

## **1974 Distinguished Teacher of the Year**

**Roger A. Messenger, Ph.D.**

**Assistant Professor of Electrical Engineering  
College of Engineering**

In reviewing the presentations of my predecessors at this convocation, I found that just about everything I had planned to discuss had already been discussed. Admittedly, I was a bit disappointed at first, but then I realized the significance of the similarities in presentations. It was quite apparent to me that Dr. Courtenay, Dr. Schwartz, Dr. Ziegler, Dr. Tessin and Dr. Gatlin are very concerned about the problems facing education today.

Now, if we had a box of light bulbs and we tested five of them in a row and found them all to be good, we would be reasonably confident that most, if not all, of the remaining bulbs were good. Here we have identified six educators who are concerned about these problems (since I, too, fall into this category), and I suspect it is a legitimate generalization that MOST educators are concerned with the problems facing education today.

Dr. Courtenay did an excellent job of presenting the problems confronting the attainment of a quality education, and I strongly encourage everyone in this audience to read his address from last year, then keep your program and show it to your friends so they may also read it. I think you will agree with me that Dr. Courtenay's ideas deserve widespread circulation.

Increasing numbers of educators are agreeing that education must change in order to meet the needs of everyone. But it is also true that these necessary changes will take too long to implement to benefit those presently emerging as products of our educational system. Today I would like to address myself to one segment of these people – the students presently in attendance at Florida Atlantic University.

Very few people would set out to build a new house without first drawing up a set of plans. Similarly, most cooks use recipes, scientists use formulas and football players gather into huddles before executing plays. In all cases here we have an end product being attained by following some sort of a plan. Naturally, not all plans are necessarily good plans, but, in general, the better the recipe, the better the cake and the better the play, the more yardage is gained.

I think a college education can be compared very nicely with a football game, and maybe this is just the right time of year to do so. The players on the team can be compared with the courses listed in the catalog. All we need now are some plays to make the best use of the players.

What I hope to accomplish here is to show that a proper plan and a proper attitude can lead to a rewarding college experience even though the overall available program might be considered by some to be inadequate or incomplete.

Let's look first at the importance of attitudes.

Not long ago, a student fresh out of college and ready to go to work interviewed for a position with a large company. After some discussion with the interviewer, it was brought out that at present the only position available was an opening in the custodial department.

"But I have a college degree," was the startled student's reply.

"No problem," said the interviewer. "Your academic record indicates that we should be able to train you for the job in a matter of weeks."

Although maybe a bit far-fetched, this little story has several important implications.

First of all, there is sometimes a tendency for college graduates to feel they are somehow too valuable to perform certain tasks.

Secondly, there is sometimes a tendency for college graduates to feel that it is necessary for them to find a job with "prestige" (whatever that might be).

Thirdly, there is a tendency for college graduates to feel that they are suited ONLY to do work directly related to their college field of study — as teachers, engineers, etc.

Maybe the most significant part of the story, however, is the last part about being trainable, because, to me, this is what a college education is all about.

Let's look at each of these ideas a bit more closely.

First of all, is there such a thing as a trivial job? I think not. Any job that needs doing is an exercise in discipline and tolerance. If there is a person for whom the task is not trivial, then the task is not trivial. To the mentally retarded person who is trained to operate a sewing machine, this job represents a significant accomplishment. When a college graduate enters the realm of non-college graduates, he will receive either respect or resentment, depending on the attitude he conveys. Looking down upon someone generates resentment. Looking across to an equal generates respect. We must realize

that all jobs are essential to the welfare of our society, and hence no task can be looked down upon. For example, suppose all of the medical doctors in New York City were to walk off their jobs for two weeks. How many people would be affected? Suppose all of the sanitation workers would walk off their jobs for two weeks. Now how many would be affected?

I have often wondered why prestige is so important to so many people. Somehow it seems to me that job emphasis should be placed on satisfaction instead. To me the quest for prestige often leads to inflated egos, ulcers and dissatisfaction. I do not mean to say that we should not strive for excellence, because I think excellence should be the means by which we attain satisfaction.

It seems to me that a college graduate should be able to become a plumber, an auto mechanic, an electrician, a carpenter or even a sanitation worker. I believe the most significant feature of a college degree is that it shows that the bearer has 1) perseverance, 2) a desire to learn and 3) a desire to perform. I believe the name of the college degree to be only of secondary importance. After all, four years of college is a very small fraction of a lifetime. I do not believe that lifetime goals must emerge from four years at college. Have you ever asked yourself why you are studying what you are studying? Don't you suppose there is probably something else you might enjoy equally well or maybe even better? Now, I do not mean to suggest that right away today everyone should change majors, but I do think it is a real shame when a person trained as a teacher or an anthropologist or a historian or an engineer or whatever gets down on society for not providing a job in the right field. Whenever we ask society to provide for us, we are asking for something for nothing, and as physicists will tell us, it is necessary to put energy into a system before energy can be extracted.

What I am suggesting is that to make the most of a college education, a person should have broad career visibility. He should be willing to accept any position for which a potential employer feels he might be qualified. The proper mental attitude can change any job into a rewarding career.

Is there anything a student can do while in college to better prepare for the transition into the working world? Definitely! Actually it is very simple. The idea is to study course material with the idea that someday it will fit in somewhere. If it is not immediately evident where the material will be useful, have faith. Probably in a year or two or maybe even longer you will be able to put it to use. It is aggravating to me to listen to some people say that college just teaches a lot of theory that is never used in real life. Sure, it helps when an instructor can say what something is good for, but even if real life examples are given, chances are that the concept in question will ultimately be applied to something different anyway. I sometimes hear graduates come back and

say they never use anything we taught them. When I hear this I find it necessary to remind them that the most important thing anyone learns in college is how to learn, and if the ability to learn is discarded, then so is the potential to succeed.

There are two things that a student often must find out for himself in college.

These two things result from different approaches to the learning process. I call them the thinking vs. cookbook syndrome and the confidence vs. textbook syndrome. They are closely related, both resulting from the choice of whether to use one's own mind or someone else's.

I believe essential ingredients of a college education are to learn to think and to learn to have confidence in your ideas. I do not mean to say you should not respond to constructive criticism of your ideas. This is, of course, important. But too many students when taking open book exams encounter questions which they can answer without opening the book, and then proceed directly to looking up the answers rather than writing them down. To me this is a fine way to eat away at confidence rather than build it up.

Remember, the ability to make decisions is very important, and the capability to think and to have confidence is the foundation for decision-making.

Before ending my comments on attitudes, there is one more item I would like to observe. This is the case of certain courses being required in a program even though they seem to be unrelated to the program. These are the so-called "enrichment" courses, such as humanities for engineers, math for musicians, or maybe that statistics course for psychologists, or maybe those all-time favorite language courses.

I have noticed that three attitudes seem to prevail with regard to these "enrichment" courses. Probably the most prevalent attitude is the "Well, I don't like the idea, but since I can't get out of it I guess I will stick it out" attitude. A close contender for second place is the "I resent some idiot saying that I have to take this course, and I have no intention of getting anything but myself out of this course" attitude. Finally, a few people take the "If I am required to take this course it must be good for something, so even though I don't think I will like the course, I will work hard at it and do my best to enjoy it" attitude.

Which attitude do you suppose will best prepare a student to enter the so-called "cruel and mean world," where it is not possible to do only what a person wants to do – where it is necessary to learn to take the bad along with the good?

So, indeed, attitude can make a big difference in college success. Now let's briefly discuss the game plan mentioned earlier.

Very little needs to be said about the game plan. It all boils down to seeking out good counseling. Again, every student has his own unique scheduling problems, but again we seem to have three groups of students – those who know for sure what they want to do, those who think they know what they want to do and those who simply cannot decide what they want to do. Even though it is, in general, difficult to register for a quarter without first seeing an advisor, many students wishing to demonstrate their independence avoid the proper registration channels and subsequently find their program messed up due to lack of prerequisites or improper sequencing.

If you think you have a problem (or if you know you have a problem) you should know that many levels of counseling are available to you here at FAU, and I strongly urge you to use whatever you need. If you need career guidance, aptitude testing is available. If you need psychological guidance, it is also available. Many other sorts of counseling are also available to anyone who will go to the Student Affairs office and just ask.

Believe me, with the proper approach it IS possible to turn your college education into a valuable experience. I am confident that all of you will someday look back and realize that your stay here at FAU was really worth it.

Thank you.