Liberal Arts Degree Advising

We have all heard the news reports and political debates over the last decade focused on the portion of college graduates who are unemployed or under employed. At the 2014 Region VII NACADA conference, Shane Barker and Ana Ayala took head-on parents’ fears that they’ll never get Jr out of the basement if he follows his passion of achieving a liberal arts degree.

Jumping off from cross-industry employer-identified most important skills for prospective employees, the presenters asserted that “any student can achieve a career, but a ‘BA career’ starts with a liberal arts degree.” The following employer-desired skills are key development goals of liberal arts degrees:

- Communication skills
- Critical thinking
- Creative problem solving

Barker and Ayala invited advisors to think outside the box when meeting with students and their parents regarding the pros and cons of liberal arts majors, asserting that major does not equal career (it is not true that the only suitable job for a history major is to teach American history to high school students), and highlighting specific, truly transferable skills liberal arts graduates take away from their undergraduate educational experience.

The ability to read with comprehension, employ sound reasoning, and explore possibilities contribute to the liberal artist’s superior capacity for understanding complex information and communicating it effectively as well as her development of a life-long intellectual curiosity that consistently pushes for innovation and advancement.

Additionally, advisors should be able to give students and their parents’ solid methods for “practicalizing” liberal arts degrees throughout their university experience. Beyond adding a business minor to any liberal arts degree, increasing the employability of graduates can be achieved through completing an internship (Barker and Ayala reported that the unemployment rate for art major recent grads is as high as 11%, but that rate for graduating artists who completed an internship drops to 7%). Combining the foreign language requirements of liberal arts degrees with study abroad experiences likewise bolsters the recent grad’s resume due to the global nature of all current and future industries. Involvement in and appropriate marketing of volunteer experiences also strengthens the employability of recent liberal arts graduates, especially considering the public’s demand for more socially responsible corporations and businesses across all industries.

With these points in mind, we can give our advisees support to follow their dreams combined with advice to keep their feet on the ground.

Last updated 4/23/14