

Powerful Conversations

The Bureau of Study Counsel (BSC) has long offered students safe space for thoughtful career consideration, through weekly discussion groups such as “What Are You Doing With Your Life?” and “Roots: Where Are You Coming From and Where Are You Going?” and single-session discussions on the topic “Insanely Busy: What Would Happen If I Slowed Down?” The bureau also aims to sensitize teaching staff (with a seminar titled “Grades and Beyond: Perfectionism, Risk-taking, and Learning from Failure”) and parents (with annual panel discussions during Freshman Parents’ Weekend) to these issues.

These disparate efforts come together under the umbrella of the Success-Failure Project (<http://bsc.harvard.edu/successfailure>), headed by BSC director Abigail Lipson and BSC counselor Ariel Phillips, Ed.D. ’89. The driving principle is not to get students to consider one specific career or another, but to envision their career choice broadly and consider it carefully—even if that means setting aside a career chosen before college in favor of pursuing a new passion. “We’re not really advocating that people take up a particular definition” of what it means to succeed, Phillips adds. “It’s the power of having the conversation.”

Dean of Harvard College Evelyn M. Hammonds says these goals line up with her own for undergraduates.

Even though Harvard must acknowledge the realities of the world—for instance, that certain fields strongly prefer graduates who have already completed three internships—Hammonds says that college, as much as possible, “should be the time when students feel the least amount of constraints around exploring what they want to do next.”

Lipson and Phillips are delighted that their program’s themes are getting such widespread attention—organizations such as the Office of Career Services and the student Career Diversity Awareness Group have come knocking, hoping to collaborate, with increasing frequency. It is, says Phillips, “a moment in time when a lot of forces are crossing.”

their grades, says Jessica Ranucci ’10, one of the “Big Question” organizers this year. In its three years, the series has explored such topics as whether pursuing a career in business necessarily means “selling out,” and whether popular spring-break-week community-service trips really help, or are better summed up as “service tourism.”

OF COURSE, a major reason for articulating one’s morals and values is to make it possible to choose a career that fits those beliefs. President Drew Faust gave graduating seniors one last nudge in that direction during her baccalaureate address in June: “A liberal education demands that you live self-consciously. It prepares you to seek and define the meaning inherent in all you do.”

Faust began that speech by noting that numerous students and recent graduates had expressed concern to her about the number of Harvard alumni going into consulting and finance. Reiterating this message before alumni at the Harvard Gay and Lesbian Caucus anniversary in September (see “Coming Out at Harvard,” page 70), Faust said she got the impression that some students felt their career choices were not entirely voluntary: “I felt they were asking permission to do something different.”

Efforts abound to introduce students to that “something different.” The Office of Career Services (OCS) has launched a campaign to “turn up the volume” on career options other than investment banking and consulting. (“We didn’t want to

turn down the volume on opportunities in consulting and finance,” explains OCS interim director Robin Mount. “We have one of the top programs in the country, and we’re really proud of that.”) The OCS fall schedule of events includes sessions on fields ranging from fashion design, museum administration, and social work to the ministry, fiction writing, culinary arts, and the military. The schedule also includes new events that invite students to discuss financial careers frankly (“Banking and Consulting: Myths and Realities”). And there is now a “career reflection” category (sessions include “Finding a Meaningful Path: What’s Your Story?”).

The number of graduates who take jobs in banking and consulting is not well established. A *Crimson* survey found that