

2016 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

The Historian as Educator and College Professor

Stephen D. Engle, Ph.D

Department of History

Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

President Kelly, honored guests, and colleagues, I sincerely appreciate the honor given me today, especially because it comes from the students, and even more so because I share this occasion with students who are being honored for their distinguished talents. Often, as faculty we spend our careers unaware of just how much of an impact we make on the world. Thankfully, we are measured by the difference we can make in a student's life, and are grateful for those who tell us so. To share this stage with such terrific faculty who pull the wagon of knowledge forward every day, and who have made a difference is deeply humbling. So thanks for placing me in the "circle" of colleagues who share these qualities. And thanks too, go to my departmental colleagues, who make working with them an absolute delight!

O' Captain, My Captain!

With these words, Walt Whitman began his eulogy to Abraham Lincoln, who died at the hands of an assassin in April 1865. The American Civil War was the central event of Whitman's life as it was to 31 million Americans, who lived through it. Yet, out of that conflict was borne new hope that a more perfect United States could be achieved through reunification, and Whitman's tribute reflected the expectation that future generations would look to those uncivil years and carry forward the lessons wrought by the devastation—lest we forget. For Whitman, Lincoln's most memorable words came neither at his Inaugural in 1861, nor at Gettysburg in 1863, but rather in December 1862 when addressing Congress about the Emancipation Proclamation he was about to sign as a war measure to liberate southern slaves. "*Fellow-citizens,*" Lincoln warned, "*we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation.*"

In 2016, we are that latest generation, and as a historian I am keenly aware of those who have gone before us in making a more perfect United States. But more importantly, it's my life's work to make students aware of their place in the generational chain going forward—mindful that we are a work in progress and that they, like Lincoln's generation, have a responsibility to make us better. So what will be your fiery trial and how will you handle it? Hopefully you can draw on history for the answers. As Henry Cabot Lodge once said, "*a people which cares nothing for its past, has no present, and deserves no future.*" So care about the past and those who teach it and write it.

O' Captain, My Captain!

Because of what I study and teach, I am uniquely positioned to share some thoughts about the significance of my generation **as a historian and educator, as well as a college professor who has observed student development for more than 25 years.**

So, for the next few moments let's agree on two things: **First**, there is something truthful about the Soviet joke that the "future is certain, it is only the past that is unpredictable." Why? Because there are 3 kinds of history: what actually happens, what we are told happens, and what we come to believe happens. And **what each generation** comes to believe about the past keeps changing. Mark Twain perhaps best summarized why this is true when he observed "*get the facts first, and then you can distort them as you please.*"

And second, let's agree that for all of the developments in information and communication technology, there really has not been revolutionary change in our generation. I say this not to disappoint you, but rather to place these changes in context. In his recent work, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth* (2016), economic historian Robert J. Gordon of Northwestern University argues that the great age of progress is behind us and that the future isn't what it used to be even with computers and iPhones. That the I.T. revolution is less impactful and less important than any one of the 5 Great Inventions that powered economic growth from 1870 to 1970—those being electricity, modern communication (i.e. the telephone), chemicals and pharmaceuticals, the internal combustion engine, and finally urban sanitation. Indeed, into the turn of the 20th century, many parts of the financial district in New York City were seven feet deep in horse manure, many rural Americans were still playing cow-pie bingo on Sunday afternoons, and a typical North Carolina housewife carried water into her home eight to 10 times daily, walking 148 miles a year. Moreover, medicine mostly made patients as comfortable as possible until nature either healed them or killed them. Is it any wonder then that the generation that grew up between two World Wars is often remembered as America's Greatest Generation precisely because they prevailed on many fronts.

O' Captain, My Captain!

I have devoted my career to exploring 19th Century American History, because I am fascinated by this period, and over the years I have found it useful in influencing students about the world around them today and why their future is part of an ongoing development of the market place where society either accepts or rejects economic change, and then solidifies that change at the ballot box by establishing a political culture that lays constitutional and legal foundations for those advances.

Perhaps I have become what I study. Indeed, I have walked backwards into the modern world of power point, skype, and "I"-technology. "I" still use chalk, and the oldest, most technologically-challenged classrooms on campus. Surely my next move on campus will be to the "T" (Temporary) buildings, an affectionate name for those structures used during World War Two by members of the Army Air Corps who were in training. No matter, "I" shall prevail, because I continue to believe that the generation I'm teaching is going to continue some of the things my generation started.

In my 25-year career, I have taught about great leaders and signature moments that proved to be decisive turning points in American history to improve our journey in making the world a better place or in advancing our ideas of self-governance. And yet, the more I read, the more I am impressed by the simplicity of the great themes running through those persons, moments, and examples that historians characterize as “*defining*.” I have found that there are fundamental differences between those who do things right, and those who do the right thing, between situational leaders and transformational leaders, between managers and leaders, and between acting as a leader and being a leader. Often times, leaders are totally unaware that people are following them, until they turn around. So students, as you mark this occasion by accepting your award, remember you are now among a small cadre of leaders, so appreciate your place in the world.

Henceforth, your colleagues will demand your vision, your collaboration, your listening and identifying, and hopefully your actions will reflect the evolution of mature thought and emboldened determination. These qualities will be required of you: confidence, negotiation, respect for difference, civility, and the willingness according to Ralph Waldo Emerson “to go where there is no path and carve out a new one.” For example, leadership does not require authority, but rather it breeds influence, and it comes from integrity that often results not in heroism, but in humility. *If*, as Bill Gates has observed, we look into this century, we will find that leaders will be those who empower others, really no different from the past, but let’s hope we have some Abraham Lincoln’s among us. So make people around you better.

Let me leave you with a few thoughts that may have some relevance as to why a historian, and an old fashioned college professor, might have something relevant or even meaningful to say that you might take from *this* signature moment.

O’ Captain, My Captain!

As I reflect on my scholarly and pedagogical career, I have to confess that I try to impress or rather influence students with the sheer simplicity that comes from deciding to do one thing well==*challenge students to compete, to engage, to embrace, and to change how they can use the past to help them in the present.*

In all my years of teaching, I have recognized that I am most successful when I am able to pull students into the material and convince them that it is worth studying. It is worth studying not only because it is historically significant, but also because there is something useful to their own lives in understanding the world around them and how it arrived that way. I’ve tried to share with students the responsibility for working through historical problems and issues that arise in the classroom by incorporating students into the enterprise. For example, read the opening to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*....and then think about Civil Rights...

For me, there is no greater challenge and yet no higher honor than drawing students into understanding the relationship between the past, the present, and how and why knowledge is power. In today’s world, I want students to *own* their understanding of the information because it will establish within them a *credibility* that sets them apart from those who lack that knowledge. If we truly believe that knowledge is power, we must challenge students to believe that power

and autonomy are achieved by closing the gap between opinion-based knowledge and research-based knowledge, and that what is required of them is developing, owning, and being responsible for the credibility that comes with that knowledge.

O' Captain, My Captain!

Yet, perhaps my greatest impact as a historian comes from my role as an educator and observer of student development. But even better is to find that students I have had at FAU have gone on to become the great successes I knew they would be. Perhaps they were willing to allow professors to influence them in ways that equipped them for what came after college. Perhaps they found that success comes from getting up every day and advancing themselves an inch, and recognizing that eventually they had walked a mile. In these years, students must be made aware that the transcript they accumulate in college *will not* change after they graduate. Yet, that transcript will not reflect the challenges they faced, or the education they gained outside of class. Students, it is your job to make yourselves credible, relevant, and worth the chance to be great. In a world of uncertainty, make people believe you are certain. So ask yourself this: *What will be your lifelong transcript?*

In answering that question, allow me to provide you some principles that will help guide you:

1. Be humbled by success, don't dance in public.
2. Be willing to confess you don't have all the answers, but be informed enough to know how to find them.
3. When you are wrong, have the confidence to own it as much as being right—arrogance is no longer fashionable.
4. Accept that there is no labor beneath you, so stretch.
5. Being silent is powerful, but listening is educational: do both
6. Become credible by banking your opinion with intellectual currency, and make deposits often.
7. Recognize that the market place owes you nothing, but the chance to compete—so be competitive
8. Pack your own parachute, but let others watch.
9. Take what you do seriously, but not yourself
10. Learn to hit curveballs, but have confidence in being a 2-strike hitter.
11. In college, your only job is to get smarter, so don't complain and get your money's worth.
12. Carve your own path in life so people will be impressed by your willingness to go first and possibly fail—then show them how to get up, move on, and reclaim the journey.

O' Captain, My Captain...You cannot escape history, and you will remembered in spite of yourself. So be memorable!

Thank you for this honor and privilege!