from the core, enrollment in those courses, he and others said, would nosedive, making them difficult to continue offering. Being on the committee's list "threatens those courses with effective extinction," said Daniel Morales, the AAUP chapter president,

who added that he was speaking in his personal capacity and not for the university.

That's an especially important consideration at an institution like Houston, whose students often face financial pressure to "be very practical in their studies" and may not take many courses that aren't required to graduate. (According to federal data, 45 percent of Houston students received Pell grants; the university says a similar proportion are first-generation.) "The core," Morales said, "kind of gave them permission to explore," which he fears will be lost.

Meanwhile, Morales said, shrinking the core would likely leave the 154 courses slated to remain "significantly over-enrolled," diminishing students' quality of education.

Course Classifications

The working group's report also overstates the role departments had in the process, the AAUP letter says. Of the courses the group recommended for removal, 20 percent had already been slated by their college or department for the same fate. But, the chapter says, department chairs' hands may have been forced in the earlier round of cuts.

In March, department chairs were told the university would no longer consider courses classified at the 3000 level — upper-division offerings typically taken by juniors and seniors — part of the core. The AAUP letter speculates that decision was made "on the theory that 3000-level courses cannot be foundational and fundamental," referring to the first of SB 37's criteria for core courses.

"My understanding is that chairs were presented with a bright-line choice: You either move a course out of the 3000 level, or it gets cut from the core,"

Morales said. "Yes, there was a choice to move the courses, but that choice was dictated by an administrative decision that has no basis, that I can tell, in SB 37 itself."

Several faculty members also took issue with the recommended removal of introductory courses in women's and LGBT studies. Morales said that the AAUP chapter's members, "given the broader climate in Texas, have significant concerns that the cuts to those courses were ideologically motivated," pointing to course-review processes at [Texas Tech](#) and [Texas A&M Universities](#) that have drawn criticism for being censorious.

Carrera, of the department of modern and classical languages, said that Houston, so far, "has not felt the political pressure as much" as other Texas institutions, several of which have already cut courses and programs in women's and gender studies. "We're lucky so far that we still have those courses," he said. "So maybe the university is trying to walk a very fine line here."