

1973 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

Walter R. Courtenay, Jr., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Zoology
College of Science

Mr. President, Professor Ziegler, distinguished colleagues and students, honored guests. When I was informed that I was to deliver an address at this important convocation, I asked what guidelines I was to follow. While the answer I got was vague, I did get the distinct impression that I was not to talk about fishes! So for the next several minutes, let me share with you some of my personal views and opinions on education in the decade of the '70s.

Many of you have seen an inscription, made by someone who could not resist the temptations of wet concrete, on a piece of sidewalk at the north end of the Administration Building. This inscription reads, "And where will FAU be the day after tomorrow?" I have wondered if the author of that statement knew something that we do not know or was only suffering from a severe case of tunnel vision. The inscription, if it had to be made at all on this or any other campus, might have read, "And where will education be the day after tomorrow?"

In my view, education at every level is in serious trouble. Education is not doing what it can and should be doing. While this may be true of education in any era, we should be capable of doing more to improve it than in any other era. The complexities of the educational problem are many, and I do not profess to know the solutions necessary, but of one thing I am sure: far too many students are being "short-changed" as they strive to run the maze we call schooling. The majority of students from the first grade through graduate school is not being given a quality education that prepares them for a vocation, for useful avocation or for life at an acceptable level. The best leaders in education feel that quality education is what we all need, but quality education, like quality teachers, is difficult to come by. And because we lack a sufficient number of quality teachers, it is reasonable to assume that we are not getting quality results.

Many in and out of the education field feel that our lack of quality in both areas is the fault of educators themselves, many of whom seem to be suffering from a case of artificial paranoia. We happily join them in their resentment at being treated like second-class citizens, but we cannot join them in their failure to so handle themselves and their problems that society is forced to see them as inadequately equipped to make education possible. Educators are supposed to be both the builders and rebuilders of

our society, and, thus, the skilled molders of a better America. I question that educators are doing this job effectively, and I also question that society is permitting educators to do these jobs effectively.

I pause here to observe that most children entering first grade will never enter college. While this is true, it does not mean that these children deserve less than the best. What most get, however, is a place on the educational assembly line, created to turn out stereotyped products regardless of background, abilities, desires or needs. The primary and secondary schools are all too often conducted and funded on an assembly line basis, staffed by administrators and teachers who never see beyond the assembly line procedures, and while some never earn the pay they receive, others are seldom paid what assembly line workers in industry receive. Those who control the funding of school systems are often cursed with an assembly line mentality, and one of the consequences of this is that they regard both remedial and accelerated programs as expensive and unnecessary luxuries.

While it is true that most first graders will never enter college, it is also often true that many entering college belong somewhere else. That statement may be viewed as heretical by some in a society that has come to believe that nearly everyone should hold a college degree and often looks down on those who do not, and in a system in which college programs have also yielded to assembly line techniques. In my view, vocational education stands as one of the crying needs of our day, and the controllers of our tax dollars are either not as alert as they ought to be to this great need or are willing to subvert the operations of institutions created for other purposes toward this singular goal. Some students lack either the ability or the will to do college work, and would be happier, more useful citizens as graduates of a good vocational institution. I would add here, parenthetically, and this may also be viewed as heretical by some, that the university system may be in danger of being reduced to a vocational educational system should it allow itself to be forced into operating all of its undergraduate programs on a basis of three years from matriculation to graduation. I further note that the three-year program we now operate is a special purpose program based upon the very thing we honor here today, scholarship.

The more I think of it, the more I am impressed by the diversity of the raw materials, namely the students. I am also impressed by the fact that it is the task of our factories of education to learn how to transform this raw material into useful products. Neither our day, nor the day that follows ours, can afford to be satisfied to produce stereotyped products. A stereotyped product is impossible, and, in all probability, is exactly what future society does not need.

The leaders in education have sought and are seeking ways and means to find remedies for the maladjustments in our educational systems. Curricula need to be improved, and teacher training needs to call into its sphere of influence persons who are teaching to live and not just teaching to make a living. Teachers ought to be as well paid as truck drivers or factory foremen, but should also be better prepared for their specialized work.

Education is the victim of our political system, which has made sweeping changes in our nation in the name of social justice, and this we applaud, but in so doing the system commits a major injustice, the underfunding of education. Roads, bridges, airports and other public works receive more attention than the training of students to become useful citizens. Education, year after year, is underfunded, and yet education can do more than any other force we know to correct the social injustices of the past and to create a greater society in the future.

Education and students are also the victims of a citizenry which seems to care little for what you and I would call quality education.

What is the purpose of education? Why is it important that we have schools wherein children and maturing young people are exposed to the vast reservoirs of accumulated knowledge? Is it enough to merely expose? Is it enough for a teacher or professor to demand attention to what he or she is there to share without humanizing it and making the study an assist to an expanding, absorbing life? In my view, the aim of education should be to create mature people of integrity who are broadly informed and constructively equipped and motivated to become citizens of merit, citizens who earn the right to be honored and to be remembered with appreciation.

Only such an aim can give us quality education, but those who seek to achieve the aim are all too often frustrated by politicians and parents who seem satisfied with a mediocre school system, a mediocre curriculum and a mediocre educational graduate. Quality education, namely education that seeks to do more than perform the chores of schooling, is not high on the "want list" of most parents and those responsible for funding our school systems.

Quality education never loses sight of the diversity of the raw materials presented or of the need for us to have a built-in system of diversity of opportunity. Quality education must be able to stand as high on the social scale as the traditional professions of law and medicine. Only quality educators and only quality education can win for education an improved respect and appreciation by society. Not until parents and politicians become conscious of our need for quality education will there be an end to the apathy and lack of respect that is so prevalent today.

With regard to higher education, one cannot forget the words of John Henry Cardinal Newman, who, 120 years ago, described the academy as “an Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one, not a factory or a mint or a treadmill.” Cardinal Newman’s wish to know the students one by one has become an impossibility in modern academia. The battle in education today is between quality education and quantity education. Many in the educational field believe in and are striving for quality in education, whereas legislators who control state university funding and boards of trustees who determine fiscal policies of private institutions have elected to give their support to quantity education. Few institutions today can afford the costs of quality education; others which have quality can count themselves fortunate, albeit the quality is often accidental and teachers typically unrewarded. Quantity education is assembly line education. While this may be good enough for a certain portion of schooling, it is *not* good enough for those who progress to the university level and hope to be adequately prepared for places of creativeness in a progressive society. Education, especially at the university level, should never be an assembly line system simply because our business is not the making of things but producing men and women of quality.

At the primary and secondary levels, quality education ought to offer an inverted pyramid of learning, a system of education that expands to meet the broadest needs of expanding minds and talents in order to have quality in individuals and in our society as a whole. Too much of our present system, like a pipe or a hose, never becomes involved in terms of larger dimensions. The products of the present system can never handle adequately their own needs, much less the needs of America. We need persons of greater capacity and purpose, and in order to get them we must emphasize quality in the midst of quantity. Quality education is expensive, but, in the long run, is it more expensive than our current “dropout” system?

Quality education needs adequate funding, but it also needs teachers who love to teach and who know what to teach, who know how to teach and how to predict and modify as social needs are altered. We need teachers who are dedicated, who are equipped emotionally and intellectually to work with people, and who are adequately compensated financially for the sacrifices and strains that are inherent in teaching. From first grade teachers to those who challenge graduate students to attack new frontiers, the teaching profession demands only the best.

I have wondered in recent years why teachers feel an urge to organize and form unions, and why teachers go on strike like so many assembly line workers. I do not know all the answers, but it does seem clear that many in the field of education today feel unappreciated and unrewarded. They are tired of the apathy of those who fund our educational systems and of parents who expect the schools to do what parents themselves are unwilling or unable to do. Good teachers deserve the applause of society

and the rewards of work well done. I fear that anything less will lead to compensated mediocrity to the satisfaction of none.

Looking back upon my own years of schooling, experience and living, I am increasingly aware that mediocrity looms far too large today in every area of America life, and that quality education can never make its peace with mediocrity. As the college and university level, I see quality in terms of a productive faculty, which is fully aware of the needs of the changing society that lies outside the walls of academic. It is the task of professors to prepare students to live happily and usefully beyond our academic walls.

In my view, one of the major failures of higher education is a lack of ability or innate unwillingness on the part of university professors to see beyond the hallowed halls of ivy, or, in our case, concrete and palm trees. I realize that some disciplines are almost totally academic by their very nature, but in the main flow of life on a university campus one should be conscious of the need to explore new ideas, new methods and new philosophies. It is exploration and not mere memorization that makes for quality education in a university. Few of our students are destined to live in an academic environment. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to avoid being so totally immersed in our narrow specialized fields that we overlook the fact that the majority of our students is destined to live a non-academic life in a non-academic society. It is *not* our job to mold our students in our own images. It *is* our job to present to them what we have learned and to stimulate them in their thinking and imagination to drive beyond their temporary world of learning from lectures and textbooks. Quality education will not permit us to do less.

Quality education also demands that students, the public, legislators and board members realize that teaching and research are mutually interdependent. A faculty member who has lost his intellectual curiosity, or who has been prevented from practicing this curiosity by legislative dictum, or who does not keep up to date on the literature in his specialized field cannot possibly stimulate creative thinking and efforts on the part of students. Good teachers never cease to be learners, and in order to learn one must explore. Quality education demands a certain amount of individual and corporate freedom in order to produce graduates who are neither machines, things nor robots.

I regret that Cardinal Newman's dream of an Alma Mater knowing students "one by one" is an impossibility under modern educational conditions. Mass education, or education in chunks, is here to stay, and yet maybe each faculty member could do more to personalize education, to know more students by name to evidence his appreciation of students as persons. True, we are limited here, but I am convinced that we can and

ought to do more to make time in the classroom and in the laboratory more than a depersonalized experience.

Here I pause to emphasize a word that tends to become lost in the milieu of our day: *responsibility*. We cannot have quality education apart from the parent, the legislator, the board member, the teacher and the student each meeting the demands and fulfilling the obligations of his place in society. We cannot teach responsibility, but we can encourage both ourselves and others to be responsible. This must hold high priority in this decade, which threatens to grow weaker and sicker simply because being a responsive, responsible person is no longer a must.

Two years ago, at this Scholarship Convocation, Professor Schwartz explored the concepts of excellence and relevance. The academy, in my view, is both the guide and guardian of excellence and relevance. If quality is a vibrant part of education, we will achieve excellence and our educators will be relevant. Without quality in education, excellence itself may become irrelevant, and the relevance in education which we hold so dear will be compelled to surrender to the assembly line condition which we so rightly criticize and condemn.

We live in a society which always responds in a time of crisis; ours, for better or for worse, is a crisis society. Today there is a sickness in education and, like cancer, it can go unattended until the victim is beyond help. Our society is sick and education is part of that sickness, but surely we can do something about both prior to a time of new crisis.

Someone in our recent past left us both a question and a warning, not in the pages of a scholarship treatise, but on a piece of sidewalk. And where will FAU be the day after tomorrow? It will be here, but the more important question is what will we be doing here? Will we be practicing assembly line education, an educational process devoid of vital personal relationships and challenges, a process wherein quality, excellence, responsibility and relevance are forgotten words? I, for one, hope that each of us will pledge ourselves to help our university possess the quality, excellence, responsibility and relevance without which we cannot guide our students to be prepared for life inside and outside the walls of academia.

Let us not permit the question on the sidewalk to become our epitaph. Rather, let us make our motto, "Where tomorrow begins," a quality beginning toward a quality tomorrow.

I appreciate greatly the honor granted me today, even as I appreciate being a member of the faculty of this increasingly useful university. The opportunity to be useful is the

greatest privilege this world can offer us, and, I hope, in my work and in this address that I have evidenced the fact that my highest ambition is to live usefully. Thank you.