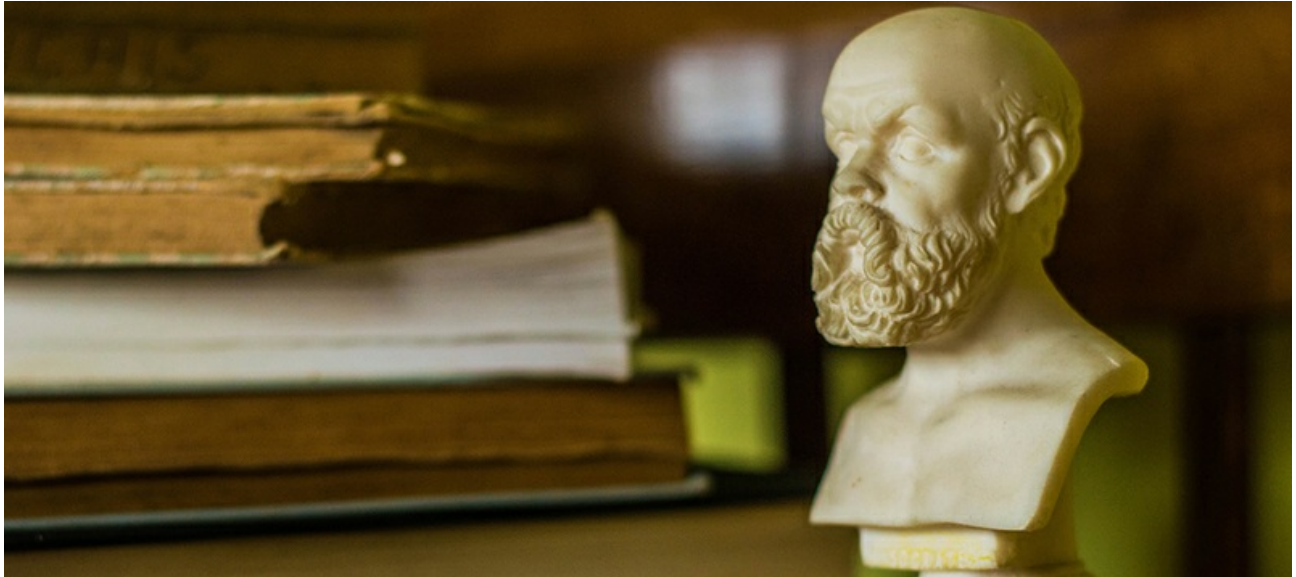


Why We Should Require All Students to Take 2 Philosophy Courses

chroniclevitae.com/news/2078-why-we-should-require-all-students-to-take-2-philosophy-courses



July 10, 2018

Image: iStock

By Howard Gardner

If I were the czar of higher education that is not explicitly vocational, I would require every undergraduate to study philosophy. And if I were both czar and czarina, I would require all students to take two philosophy courses — one in their first year and another just before graduation.

At first blush, that requirement may seem bizarre, especially coming from me. I am a psychologist and, more broadly, a social scientist — not a philosopher or a humanist. Even more deplorably, I have never taken a philosophy course myself.

But I've been thinking about philosophy in recent months because of two developments. A year ago, Mills College eliminated its philosophy major and merged the department into an interdisciplinary unit — just one example of a growing number of institutions that have eliminated majors in certain humanities fields. On a more positive note, in January, the Johns Hopkins University won a \$75-million donation to bolster its philosophy department. It occurred to me that a good use of that money would be to design new required courses in philosophy for the benefit of both philosophy departments and undergraduates in general.

The kinds of courses I would require probably wouldn't even have "philosophy" in the name, although they would all be taught by academics trained in that field. Indeed, except in certain explicitly liberal-arts contexts, I might well avoid the word entirely, since it would frighten some

students (and, even more, their parents) and confuse others ("Is this about my personal philosophy?").

Instead, I would call the requirement something like "Big Questions of Life." Every student in their first year of college would choose one course from a list with titles like:

- "Questions of Identity" (Who am I? Who are we?).
- "Questions of Purpose" (Why are we here? What's it all for?).
- "Questions of Virtues and Vices" (What is truth? What is beauty? What is morality?).
- "Questions of Existence" (What does it mean to be alive, to die, indeed, to be? Or not to be?).

Those are the questions!

Moreover, I would start with the students' own individual and collective answers to the Big Questions of Life. But — and here is the crucial move — I would not end there.

Instead, I would help students understand that reflective human beings have been asking and answering such questions for millennia, across many cultures and many epochs. Some of the answers those people came up with to the perennial riddles of life have been profound, as indeed have some of the subsequent critiques of their answers.

I want students to appreciate that this conversation over time and across cultures is important and — crucially — that they can and should join in. But they should do so with some humility and respect, building on what has been thought and said before.

There are two powerful reasons for requiring students to start (and end) their education with philosophical questions and thinking. First, scholarly disciplines, however they may have evolved in recent times, began because of human beings' interest in understanding diverse aspects of their world — ranging from the movement of the stars to the strivings of the soul. A compelling way to understand the spectrum of knowledge is to encounter some of the intriguing ways in which our predecessors thought about those same issues. Second, for most of us, it's only in late adolescence that we become able to reflect on bodies of knowledge and their relation to one another.

Philosophical ways of reading, thinking, and arguing would constitute good training for four years of college — whether or not the "ph" word is ever uttered.

In Years 2 and 3 of a student's education, faculty members across the disciplines and at several degrees of sophistication could build on the initial exposure to philosophical thought, contouring it in ways appropriate to their particular courses. Whether you are teaching poetry, psychology, or physics, you should be able to talk about the ideas that originally motivated the practices in your discipline, the ways in which those ideas have remained constant or changed, and how they relate to ideas in other fields, both neighboring and more remote.

To do that, faculty members need not be masters of philosophy, just as a philosopher need not be a master of the other fields. But all professors should be able to — indeed, should *want* to — provide a context for their field of study. Imagine how inspiring and motivating those conversations could be from course to course, and discipline to discipline.

During an undergraduate's senior year, philosophical topics and concerns would return as a required course, once again taught by philosophers or philosophically trained scholars. But this time, students would approach the discipline more directly through the use of philosophical texts that deal with timeless as well as contemporary issues — for example, seminal texts on just and unjust wars, human and artificial intelligence, bioethics, the nature of consciousness.

The goal: to equip graduates with a philosophical armamentarium they could draw from — and contribute to — for the rest of their lives.

At Mills College, the loss of the philosophy department and major will decrease the likelihood that students will master the critical ways of thinking that have been the hallmark of philosophical thinking since classical times. It will be far more difficult for students there to understand the origin and development of different lines of scholarship and how they relate to one another. At Johns Hopkins, a generous donation should mean that more graduating students will be armed with powerful cognitive tools that should serve them well in whatever work and leisure pursuits they elect.

It would be disappointing — even tragic — if less-wealthy institutions elected to banish philosophical thinking from their campuses. Leaders of such campuses should, instead, be ingenious in drawing on philosophically trained instructors to inform foundational first-year courses and provide culminating courses of synthesis.

Indeed, in the 19th century, it was customary for the president of a college to provide an overview course at the end of the students' education. Think of the powerful message that a president would send by advocating required philosophy courses for all incoming and graduating students. Why, that kind of initiative might even attract a multimillion-dollar donation.

Howard Gardner is a professor of cognition and education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

This article relates to...

More News & Advice

Join the Conversation

1 Comment [↗](#)

[↗](#) [Log In](#) or [Sign Up](#) to leave a comment.

