



# Advising and the Liberal Arts: It Takes a College

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**A**t the College of the Holy Cross, as at many other schools, all students are advised by full-time members of the faculty. This is as it should be. Good advising is about what good faculty do best—engaging students in the life of the mind, supporting their intellectual development and raising questions that help them think critically and reflectively. It is about ensuring that they meet requirements, but also about enlightening them to the ways that a liberal education can be liberating. But advising at Holy Cross is not the purview of the faculty alone. This too is how it should be.

Students are assigned a faculty adviser when they enter the college and they remain with that adviser until the spring of their second year. Most of our students come to college without knowing what major they would like to pursue, or they enroll in a major that they eventually change. Thus in their first three semesters, this adviser is assisting them as they explore the breadth of the curriculum, complete distribution requirements and identify their major area of study. As we enter the enrollment period for the fall of their third year, students have identified a major and will be preparing to pursue advanced work in this area. At this point, they will be assigned a faculty adviser in their major area of study who can help them navigate this curriculum and serve as a resource as they imagine life after college.

## ADVISING: MONITORING AND MENTORING

There are two primary dimensions to advising at Holy Cross. The first is monitoring. Faculty advisers monitor the academic progress of their students toward successful degree completion. Are they completing their common requirements? Have they identified a major? Will they complete all of their requirements in four years? Are they struggling in their courses? Would they benefit from a workshop on study skills or time management? Have they used the writer's workshop to get help on writing or the calculus workshop to get assistance for their mathematics

course? Generally this monitoring is done during the mandatory advising meeting that takes place each semester. In preparation for this meeting, advisers review transcripts online. Our automated degree audit gives advisers and students information about which requirements have been completed and which are outstanding. The college's common requirements are specified in terms of areas of study, or modes of inquiry, not specific courses. The discussion of which courses students should take often leads to a conversation about areas of student interest and their potential majors. This discussion also presents an opportunity for conversation about why it is important for students to engage in coursework in the arts and the sciences, in literature, philosophy, and language in order to be liberally educated. Faculty complete midsemester reports on students in their classes which are sent to advisers to flag students who are having trouble and need particular attention. Advisers then meet with these students to discuss strategies, to suggest options, to make referrals, to identify resources—or just to listen to the student's frustration. All of these interactions send the message to the student that academic progress is not just about checking off the correct boxes. It is about personal and intellectual development, and we can grow as much from our struggles and failures as we do from our successes.

It is these moments that move advisers from monitoring to mentoring, the second dimension of advising. Mentoring our advisees—that is, connecting them more fully to the liberal arts program—seems to be more challenging each year. Our students have been admitted to this school by completing all requirements, participating in all appropriate cocurricular experiences and building a set of credentials. They have been told what to do and they have done it well. The challenge is to move them beyond that. What do you want to explore here? Who do you want to become? What do you want to say about yourself as a student? How will you identify your intellectual passions? What about other opportunities—study abroad, internships, interdisciplinary



study—and how they might contribute to your intellectual journey? These are the opportunities to imagine the ways in which a liberal arts education is liberating. This is hard work—but it is work that faculty are well suited to. They are committed to a liberal arts education, passionate about intellectual pursuits and dedicated to working closely with individual students.

### IT TAKES A COLLEGE TO ADVISE A STUDENT

Pursuing advising as monitoring and mentoring is time consuming. It requires the time to ask questions and, more important, to listen to the answers. It requires the time to build relationships of trust with our students. It cannot be done by individual faculty working in isolation.

Students will have more than one faculty adviser in the four years they spend at Holy Cross. They will be advised about particular programs by a variety of program directors. They will be encouraged to develop habits of reflection by teachers, chaplains, and student affairs professionals. They will be counseled on postgraduate opportunities by graduate study advisers, career counselors, and even alumni. They will have a network of formal and informal advisers.

The center of the advising network at Holy Cross is the class dean, a unique aspect of the college's advising structure. While many schools have a person identified as the first-year, second-year, third-year, or senior dean, at Holy Cross a dean is appointed to each class at the time of orientation and remains with the class until graduation. Over the course of four years, the class dean serves as the point of contact for students in this class. When a faculty member or adviser is concerned about a student, they will notify the class dean. When a student needs advice beyond what they might receive from their faculty adviser, they will

see the class dean. When the fellowships adviser wants to know who should be recruited to apply, he will contact the class dean. If a student is doing well, the class dean will send a congratulatory note encouraging the student to think about a variety of opportunities—fellowships, internships, research positions. If a student is struggling, the class dean will meet with them to talk about the issues. Often students' academic difficulties in a single class are part of a larger problem. The class dean can piece together the information received from faculty and administrators, and from the student her or himself, to identify resources—such as the counseling center, the academic resources center, or the chaplains' office—that would best serve the student's needs.

Because the class dean works with students from the beginning of their Holy Cross experience to the end, he or she has the opportunity to build the necessary relationship of trust with the students and the privilege of observing and participating in the intellectual and personal development of the student over her or his four-year undergraduate career.

There are also programmatic ways that the class deans support the advising system at the college. There are a number of opportunities for the class dean to

of advising. Others are for more seasoned veterans, focusing on developmental advising or updating faculty on issues facing our students today. The point is that in working with students and faculty, the class deans are working to create a culture of advising, one that requires the participation of all in building and sustaining advising relationships.

### ADVISING FIRST- THROUGH SENIOR-YEAR STUDENTS

Our students require different kinds of advising support for each of their four years at Holy Cross and the class deans are constants in this progression. They have a unique view of the rhythm of our students' undergraduate career, and they can tailor their efforts to support students and advisers to meet the different needs of each year. The first year at college is marked by urgency—fitting everything in and fitting in. First-year students are urgent about completing requirements, anxious about making friends, worried about making everything count and frantic about being able to participate in every possible curricular and cocurricular option. For the class deans and for advisers this means explaining that choosing a major is not choosing a career; that there are more careers than doctor,

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address the class, in speeches and in writing, as well as opportunities for monitoring and mentoring students to better prepare them to be full participants in the advising relationships they will have with faculty. The class deans will offer workshops on advising for faculty each year. Some of the workshops are for new faculty, focusing on the “nuts and bolts”

lawyer, business person, and teacher; and that focus in their curriculum and cocurriculum must shift from quantity to quality. It also means directing students to the variety of offices on campus that are providing workshops and support services—on time management and study skills, or dealing with homesickness and loneliness or building reflective habits.



The second year, on the other hand, is marked more by a certain vagueness or lack of clarity, the so-called *sophomore slump*. They have made it through the transition to college, some more successfully than others, and their theme song appears to be *Is That All There Is?*

In response to this, Holy Cross, with funding from the Lilly Endowment, instituted a program in 2004 called Second-Year Opportunities (2YO). Designed to support advisers as they work with our second-year students, 2YO provides a framework for faculty and administrators to reach out to students at the beginning of their second year and encourage them to explore the rich array of academic opportunities available at the college. Advisers welcome these students back before classes start and meet with them to reflect upon what they have learned about themselves in their first year—the good and the bad—and how they can best use their next three years. They can take the time to talk about the big picture: Where are you now? Where do you want to go? How will you get there? The advising meetings are followed by an Academic Extravaganza, where department representatives, program directors, and advisers staff tables to answer questions about majors and minors, interdisciplinary opportunities, study abroad, internships, career services, graduate programs, etc. The focus is on helping students to create and take ownership of their educational experience.

By their third year, students are immersed in a major, and most have found an academic home in their major department. Many have developed close mentoring relationships with more than one faculty member, and they will seek the advice of several members of their department. They often need encouragement to explore possibilities they may not have imagined yet. They also should be reminded to take advantage of

the wide variety of opportunities at the college for developing leadership skills. Advisers once again can ask the same questions: Where are you now? Where do you want to go? How will you get there?

The student's fourth year is often a return to urgency. Most will be leaving an academic environment for the first time in their lives and they are anxious about the transition. Some will try to avoid the question completely; others will become obsessed with the question. This is the time when a number of different offices

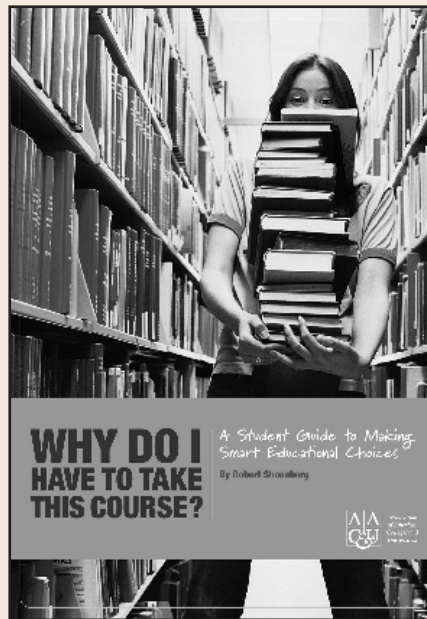
and programs step in to support advising, including the fellowships office and the career center. But the senior year also a time when student life professionals and chaplains work with our students to help them reflect on who they have become and what this transition to a new life can mean for them.

At Holy Cross we make a commitment to the education of the whole student. We also commit to the advising of the whole student—and fulfilling this promise takes dedication and diligence from all of us. ■

## Why Do I Have to Take This Course?

*A Student Guide to Making Smart Educational Choices*

By Robert Shoenberg



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36 pp/ISBN: 0-9763576-5-8

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