

December 18, 2011

Dear Alumni:

Greetings from the Philosophy Department. All is well here on Commonwealth Avenue and I very much hope that the same is true for you.

I became Chair of the Department in September, 2011. So far the transition from being a “mere” professor (which I had been for 30 years) to being an administrator has gone smoothly. One important reason why is the excellent support I have received from Mr. Matt Roselli, our department’s administrative assistant. He knows the system thoroughly and has been very helpful from day one.

The Department is quite healthy. About 1,400 students, both undergraduate and graduate, enrolled in our courses in the Fall of 2011. We offered 8 courses at the 100-level and 9 at the 200-level. These are our “gateway” classes and they are of utmost importance in introducing large numbers of BU students to philosophy. We continue to believe that there is no better preparation for a future intellectual life than the study of philosophy. To that end we have recently added a few new courses to our curriculum including “The Philosophy of Sport,” “Wealth, Ethics and Liberty” and “Philosophy and Film.”

Unfortunately this view about the value of philosophy is not as widely shared as we would like. American universities are increasingly becoming more like vocational schools than institutions of genuinely “higher” education. Boston University has admirably resisted this trend, but even here at BU the increased emphasis on the technical fields and the applied sciences threatens to diminish the status of the Humanities. One of my main responsibilities—indeed, this is a responsibility that belongs to all of us—is continually to argue on behalf of the traditional conception of a liberal education. Permit me a few reflections on this topic.

I often meet with the students in my office who are tempted by the study of philosophy but also fearful of it. Especially in these hard economic times they worry that majoring in philosophy will diminish their job prospects. I usually give them the following speech. There is, I explain, one important indicator of a successful undergraduate education: the discovery of a subject, of an intellectual activity, that a student thoroughly enjoys. It doesn’t matter whether it is reading Aristotle or studying Chinese. For when a student is self-propelled by love rather than being in thrall to external authority figures the quality of the academic experience fundamentally changes. Often the signal of this change is a subtle shift in terminology. Instead of describing assignments as “homework,” a high-school term that suggests a laborious task that one would prefer to avoid, students start speaking about their “work.” This word, at least to my ears, refers to an activity that can take on great personal significance. When students come to class,

study, and write their papers animated by a sense of purpose and pleasure, when their academic activity becomes a gratifying even if difficult enterprise, they have learned a crucial lesson: good work, the kind that expresses who we are, is inherently fulfilling. It represents the actualization of a potentiality. It tells us who we are when we are at our best.

Majoring in philosophy may or may not immediately open doors to a professional career. But it does something else: teach the student that learning is the best of all pleasures. Philosophers are people who have the courage to ask questions, even when there is no obvious short-term economic benefit in doing so. They are curious and engaged and care enough about the world to think about it hard. In the broadest and best sense of the word, they will “succeed” in life.

Back to Commonwealth Avenue. Two of our senior professors (Rosen and Brinkmann) recently retired and partly as a result we are now a rather young department. Seven members of our faculty (Professors P. Bokulich, Bronstein, Katsafanas, Leibesman, Powell, Star and Sreedhar) joined us within the past five years. One (Professor Hopp) was awarded tenure in May. Our veteran faculty (Professors Baxter, A. Bokulich, Cao, Dahlstrom, Floyd, Garrett, Griswold, Hintikka, Kestenbaum, Kuehn, Lyons, Michalski, Neville, Roochnik, Speight and Webb) remain hard at work teaching, writing books and articles, and giving lectures around the world. Please have a look at <http://www.bu.edu/philo/people/faculty/> to get a sense of their many fine accomplishments.

We continue to strive to create a department in which both faculty and students feel at home. We have been particularly fortunate in having generous alumni who through their donations have helped us do this. Thanks to Steve Karbank, we were able to inaugurate the 2011-12 academic year with a wonderful concert given by the Japanese percussionist Tatsuya Nakatani. Over 100 people attended it and the reception that followed, and the evening was a delight. We also use the Karbank Fund to take students out to lunch or dinner, to support the Undergraduate Philosophy Association, to support off-campus language study, and to sponsor a wide variety of events that augment the life of the department. Hideo and Yoko Itabashi recently renewed their gift to The Bertocci Fund, which provides much needed financial assistance to graduate students. The Hellenic Studies Fund provides financial support for students pursuing some aspect of Greek culture. These contributions have allowed us to reach beyond the classroom and forge bonds with students in ways that are immeasurably valuable. I can't tell you how grateful we are for the contributions that these and other alumni have made.

If you are in the Boston area please drop by and say hello. My office is 511 on the fifth floor of 745 Commonwealth Avenue. If you can't be here in person please contact me by email. I'd love to know what you're up to and would be eager to return the favor.

Best wishes for a healthy and successful 2012.

David Roochnik

