Planning for the Future, Reflecting on the Past

Welcome to April, and perhaps the start of spring in Cleveland (we hope!). For some of you, it means that you are counting down the days to graduation (fewer than 50). For others, it means that registration for fall semester courses will soon be upon you, and you need to begin reviewing your Academic Requirements report to see which of your requirements remain to be completed and to explore the Schedule of Classes to find courses that satisfy your interests and curiosities. Whether you are planning for life after graduation or the next step in your progress toward a CWRU degree, you are looking ahead to the future. It fits the metaphor of spring, a forward-looking time of renewal.

Renewal and planning require reflection. Have you stopped to review what you have accomplished since accepting your offer of admission to Case Western Reserve University? At that moment, you chose to become part of a dynamic community of students, faculty, and staff dedicated to academic pursuits, personal growth and development, and community service. CWRU is a special place and deserves the pride we all take in having an affiliation with the institution’s past, present, and future, and with one another. So, how have you changed as a result of this experience? What does it tell you about the choices you have made and the choices you will now make about the future?

A recent article in Inside Higher Ed (http://www.insidehighered.com, 2/28/2014) described an interesting initiative at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Evergreen State is described on its web site as “a progressive public liberal arts and sciences college.” As part of its efforts at outcome assessment, i.e. measuring how well the college is achieving its educational goals, each student is asked to write an annual academic statement, limited to 750 words. The Inside Higher Ed article describes the program this way:

The academic statement asks students to think and write, over and over again throughout their college careers, about what they’ve learned: why they made the educational choices they have, and what is it all adding up to? The final iteration of the assessment becomes a cover letter or guide to students’ transcripts, offering other institutions and would-be employers particular insight into the document before them.

Students write the first version of their academic statement during orientation during the first week of classes. Then, each fall for the following three years, students revise their statements to reflect who they are as students and people at the moment.

Evergreen State College and CWRU are very different places, with very different student populations pursuing very different goals. Much of the way Evergreen State organizes its curriculum would not work well here given the range of fields we teach at CWRU, and I am not at all convinced that a student’s reflective essay should become part of her transcript, rather than informing cover letters for jobs and personal statements for advanced study. At the same time, I couldn’t help but pause and think “What an interesting idea!” and to wonder how CWRU students might benefit from such an exercise.

We already ask students to pause at several points in their academic careers to reflect on their goals and progress. During the summer before you began as a first-year student, you were asked to write to your still-unknown-at-that-time advisor about your academic plans and your hopes and fears. (Perhaps we should send those back to you at some later point to encourage reflections on growth, progress, and
Upon completion of your second University Seminar, you are asked to submit a SAGES Writing Portfolio that includes a reflective essay on your progress as a writer and evidence from your first three SAGES courses. And all students are expected to complete a capstone project meant to be a culmination of your undergraduate work at CWRU, requiring that you look backward to employ the skills and perspectives that you have developed over time.

Beyond this, I invite you to become more reflective about how you have grown and changed over time. Which of your early fears have you overcome? In what areas have you become more confident and independent than you imagined both as a thinker and as a citizen? And, equally important, in what ways have you become more interdependent, recognizing the value of working as part of a team and a community and the expertise that others can offer to complement your knowledge and skills? All of this can provide the basis for interesting conversations with advisors, mentors, and family, and may help you make the most of the options before you for the future.

Happy spring! Happy reflection! And, happy planning!

Let me know what you think. You can write to me at jeffrey.wolcowitz@case.edu.