

## **1978 Distinguished Teacher of the Year**

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### *Why Are We Here?*

The title of this talk sounds like the topic for an abstract philosophical-theological discourse on the reasons for our existence as individuals, and why we occupy our particular niches in space and time. That is not, however, the context for this talk. The question being addressed is a more mundane yet meaningful question, relating to the reason for existence of the University. What is the reason for this association of students, faculty, administrators and staff people known as Florida Atlantic University?

Universities exist for a variety of reasons, such as meeting the needs of students, as described below; conducting research with the objective of increasing knowledge, without regard to immediate application of the understanding thus developed; research aimed at providing solutions to known problems, and better ways of accomplishing ongoing activities; public service, through such media as membership on advisory boards, speeches and presentations to civic groups, consultation with individuals and organizations, and participation in professional or other organizations.

All of the above activities are part of the contribution of most universities to society; thus the question becomes largely one of the balance or proportion among the various activities. In privately endowed institutions, this balance may largely be determined by the preferences of major donors or supporting organizations, such as churches. In the publicly supported university, it should be determined by the needs and preferences of the people, as expressed through their appropriate representative body or bodies. Florida Atlantic clearly belongs in the latter category, and its role should be examined from this viewpoint.

It appears clear that the primary role of Florida Atlantic University is to meet the needs of the students, with emphasis on Southeast Florida, while serving the balance of the state and the United States, as appropriate. The effective fulfillment of this mission requires an examination of our question "Why are we here?" from the viewpoint of the student body. What are the reasons or motivations which induce individuals to become students at a university? The reasons are too numerous to permit a comprehensive

listing, but certain major and common motivating factors are identified in the paragraphs which follow.

One frequently cited student objective is to obtain an education for purposes of general personal development. In an earlier society, when only the fortunate few were able to attend universities, this was the predominant objective of students. It was generally presumed that the economic well-being of the student was assured, and the function of education was to permit the individual to assume his or her rightful place as a social leader. While this objective is still applicable to some of the student body, as a major goal of the student body and of the University it would probably be described as "elitist" and out of step with modern society.

For the bulk of our student population, the motivation for entering a university is job-related. This includes preparation for entry-level positions in selected fields of endeavor; improvement of existing skills and knowledge in connection with present employment for purposes of advancement; preparation for advanced study in a chosen field; keeping up with current developments; and a variety of other, more specialized objectives. The success or failure of Florida Atlantic University will ultimately be measured by the extent to which the academic and other programs of the University meet these student needs.

If the University is to meet the needs of a student body which is largely job or career oriented, what is the nature of the academic program which should be provided, and what are the choices which should be made by the student to best further his or her career objectives? Whenever career-oriented education is discussed, there is an unfortunate proclivity on the part of some to stereotype it as training rather than education. It is important to recognize that all academic disciplines include elements of both training and education and that the distinction is largely one of balance. Within a discipline, an undue emphasis upon the training aspects of the educational process is likely to equip the student well to handle the routine and repetitive aspects of a career, while failing to prepare the individual for the proper exercise of judgment and imagination in handling non-routine situations. On the other hand, neglect of the basic training may leave the student unprepared to deal with the day-to-day realities of an initial position. The proper balance will equip the student to handle initial responsibilities while permitting growth and adaption as the career develops.

The same element – that is, balance – is essential in another respect. Any program which is too narrowly constructed, whatever the discipline, will tend to lead to a form of "tunnel vision," while a program which is too generalized will tend, in most cases, to fail to meet the career objectives of the individual. For this reason, all students should include in their overall educational program enough coverage of their basic discipline

to enable them to meet the entry-level requirements of their career fields while at the same time providing flexibility in two respects. First, their preparation and perspectives within the discipline must be adequate to permit them to adapt and to grow as they progress in their chosen field. Second, they must obtain enough understanding of related fields of activity and of the environment within which they must function to permit them to be effective members of the society in which they live. This requirement of breadth is equally applicable to all academic disciplines.

In the opening comments of this address, a question was raised: "Why are we here?" An attempt has been made to identify some of the major reasons why students are here, at Florida Atlantic University. The reasons why the rest of us, faculty, administration and staff are here are derived from the needs of the students. We are here to provide the setting within which the students may achieve their immediate goals and objectives. What, then, are the implications of this reason for the other activities of the University, as enumerated earlier? It is clear that our priority for the allocation of resources must recognize the students' needs first. At the same time, it must be recognized that, given the existence of this University, we must not fail to meet our public service requirements. The need for research is a bit more subtle, but no less real. Aside from the applied research needs of our government and our constituency, our faculty must engage in research to remain at the leading edge of their respective disciplines. In addition, it would be impossible to attract and to retain faculty of the quality we demand if research were not an integral part of our program. Research, then, as well as service, must go along with meeting the needs of our students as necessary parts of our activities.

In conclusion, we can best fulfill our function by recognizing that our primary responsibility is to our students, but that such responsibility is best met in a program of an interdisciplinary nature, which recognizes the importance of and respects the contribution of each activity to the achievement of the common goals.