Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WCU Liberal Studies and Advising: Fixing the Flawed System

I am a senior and have attended WCU for the duration of my college years. I am scheduled to graduate in May, on time, which is something of a miracle these days. Even though I won’t be barred from graduating on time by advisor error, I feel cheated. Here are the flaws I see in our Liberal Studies and Advising systems:

1. Liberal Studies, as currently dictated, is a waste of students’ time. Liberal Studies was supposed to be a golden opportunity for me to become a more well-rounded college student. Instead, it has caused me almost nothing but stress. It was very difficult to figure out what exactly the requirements were for me and which catalog I should follow to make certain courses count when they didn’t fulfill the requirements I originally planned. Granted, perhaps six of the 42 hours I took for Liberal Studies (two classes of the fourteen) were well-spent. I had two interesting classes that I otherwise might not have taken. That doesn’t make the overall program feel worthwhile.

You can’t convince me, either, that the Liberal Studies program is supposed to help students figure out what they want to major in, which is something a professor once told me. I didn’t have that kind of time. If you don’t get careful advising and don’t bring hours in, you can’t really afford to change majors or be too indecisive. Most college kids have no idea what they want to major in or are still uncertain when they are forced to decide. If we had a more flexible system, students could explore what they wanted without being forced to take classes they won’t like or do well in. I know there are other English classes I wish I had had the time to take, but instead I suffered through Grassroots of Democracy and the like. Did I retain anything useful from the classes I didn’t like? No. Nearly half my time (and money) at WCU was spent on classes I didn’t find useful. That’s a big investment for a very small return!

The fix is simple: Make Liberal Studies much more flexible and publish ONE comprehensive guide for it, as Dr. Herzog suggested. No more of this “What year’s catalog are you using for your major? What about your minor?” And be more flexible in letting students take different courses if their interests lie in different areas than the ones listed. Students will be happier and less stressed as a result, and they will probably perform better as well.

2. Students need excellent advising and aren’t getting it. Sometimes I couldn’t get up with my advisor when I needed his advice. He was usually helpful when I found him, but I wish the contact had been more frequent and more in-depth. I added a second advisor (one in my minor) because my major advisor knew nothing about those requirements, and I needed someone very reliable who would consistently try to get me proper information—which can be amazingly hard to find. Due to the rigidity of programs and lack of adequate advising, two of my friends are looking at an extra semester. Ouch! Others I know, also seniors, didn’t even know the names of their advisors! These indicators should be a red flag for all of us.
If you were my advisor and I were a first-semester freshman, I would ask first of all that you try to understand how important this relationship will be for me in the coming years. I will come to you for help when I have no idea what I need to do to meet the requirements for Liberal Studies, my major, or my minor. I will place my trust in you to get me out of here on time. You are the only person who can help me, at least that I know of. I can’t be just a number or a name to you—I could have found that at Chapel Hill. I came to Western because I can get one-on-one time with you. I want that, and I need it.

Since this relationship is important to both of us, why not get adequate training? Make it mandatory for faculty if people don’t show up. You cannot afford to have a sloppy advising system, and I can’t afford for you to, either. I try to follow the guidelines I know of, but my advisor is my safety net. I don’t think I can do this by myself, and I shouldn’t have to.

In addition to just helping me figure out what courses I need to take, I will come to my advisor for bigger questions. Am I in the right major? If you don’t know anything about me, how can you help me through this? Please make an effort to see me as an individual with my own set of talents and weaknesses. Even twenty minutes per semester is enough.

Don’t give up face time with me. If you have too many advisees, seek another faculty member who has fewer students to meet with. See if your colleagues will help ease your burden so that each student gets the help he or she needs. Don’t shortchange new majors or programs. If we need to hire more faculty, let’s bring it up to someone who can make that happen. Advisors are trying—they could use some good help, too!

3. That degree audit has to go! The degree audit at WCU is one of the most confusing “helps” a student or advisor can dig up. It always seems to be wrong, doesn’t credit classes that DO fit the requirements you took them for, and is probably a factor in early hypertension among students. I almost had a heart attack when I looked at my audit before going to talk with my department head this semester. I was sure the courses listed as “work not applicable to this program” were indeed very pertinent! I chose them off one of those annoying little check sheets that seem to change every week. How could the classes not count?

After two anxious appointments with my already overworked department head, the classes counted as they were intended to, and I was cleared for on-time graduation. It took over an hour and a few different catalogs to figure it out, and I remember thinking “Why couldn’t I just look at the degree audit and know this already?”

If we had a more useful program for tracking student developments, my department head would not have had to spend so much time filling in the blanks by course and grade on my final audit. We could have just hit “Print” and tucked the pages into my forwarded file. Wouldn’t it be nice if we had a more accurate program? It would solve many problems, and it has to be possible. I don’t have to be a CS major to tell you that programs far more complex than a competent degree requirement-tracking program exist today. Why don’t we get or make a program that actually works for us?

I agree with Dr. Herzog’s recommendations. Why isn’t there a panel of faculty and students already at work on how to implement these solutions? We’ve known about these shortcomings for a while now. Let’s get started on the solution phase before another student slips through the cracks of WCU’s faulty advising system.

Mel Robbins, WCU senior
Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "WCU Liberal Studies and Advising: Fixing the Flawed System," by Mel Robbins, 2/1/05

Each student is expected to know the information in the catalog and to verify that qualitative and quantitative requirements for a particular class rank and for proper progress toward graduation are being met. I did not construct that sentence. It is from our catalog. It is not a license for me to shirk my responsibilities as an advisor. Pointing out that sentence to my advisees is my responsibility, perhaps my most important one. A good advisor helps advisees become more active, more independent, more in charge of their own educations. I am sure we have some dull liberal studies courses and more than a few that are not “useful” (indeed, a good advisor tries to convince advisees that a major purpose of liberal studies is to show the student that usefulness is not the key metric for judging anything). However, I know enough about our course offerings and faculty to ensure my advisees that there are many, many more than 42 hours of enlightening, stimulating courses here. Their job is to talk with peers and other faculty to find out about the very best offerings. Yet when I tell my advisees to take course X because it is wonderful or to take anything taught by Professor Y because it will be a great experience, too often I hear in reply “I can’t take anything before 11,” “I only come to campus on Tuesdays and Thursdays,” or “I hear that course is a lot of work.” Yes, the degree audit is the work of the devil, some advisors do need to learn how to fill out a waiver form, the requirements should be presented more clearly. No, it is not appropriate for an advisor to be a safety net. And no, the liberal studies program is not too inflexible.

Bruce Henderson, Psychology

The student has a VALID argument, but a VALID argument only becomes a strong and sound argument if its premises are true. If the student’s premises are true, then clearly we all need to streamline the Liberal Studies Program. If the premises are false we get to reject the claim(s). Now, since we are the Liberal Studies Program and not the Conservative Studies Program, and since many of us in this program are, in fact, left of center, let us proceed with due diligence and caution lest we be correctly and justifiably labeled as “flip-flopplers.”

Thomas Hughes, English

Hal Herzog is to be commended for saying much of what needed to be said about Western's dysfunctional advising. However, particularly with regard to the Liberal Studies curriculum, perhaps in an effort to be evenhanded, he has not nearly gone far enough. It is abundantly true that Western has arbitrarily and unthinkingly levied a tremendous burden on the faculty in the form of the ten thousand commandments of the Liberal Studies program, while systematically denying us access to the tools we need to conscientiously advise our students.

At the risk of appearing cynical, it would almost appear that the administration's baseline assumption was that, based on past experience, the faculty could not reasonably be trusted to offer conscientious advising, so there would be no point in giving us access to the necessary tools in the form, for example, of accurate online degree audits. Furthermore, in addition to being unnecessarily complicated, and in ways seemingly unrelated to educational requirements, the Liberal Studies
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program periodically metastasizes, each time becoming more convoluted and less educationally benign. The myriad requirements were poorly appreciated by the faculty to begin with, as they were poorly justified, and they randomly increase in complexity without warning, as their already dubious educational validity nearly always diminishes. Clearly curricular reform is a pressing need.

However, the real problem with Liberal Studies is less a function of complexity or discontinuity, however damning those two faults may be, but that the Liberal Studies curriculum utterly fails to guarantee our students the meaningful education they need and to which they are morally entitled. An effective Liberal Studies program would provide every student a meaningful, college-level education, regardless of their choice of major. Again, at the risk of seeming cynical, at Western it appears as if the Liberal Studies curriculum was designed primarily to guarantee resources to politically favored departments. What makes matters worse is that in implementing this jerry-rigged Rube Goldberg structure, complete with the Kafkaesque and ever-expanding phalanx of senseless rules and the university's Orwellian attitude toward blind enforcement of them, Western seems to have lost sight of the fact that we're actively preventing our students receiving a meaningful education.

If anyone is getting a meaningful education at Western, it's due to that student's independent reading, rather than the combination of Liberal Studies classes they chose within the restrictive straitjacket imposed by our curriculum. This situation is an unmitigated disgrace and a deep embarrassment, and if we don't fix it fast, we'll all deserve the consequences in terms of the reduced enrollment and legislative interference which are likely to follow. Regrettfully, the consequences this situation has already had in making Western degrees meaningless, to our undying shame, is something we can't undo, but can at best remedy for the future.

Anonymous