

Make Room for Socrates

A university education should be more than a preparation for a career.

By Don Morgenson

We who are toiling in post-secondary education and will shortly face a double-cohort student population desperately need parents' help.

Our responsibilities as professors continue to be as they traditionally have been: enthusiastically developing well-crafted lectures, showing real concern for the lives of our students, and preparing careful critical evaluations of student efforts.

But parents are not without some responsibility. Your daughters and sons keep telling me that you want them to have a careeristic orientation to their education.

Many times, students will confide that they might prefer a broader, more general approach to their education, selection of courses, etc., but they have to deal with "pressures from my mom and dad to take courses which may lead efficiently to a career."

From what they share with me, you parents have a narrow, utilitarianism focus on market-related concerns. Such a focus pervades provincial and federal government education policies as well.

And so your sons and daughters are scrambling to get jobs, which they think require only training, not education.

Your sons and daughters ask me about the utility of a course in comparative religion, the fine arts, history of music, or philosophy. And, if the only goal or dominant goal of education is vocational, such courses may well be outside their educational objectives.

But you and I both know that an education must be more than a constellation of career-oriented courses, because life is infinitely more than what one practises. Granted one must earn a living but, more importantly, one must also earn a good life, and a genuinely-liberal education is the most useful grounding for any career or practical goal.

Students who seek challenges, who love to learn, who enjoy intellectually-stimulating environments, who are reflective and take responsibility for themselves and their communities and see themselves in larger social context of history and broad cultural trends do the following.

Choose courses in which students are required to write, write, and write some more

The involved student chooses courses in which papers are required. Writing papers involves more work, but the better students feel that it systematically improves their grades.

Take the time to meet faculty members

At the end of a four-year degree, the better students know several professors, and these professors know these students — know them well enough to write letters of reference, give them advice on graduate schools, etc.

Study another language

The best students tell me that language courses are the "best-kept secret on campus." The study of language is thought to combine all the elements leading to more learning and greater intellectual engagement.

Get involved in non-academic activities

What goes on outside of class is just as important, and may even turn out to be more important than formal class experiences. Students who get involved in volunteer activities are not only better students but, in my experience, more committed students.

Take an eclectic mix of courses

Students who are doing better treat their early university years like shopping excursions, taking art, music, and philosophy courses, and they report being more engaged and happier with their major area of concentration.

- If our hope is to identify the central questions of life and know how to respond thoughtfully to the many challenges these questions present;
- If we hope to identify the best in literature, art, and music;
- If we hope to become active members of the human family with a sense of perspective that comes from a knowledge of the struggles of the many who preceded us;
- If we want to avoid the insensitivity that allows us to treat each other as objects;

then we must become friends of Socrates, Michelangelo, the Brontës, Virginia Woolf, Beethoven, and Hannah Arendt.

The art and writings of these people cannot give your sons and daughters instant recipes for the "good life," but at least your children won't have to rediscover gravity or reinvent language.

Association with the great minds and spirits of the present time and past ages will free the spirits of your sons and daughters so they can search for new ideas that point to greater and greater possibilities.

Together, we can envision a university that promotes the exchange of ideas and develops an appreciation of our common humanity. It can usher in moments of enlightenment which can be intoxicating for your daughters and sons.

Together, parents and committed faculty members must help them reclaim from those early years that revelation of wonders which now takes the form of the mature engagement of minds.

Together, we can do it.

(Adapted with permission from The Record, Jan. 6, 2003. Dr. Morgenson is a professor emeritus in psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University.)