

Lessons Learned during a Life in the Academy

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This essay is adapted from a keynote presentation at the 2018 Ohio Communication Association conference in Orrville, Ohio.

My goal in this essay is to compress five decades of involvement in the academy into some observations that may be useful. Two caveats are important – first, while I don't think all of what I write here will be new (or even some of it), my hope is that it helps confirm the values and goals many faculty share. Second, I also hope that for those whose future is not directed at teaching in the academy, the 'lessons' will still have some resonance in work experiences in other contexts. I will focus first on the Ohio Communication Association 2018 conference theme, and then consider teaching, scholarship, and service respectively.

If we are to leverage the strengths of the discipline, we need to start with ourselves as educators. What we do individually and in collaboration with others will be the "difference that makes a difference" in the lives of our students. I believe that our major strength arises out of our conviction that what we teach in the classroom and our interactions with students outside it is critical in the advancement of student success. What we say, and how we say it in communicating with others, regardless of the context, reveals what our values and beliefs are – we are what we say. The discipline of communication is not the only portal, but it is a critical one in conveying to students the central importance of communicating well. When studies are done of success in moving up the corporate ladder, for example, a consistent finding is that how people communicate with others is a primary factor in their moving forward. Our efforts are at the center in improving student potential to achieve their goals.

With this as a preamble, have I learned anything of value since my first day teaching as a graduate student in the fall of 1966?

My first claim is that we should "value students as persons first." Taking the term student as a focus, as I suspect you know, not all students are students. What that means is they are not focused on our oftentimes narrow approach to how they may best learn. Tests and papers are common venues for assessing student learning—not every student is oriented toward a highly cognitive style of learning. That is one of the reasons many of us have moved toward getting students more engaged in community issues and activities; the more we engage students, the more we increase opportunities for different approaches to learning. What about their role as 'persons first?' What I intend to impart is that we need to engage students as whole people, not just as bodies in a class—they have lives outside our classroom that impact their performance within it. As one illustration, and many of you have seen this happen, a first-year student arrives on campus, and a few weeks later learns his parents are divorcing. What does that do to their focus on academics? We can't solve that issue, but we can be supportive as they work through this change in their personal life. As I noted in an earlier essay:

One of the ways of elaborating on this orientation is to consider "students at risk"—these are the students who are classic "underachievers" when it comes to the heart of the academic enterprise—doing well enough on exams and papers to "make the grade." These are the students who find themselves in the bottom 10% or so of the academic ranks; they are truly "at risk" in the sense of not making it academically (a 90/10 principle seems to apply here, as the bottom 10% take 90% of one's time in working to ensure academic success. . .). In my experience, one never knows who they will be. Academic under-performance cuts across gender, ethnic, and socio-economic lines; such students may be from conditions of wealth as from poverty, from good educational backgrounds as from weak ones.¹

¹ Raymie E. McKerrow (1998) Rhetoric and the construction of a deliberative community, *Southern Communication Journal*, 63:4, 350-356. Doi: 10.1080/10417949809373110

What I want to underscore here is that students at risk is where the challenge, and from my perspective at least, the reward, lies. As most of have learned, some students are self-directed—they know why they are in class and what they want from it; they come to an advising session with a schedule already set in their notes—our job is made easier in suggesting they have a ‘plan b’ if a particular class is full, etc. Other students come in and have no clue what they should or could do the next term. That is where the work starts—asking them where they want to be in five-seven years, asking them what they enjoy outside the classroom—these are the simple ways in gaining a foothold from which to learn who the person is in front of you, and thereby be better able to provide assistance. Whether clueless or not, students are not ‘dumb’; they may not be in the right program—I’ve had experiences where I helped students find a new academic home. They may have gotten by in high school without acquiring study habits that would be critical in more advanced studies. In rare cases, they may be better suited by interest and temperament in a more vocationally oriented institution—helping a student see that as a better option and being invited to their graduation is its own reward. Whatever the reason, valuing them (it doesn’t mean we have to like them in all cases) as persons first expands the range of options in assisting them meet their goals. As a case in point, one of my favorite students, in his last semester, proclaimed “2.0 and go” – as long as he passed all his courses he would be a happy camper. He also had his own advertising company while in school, later worked with the NHL’s first wave of Russian players as a translator and worked for a Fortune 500 company while also serving as a volunteer fireman. I was not worried about his future. Students who may not have the top gpa’s in the department are not, in any sense, of less value.

Related to this is the common feeling, when working with first generation students or those from other cultures, that “they are here now as students, so let them study and learn—they don’t need any further assistance.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Students who arrive from less-wealthy neighborhood schools may not have had the same experiences as other more ‘privileged’ students. First generation students arrive on campus without the same supportive network as those with families who have already earned an advanced degree. Programs such as McNair Scholars focus on providing not only a support group, but also serve to introduce first generation and marginalized students to research that motivates their entry into more advanced studies. As a former Director of that program, I can attest to how it has generated far more Master’s and Doctoral students than might otherwise have entered graduate programs. International students are familiar with how education works in their respective cultures, but that is not necessarily translatable to how our culture operates. This was brought home to me in teaching Chinese students in Hong Kong years ago and more recently in working with doctoral students in Thailand. Students might arrive late to class in Hong Kong—partly because of travel time from the Island to the campus on the mainland, but mostly because they could not leave work until their boss left. When asked if they understood what I was saying, they would smile and shake their head ‘no.’ Did they ask questions – no, that was not a comfortable thing for them to do. One of my international students put a personal face on the disparity between cultures with these remarks:

“I cannot understand many expressions, I cannot follow jokes, and I cannot actively engage in exciting discussions. I have many experiences that I watch myself smiling and nodding, and pretending that I am understanding what the other person is saying even though I could not follow the conversation.” . . . The feeling of ‘being comfortable’ . . . is not an issue solely with respect to our international students. We have other students of color who may not have the same barriers to cross as our international students, but for whom other barriers, equally invisible to many of us in our daily habits, also exist.²

Valuing them as ‘persons first’ means recognizing what they may be missing in their prior experience, and making sure actions are taken to fill in the gaps in their understanding of how things work.

One of the tasks students have that plays into our roles as teachers is to complete course evaluation forms. Over time, I’ve developed a better understanding of how we might best make use of the information students provide as we review our own teaching methods as well as when others review us in tenure and promotion recommendations. An evaluation of a single course is useful only in reference to that course—it may help the instructor with respect to what worked or didn’t work as well, but for faculty review groups, it doesn’t say much if anything about the

² Raymie E. McKerrow, (January, 2001) “Coloring Outside the Lines: The Limits of Civility,” *Spectra*, 8.

quality of instruction. What does begin to tell both instructors and others something is seeing consistent remarks and or scores on specific indices across a series of courses, especially when that information is more negative than we might desire. That information, however, does not mean reviewers can unilaterally judge what happened. We were not there. What we can do is indicate “this is what we see—what do you, as the instructor, see in these remarks and/or scores across several classes? If you agree with us that these are problematic, what can we do to assist in responding to the issues?” That approach, as difficult as it may be to not simply say “you must be an ineffective teacher based on these results,” is how we protect the sense that we are a community. There are those occasions, however, when a more negative judgement needs to be made. If several female students, as happened in one instance, come into your offices and consistently say “I don’t want to take untenured faculty member ‘x’s course” it is time to consider their concerns and ask whether that individual should be reappointed. Protecting the community sometimes does mean someone should leave.

To shift from students to our roles in the academy, I’ve been involved long enough to become jaded and cynical. One of the ‘truths’ I’ve learned is that “if an idea or action seems logical and reasonable, it is likely to violate university policy.” No one would claim that academic institutions are ‘fast-changing’ entities—that they are hide-bound and resistant to doing things other than the way they’ve always done them seems a common malady. It is also the case that “If you owe the university money, they want it yesterday; if they owe you money, it will come when they find time to process the request and then wait until the day they’ve selected to transfer funds.” Both of these claims have exceptions. There are progressive leaders who move faster than normal; there are systems that process work more quickly. I don’t want to paint all institutions with the same brush. Nonetheless, across the decades from the mid 60’s till now, there does appear to be some truth to these more jaded remarks.

What I do want to privilege here is something I learned years ago from a minister in talking about his role: “We are the congregation together.” Taking that phrase metaphorically, if we are to get things done, it is not “I” as the progressive leader that is critical, or “us” as the compliant employees that is important. It is “WE”—all of us together who form the intellectual or deliberative community as a holistic body that constitutes the ground on which change can be contemplated and executed. I realize the downside of this, as evidenced in the expression “leading faculty toward action is a lot like herding cats.” Be that as it may, we still have an obligation to not only ourselves but our students to work toward a sense of “we-ness”—of the congregation together that engages in deliberative and reasonable acts. I don’t want to downplay the fact that some places are toxic environments, and that changing the culture may seem impossible. Change can happen over time, but in the meantime, there is one escape: I’ve found that walking into a classroom and, metaphorically if not actually, closing the classroom door and concentrating on delivering my best to the students is my salvation. That can be the place of freedom from an otherwise unhealthy environment. To do this well, it also means we cannot bring the issues that frustrate us into that room.

Adversity does exist in our experiences – we don’t always get what we want when we want it. We have had failures amidst our successes. Recounting an experience from my past may be useful: In addressing new graduate students I often tell them about my early years at Wisconsin. I left my doctoral program at Iowa after two years, where I’d been on a Fellowship, hence took 5 graduate classes a term, with about half my dissertation written. I spent the first semester and a half finishing that project while teaching. I then taught a new class in the summer session and began my second year. Early in the Spring semester of that second year, I was asked to come to the Chair’s office, where after a brief conversation, I was told I would not be re-appointed, but given the timing of their decision, I would have a third year. I left and stopped at my office to pick up materials and went to teach my next class. Though I can’t say for certain, I heard later they were convinced I would not be as influential a scholar and leader as they desired. The point I want to make with this story is that while one needs to try, as hard as it is under those conditions, to learn something from it, it does not define you. The best advice I received, and I would not have learned this otherwise, was to take the next job and “act tenured.” What this meant was ‘do the things you would do if you were already promoted and tenured.’ This is not an argument for ‘publish or perish.’ If you are not interested in doing research, then you need to be at a place that values you for what you are interested in and committed to—it doesn’t mean you are any less valuable as a member of the congregation. It does mean your contribution is not the same as others. The phrase “it takes a village” applies here – even in research 1 institutions, some will do enough research early on to become an Associate Professor, and then slow down enough that the next promotion may be a longer time coming. Does that mean they are less valuable? Some will think so. I’m no saint,

but I learned early on not to use my standard of productivity as a measure of another's worthiness. Some faculty take on extra advising, some take on departmental and/or university committee work. Overall, the department functions on all cylinders without everyone having to do everything others do. Learning to see and appreciate the larger picture is essential if the congregation is to exist as a 'get it done' community.

For those interested in doing research, discipline is a key ingredient in making it work – there are sufficient pressures from teaching, advising, departmental and other meetings to attend, to say nothing of having a life outside the academy to make it difficult to read and write. In my own case, I was an early workaholic – I've slowed down considerably, especially in retirement. Being active meant working not only in the evenings but on weekends. I wasn't sure I wanted to leave the University of Maine, where I ended up teaching for 19 years after leaving Wisconsin. But I also wanted to keep the option alive – and doing research, especially if I wanted at some point to work with doctoral students, was an essential component of being able to move on. When I did leave Maine, I was surprised by the reaction of some colleagues—they indicated a desire to leave, but also realized they had not done the kinds of things that would demonstrate their potential to a new program; this was especially true with respect to a consistent research record. Now, as my last two advisees defend their dissertations later this month, I will have directed 31 dissertations and served on an additional 40 committees since 1995. That service has enriched my own work and helped keep me current as new research directions take form. The academic world is far different now than when I began. We are a far more vibrant discipline as a result of new directions in research; we still have the challenge of being more inclusive and diverse as a field.

What about getting published? One small piece of advice for those submitting to a journal – pay attention to the Editor's status – when new Editors begin, they are looking for manuscripts and are more likely to extend an R and R in the first months; when they hit the end of year 2, they are looking to minimize the number of manuscripts that are 'out there' being revised. They are thus more likely to reject a manuscript that is otherwise potentially publishable. A second piece of advice from my dissertation advisor: make a list of journals that seem to fit the essay – if it comes back rejected, take time to review and revise before sending to the next journal on the list. Our field is small, and a reviewer for one journal may well be the reviewer you get for the second journal selected. Finally, keep in mind that well-known scholars have been rejected. I have been rejected, even since retirement in 2015. I edited 4 journals over my career. My rejection rate across those journals varied; in the case of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, I reviewed around 450 essays and published 45 or so. 10% made it through the review process. The central lesson I learned in reviewing manuscripts was to look for the argument being presented – in more specific terms, what is the essay's central reason for being – why should I or anyone read it? Answering that question may be the most important task a writer can accomplish. Knowing something about the kind of essays being published in a specific journal, and paying attention to word restrictions, will also make it easier to create a list of potential venues for the work being submitted. The same applies to searching for a book publisher. If a specific press has published work similar to your research area, that bodes well for their possible interest in reviewing your work.

Service is perhaps under-rated as a potential strength of the discipline. A department that is integrated into the college and university through the service of its faculty on committees and task forces is often recognized and valued within the institution. In addition, faculty who have been pulled from the ranks to serve administrative roles provide clear evidence of a program's commitment to meeting the institution's mission. The work done also lessens any chance that people would question "what is it you do?" The tasks may seem thankless, and at times they are, but networking with faculty from other programs also has the advantage of creating a larger 'congregation.' Challenges can become opportunities for change when the connections are strong; otherwise they simply remain as challenges, with a sense of powerlessness to ever influence change. One of the most important service roles we have, and this returns us to where we started, is advising students. To do this task well, one needs to like students and also see this as an extension of their role as educators. Otherwise, the task becomes onerous and less likely to produce positive outcomes. In my own case, if I did anything in my career well, my role as an advisor may be that one thing. When I was at Maine, I worked for a while as the College "discipline" person – which meant I met with all students on probation or at risk of being suspended or expelled. I knew I was on the right track when students I'd met with would stop by the office with 1-2 other students and ask if I would talk with them. By and large, our students are smarter and more gifted in multiple ways than they give themselves credit for. Working with them as an advisor gives us a chance to push them out of their comfort zones and gain both new experiences and increased

confidence in their own innate abilities. This includes those on probation—and seeing most of them succeed is all the reward one needs.

One last issue: when should we quit? One response to this issue is: it is time to quit when we are no longer nervous when meeting a class on the first day. The sense of wonder and excitement in meeting a new group of students—even when several are either advisees or have been in earlier classes, energizes us as we embark on a new term. When that sense disappears, it is time to consider quitting. Although that sense did not leave me, I realized in my last semester of teaching that it was time for me to go. I was teaching an undergraduate class the last day before Spring Break. As I was showing a video, I noted students with their heads down, and hands below the table working their phones. I stopped the video and did something I'd never before done—I noted that if they had no more respect for their own education than they were showing, or respect for what we were trying to accomplish together in class, they should give up now. I then said that they should not bother showing up for class when they returned from Break. In fact, I preferred that they simply stay away. I assured them I'd figure out something to make sure they could still graduate (as most were seniors), and told them class was over. The first day of class after break came—and they all showed up. I started class by indicating the last time we were together I'd gone on a brief 'rant.' They seemed to agree; I further noted that I did not hold grudges, and while I hoped the reliance on cell phones would not occur during class, we could simply start as if this were a new beginning. At the end of the semester, I was pleasantly surprised by one of the better course evaluations I'd received in some time! One never knows for certain what actions will make a difference!

In bringing this review to a close, you might be able to see that I'm first and foremost student-oriented. We owe it to ourselves to revel in the fact that an email from a former student saying 'you told me I should go to graduate school—well, I'm ready; can you write a letter?' is what keeps us energized as we tackle yet another set of papers, a new class of students, a new advisee—the list goes on. And so should we.