The ability of the human mind to acquire new knowledge has always fascinated me. From the days of early childhood to the last minute of life humans are capable of learning new material, gaining experience, and shaping their behavior accordingly. Even though this may not be true for some individuals with severe brain damage either due to physical trauma, inborn retardation, or aging, still for the vast majority of people those abilities remain.

Recent studies in human cognition have supported the idea that expertise, extraordinary mnemonic abilities, and even analytic logical reasoning are the results of a continuous training. For example, chess grand masters have been shown to keep in mind over fifty thousand different chess patterns and to be able to recognize them quickly, hence winning the game by simply rearranging the patterns that they recall (Simon & Gilmartin, 1973). Some researchers even argue that there is no such concept as talent, but rather steady and hard work, not particular skills, is the main factor in the exceptional abilities people show.

Interestingly, I came to a similar conclusion in my case, too. By electing to take CORE and working on my homework, doing all the readings, reflecting on extra-curricular activities, participating in discussions, and being prepared overall, I managed to improve my verbal skills. Just like chess players, I started basically by memorizing new words and word combinations, hence working on my basic vocabulary expansion. Such practice increased my ability to build up stronger logical arguments because of the use of more precise word combinations and patterns. Eventually I became so comfortable with words I once had to memorize that they basically
became a natural part of my everyday vocabulary. Core also allowed me to practice my ability to present a well-structured, logical argument.

Overall, I find those improvements amusing and amazing at the same time. It is amusing, because English is my second language and I have been mastering it for more than two years, yet evident progress became clear only after I started my classes at Valpo. Concurrently, it is amazing how much more work I have to do, which I’m clearly capable of doing, to further master my abilities.

Looking back at my first paper *A Birth of New Life*, which was written on the creation issue, I find it a little childish and awkward in terms of grammar, sentence structure, and conclusiveness. That was clearly a starting point, which reflected a lot of my original thoughts and rather poor vocabulary. Fortunately, a very surprising positive feedback from my peer group and instructor provided me with optimism regarding my writing abilities. Even though the style of *A Birth of New Life* remained very shy and cautious, the overall positively charged experience from writing it gave me a huge incentive and ways for improvement. That is why I included *A Birth of New Life* in my portfolio as a first topic discussed.

The next paper, called *The Power of Need to Belong* was a real step up. There I found a way to combine the assorted knowledge I acquired at Valparaiso University. It was probably the easiest and the second-most interesting paper for me to write. By that time I was quite comfortable with the use of certain vocabulary that was not available for me in the first paper. Also, I was capable of applying the facts and data received in my social psychology class to enrich the subject and support my conclusions. Thus, *The Power of Need to Belong* has been included in the recent portfolio as an example of an across-subject application of newly gained knowledge and experience.
Finally, *A Secular Government that Trusts in God* included here is the apogee and, at the same time, clear reflection of what I gained from the CORE class through the semester. A combination of relatively enhanced vocabulary, extended research work, and knowledge gained from class discussions led to the point where I felt comfortable enough to engage into discussion of a real issue that is substantial to me. *A Secular Government that Trusts in God* helped me identify the skills that needed further improvement, such as knowledge of history, political science, and of course, writing. At the same time, it drew a clear picture of what I have achieved from taking the CORE. I think *A Secular Government that Trusts in God* is a good conclusion for the semester.

Finishing my first semester in Valparaiso University, I can say that I’m satisfied with both the job done and the experience gained from the education process. Joining CORE class has not only achieved my goals of substantially improving my verbal skills and expanding my knowledge on important topics—such as creation, coming of age, and citizenship—but also provided an unforgettable experience of camaraderie, real-life discussions, and better understanding of myself. Clearly, I did not become an exceptional writer or an extremely good speaker in just a few months, for expertise is defined as having been practicing for more than ten years, yet the accomplishments I made certainly support the notion of a neverending knowledge acquisition continuum in humans.