The Mentor

The Importance of Advising Undergraduates in the Humanities

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Krystie L. Herndon, Indiana University Bloomington

Last semester, a colleague who also advises undergraduate students confided in me that one of her students arrived for an appointment in distress. The student, a third-year humanities major, had been informed by an undergraduate adviser in a professional program that her liberal arts major was, essentially, useless. The student indicated to my colleague that, though she connected strongly to her major on an emotional and intellectual level, she felt she had no ammunition to refute the professional-program adviser’s statement. I fumed indignantly: What kind of adviser would denigrate a young person’s chosen program of study? Not a well-trained adviser, in my opinion. I then contemplated my own rebuttal to the claim that a liberal arts education is impractical. Despite the naysayers, from my own reflection as well as from the ruminations of scholars and the recommendations of students, I consider my role as an academic adviser in the humanities as vital in helping undergraduate students know themselves, understand their neighbors, and connect their knowledge and understanding of people to the improvement of local and global communities. Without thoughtful, purposeful, and egalitarian community action, our society devolves into misunderstanding, with fear in the minds of the “haves” and hopelessness in the hearts of the “have-nots.”

Some people may assume that the Internet age—with world news a mouse click away—renders cross-cultural learning naturally contagious and culture-studies courses redundant. Sentiments encapsulated in Governor Reagan’s 1967 speech about liberal education constituting “intellectual luxuries” not worth teaching (as cited in Berrett, 2015, ¶ 3) engender public opinion that college students eventually learn how to get along with others just from proximity. However, I contend that at predominantly White institutions such as my own, too few visible ‘others’ exist on campus to increase cultural awareness in the majority of students (Indiana University, 2013). College and university educators are, therefore, responsible for providing intentional lessons in world philosophies and cultures to undergraduate students to prepare them for the world outside campus boundaries.

As a student and purveyor of higher education and the humanities, I grow ever more aware of the benefit of self-reflection for daily health and productiveness. Studying world literature as an undergraduate inculcated within me a greater facility for imagining myself in other people’s stories. Measuring my own values and experiences against the narratives of humanity is an important skill in my profession. Fellow advisers Rosenfeld, Shakespeare, and Imbriale (2014) expressed the same idea: “… to a significant degree our response to the debate about the future shape and purpose of higher education is deeply autobiographical” (¶ 7). Smith (2013) recommends reflection as a healthy habit cultivated in
undergraduate days; and as practiced in the study of literature, or history, or philosophy, reflection helps develop a person “who possesses an inner integration, poise, and firmness” (Harvard University, 1945, p. 74). I tout majoring in the humanities, because I believe these disciplines help instill the kinds of qualities, as mentioned by Kyllo (2014), that students would be proud to possess.

The most popular argument against majoring in the humanities, often espoused by parents, declares “vocational/technical/professional program[s]” (Jaschik, 2013, ¶18), or even no higher education at all, to more likely lead to good jobs than would the liberal arts. However, Smith (2013) averred a college education encompasses other values besides economic, and advisers in the humanities must “become more fluent in the language of these alternate values” (¶ 3). True, general education courses can introduce students to truth, beauty, social relevance, and historical context. Nevertheless, I believe a major in the humanities provides the depth of understanding needed to conceive of and to apply solutions to societal problems large and small. When I invite students to consider adding folklore and ethnomusicology or linguistics to their degree programs, I remind them many occupations require working with people, and learning about other people’s backgrounds, traditions, nomenclatures, and cultures provides for more effective communication in the workplace. An alumna wrote me recently of using her folklore and ethnomusicology knowledge in the business world:

[T]he mindset you develop by studying this field has helped me ... to remember that people come from different cultures and backgrounds that influence their behaviors and processes. (Megan Sue, personal communication, January 8, 2015)

In advising students in the humanities, I emphasize the merits of learning about people in order to work efficiently in many milieus: education, entertainment, environmental and cultural conservation, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, social services, and entrepreneurial enterprises of all types. As a matter of fact, I have found my alumni on the professional online network LinkedIn, gainfully employed in all of these areas.

As academic advisers, one of our chief duties is to help our students connect the knowledge and skills they acquire to the needs and opportunities of society, and I believe the humanities are uniquely suited to prepare students to be sagacious and productive citizens. Smith (2013) echoed Harvard University (1945) in valuing a liberal arts education to enable students to critique their own culture as a way to improve that culture. Two years beyond college graduation, my folklore and ethnomusicology alumna articulated the worth of her humanities education in corporate America:

I’m not just well-versed in my subject matter from studying one topic in school; I’m also perceptive of people around me. I think this is becoming a more critical skill to have as the corporate world becomes more global and companies aren’t looking for just subject-matter experts—they’re looking for well-rounded leaders.” (Megan Sue, personal communication, January 8, 2015)

As Lowenstein (2000) underscored the role of academic advisers in helping students make logical connections across their curricular and co-curricular choices, he cited this role as critical to the success of
a liberal arts education. I value my capacity as an undergraduate academic adviser in the humanities as a catalyst for connecting young people to their core values, to their cohorts and clients, and to an increasingly complex global culture.

References


