

1969 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

Douglas Gatlin, Ph. D.
Associate Professor of Political Science
College of Social Science

Mr. President, Dr. Richman, distinguished colleagues, students and friends of Florida Atlantic University. To be selected as Distinguished Teacher is perhaps the highest honor that a faculty member could hope to achieve in a lifetime. I am most deeply grateful, more so than I have words to convey. But any teacher who receives such an award must do so, not with any transparent attempt at modesty, but in realistic humility. For any teacher who values his calling and who examines his performance with the least objectivity can only be dissatisfied with the gap between the ideal and the practice. Nor would I presume to try to define effective teaching. There are no maxims guaranteed to produce it. We know after the fact when we have taught well and when we have fallen short. We know it from the reactions of our students who, in the last analysis, are the best judges of whether they have been taught well or not. Teaching is an art that no one can ever claim to have mastered, for the very next course we teach will be a new and singular combination of personalities, interests and abilities, raising unforeseen problems in communicating knowledge and in stimulating the desire to learn. But our purpose here is not to brood over the mysteries of our craft, and it is not really to award honors to particular individuals. Rather, we are here to celebrate the dignity and value of our common enterprise as teachers and students, and to re-dedicate ourselves to this enterprise at the threshold of a new academic year.

We meet, if you will, in praise of the academic life that you as students and we as teachers share for a few years. But we meet in a time when American higher education is the object of severe criticism from all sides. Questions are being raised not only about the educational effectiveness of the universities, but moreover about the basic role that they should play in American society. Some of these criticisms merit our serious attention. Yet it is my conviction that the academy now has a vitality, a degree of excellence and – yes – a relevance to society that it has never had in the past, and that is deserving of our honest pride. I do not say these words lightly, or because they seem like the polite words to say on this occasion. Let us consider whether this pride is justified in the light of what our critics are saying.

We are accused of irrelevancy to the mounting crises of the world around us. We, as teachers, are said to be the curators of intellectual museums, the experts in arcane and

severely limited areas of knowledge, comprehensible only to a few of our fellow pedants, meaningless for the concerns of our students and our society. Indeed, black students in some parts of the nation have turned their backs on established institutions of higher education and have organized the “freedom universities,” which they feel will be more relevant to their needs and legitimate aspirations. Both journalists and professors indict the universities for their massive irrelevancy, calling for a re-direction of higher education to the paramount problem of our time, the survival of the human race, and for bending all our energies in teaching and research to solving the natural and human problems of continued existence.

But, in truth, have we not been bending our energies to these problems for generations? Twenty years ago, a group of distinguished social scientists at Cornell University gathered to consider the future of American society in the 1950s and 1960s. They issued a strong statement warning the nation that it faced violent racial strife unless immediate steps were taken to lift the burden of economic, social and political oppression from American Negroes. Is this the irrelevance of which we are accused? Or further: demographers in our universities have been telling us for two decades of the threat of the population explosion upon our natural resources and social institutions. Our natural scientists, moreover, have not been silent about the baneful effects of modern industrial, agricultural and military technology on our ecology – our habitat. And the revolution in agriculture, through which food production has increased so greatly in this century, was primarily due to research in the laboratories of modern universities. Every discipline represented in this university could add to this list of socially relevant accomplishments.

And what of the great works of literature, philosophy and the arts? Is the beauty and awareness that they give us of the heights and depths of the human condition – is all of this to be tossed aside as irrelevant? Surely it must not be; our universities must continue to be the bearers of all that is best in our culture.

Now, our critics are correct in part. Some of our classrooms are ivory towers; some of our research is barren intellectualism. This is the seamy side of academic freedom, but let us not forget that this same academic freedom has produced so many positive accomplishments. It is easy for the critic to find fault, and it is sometimes profitable, but a balanced assessment of the academy must also reveal its impressive contributions to our society.

But there is a further criticism that strikes even closer to home for the college teacher and student. For it is said that they are increasingly alienated from each other. The professor is accused of increasing pre-occupation with research and publication and a declining concern with informing and stimulating his students. And, admittedly, there

is much in the structure of American higher education to discourage us from teaching as best we might. Professional prestige and substantive rewards stem primarily from sources other than teaching – from our administrative duties, from gaining research grants, from scholarly writing, from consulting work off-campus. There is ample evidence of the increased emphasis on research. The American Council on Higher Education reports that in the decade from 1953 to 1963, the number of university personnel engaged primarily in teaching increased 74 percent, while the number engaged primarily in organized research increased 179 percent. And our professional organizations customarily award prizes for research and writing, while a commitment to teaching is sometimes viewed by one's colleagues as an eccentricity, or even as a kind of sentimental anti-intellectualism reminiscent of Mr. Chips. Therefore, what is remarkable is that teaching has remained as effective as it seems to have been. During the recent disturbances at Berkeley, questionnaires showed that students had very few complaints about classroom teaching. And when Acting Chancellor Meyerson called a meeting of students to hear their ideas about improving the academic program, almost nobody showed up. The Berkeley students' complaints were not about their instructors, but about the larger society and its restraints on personal freedom. And there are forces at work to encourage our greater self-consciousness as teachers. In several disciplines, the principal professional journals have recently opened their pages to articles on ways of teaching our subjects more effectively and with more relevance to our students' concerns. And in many of our professional meetings, especially, the more recent doctorates are calling for an increased self-awareness of our role as teachers in a society in crisis. And indeed, our convocation at this hour symbolizes the dedication of at least one university to the value of teaching and learning. Thus we find encouraging signs of a renewed emphasis on the dialogue, the encounter of teacher and student where it counts, in the live classroom.

So let us hear our critics, and above all let us not cease to be self-critical. At the same time, let us assert the truth of the matter: that our students are better prepared, our teachers better trained, and our universities more significant to our society than ever before. Indeed, with all its faults, American higher education is perhaps the most remarkably creative institution in history.

The day-to-day task of teaching and learning certainly includes its drudgeries, its disappointments. All of us have experienced them. But let us raise our sights above the everyday frustrations to the essential dignity and value of what we are doing. Let us not lose faith and pride in the academic life that has given our society so much, and that continues to increase in vitality and excellence. In the knowledge of these, perhaps we can face the next course, the next assignment, with greater conviction of the value of our lives as students and as teachers.