Advising the First Year Student

Each new student comes with her/his own experiences, strengths, weaknesses and expectations. In helping a student develop a course program one needs to take the information one has about each student and help them find a collection of courses that makes sense for that particular student given her/his interests, aspirations and strengths, with a sense of the wonderful opportunity they have before them, and of course a dose of reality (i.e., the College’s graduation requirements) thrown in for good measure.

Balance in a student’s academic program is important. A general rule of thumb in course selection during the first year: no more than one course in any department and a maximum of two courses in any academic division in any semester. When helping the student design the academic schedule, please keep in mind the need to include at least one small class where there will be an opportunity to work closely with a faculty member. Help the student to create a balance between quantitative, research, reading, and writing intensive courses. Encourage students to explore at least one new area instead of focusing only on requirements.

One issue that first-year students typically struggle with is that of goal-setting. Therefore, it will be important at this point to engage the student in a conversation about what s/he hopes to get from a Haverford education as a point of entry into the task of selecting courses for the first year and to make them aware of and excited by the opportunities and challenges that they will experience. What did the student enjoy studying in high school? What does the student hope to study in college? Are there fields/disciplines the student hopes to explore? Does the student have a major in mind? Does the student have a career in mind at this early point?

For the student’s first year, then, the focus needs to be on getting a well-rounded liberal arts education. Again, breadth and exploration should be the watchwords. We should strive to strike a balance between student interest and exploration on the one hand, and making progress toward choosing a major on the other.

This may also be a good opportunity to begin an on-going discussion about time management. Is the student able to undertake successfully a rigorous academic program and his/her array of other activities? Inform/remind the advisee that students should expect to spend, on average, at least three hours studying outside of class for every hour in class, and likely more in certain classes. This information
may come as a surprise/shock to some students and there may in some cases be a significant disparity between what the College expects in this regard and how hard the student expects or is willing to work. This expectation should be factored into the student’s thinking about how much time s/he can devote to other pursuits. This is especially important for those students who plan to participate in a varsity sport, which requires a significant commitment of time, and for students who are contributing to their tuition costs with on- or off-campus jobs. Students need to think seriously about time-management at an early stage of their careers, and it is your role to alert them to this.

The relationship built between faculty advisor and first year student can be a highlight of the college experience. Meeting more than simply around registration will go a long way to help student and advisor develop a working relationship and solid foundation for life throughout the college years and beyond.