



Wednesday, September 3, 2003

Associate Professor Mary Stein convocation speech

Thank you, Steven.

Students, parents, members of the Board of Trustees, President Russi and esteemed colleagues...It is an honor and a pleasure to be with you today to share in this occasion, which marks an important turning point in your lives.

Teaching is my passion and I believe that is why I was asked to talk with you today. I am not a speech-giver, I am a teacher. So that is how I need to approach my few minutes with you today.

German educator and philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbart stated my beliefs about teaching best with one memorable quote. I will give you the first few words, and I would like you to share with the person next to you, how you would finish Herbart's quote. He said, "In teaching, the greatest sin is..."

Now, although I appreciate what Herbart said, as a teacher, I know that some of you said things that were funnier, more profound, more insightful, or more inspirational than Herbart.

How boring it would be if teachers simply dictated profound statements for students to absorb and memorize rather than listening to students and their beliefs.

It is their ideas in the context of new understandings that can make a class so interesting! The ending to Herbart's quote – because I know some of you can't stand not knowing whether you were right – was: "In teaching, the greatest sin is to be boring."

I could fill my time with you by giving you examples of how teaching and learning is made "not boring" at Oakland. For example, when my daughter was a student in a playwriting course here, the students were asked to select five favorite acts written by their fellow classmates.

At the same time, students in the beginning acting class were told that they would be putting some of their newly developed acting skills to work the following week with another class as the audience.

These two classes came together with one class acting out the work of another. I was in the audience and the results were simply amazing. Not only was I thoroughly entertained, I was amazed at what both classes had accomplished in such a short period of time.

Similarly, in one course I teach, I am preparing students to teach science to elementary children. Instead of simply writing wonderful and engaging lesson plans or perhaps practicing teaching with their adult peers, students in this course are required to teach their lessons to real elementary children.

There really is no substitution for this experience. Children will ask questions like: "If plants need light to grow, why do we plant the seeds under ground where it is dark?" or "If the sun is what lights the earth, then why is space between the sun and the earth dark?"

My students need to know how to respond and what to do even when they don't know the answers. Teachers at Oakland, independent of your major, earnestly try to prepare you for your chosen profession through these types of experiences. And they aren't boring.

I heard once, that when you talk to a large group of people, it is usually the case that about 1/3 are really paying attention, 1/3 are flitting in and out - partially thinking about what you are saying and partially thinking about other things in their lives, and yet another third are completely fantasizing.

Before I continue, I just want to say that I'm glad that 1/3 of you are having a good time. But seriously, that is part of the challenge in teaching too. I know my students have lives and are also thinking about and concerned with other things in their lives.

I know that I need to keep them involved if they are truly going to learn from the courses I teach. At the same time, there has to

be a willingness to learn on the part of the student. Students, you all have heard it – you will get as much out of a situation as you put into it. But, it is so true. It certainly is true for my students.

You may find yourself in a course or situation that simply seems “boring” or doesn’t excite you. Challenge yourself to find the excitement and make the experience worthwhile. Put more into it, and you will get more out of it.

Parents, I would like you to know that along with being a professor at Oakland, I am a mother of four. Your son or daughter’s teachers are real people who are caring, compassionate, and want students to learn and do well.

There are many people here who are more than willing to help and do whatever we can to help students achieve.

During my first semester at Oakland, I was working in my office, and I think it was lunchtime and my office door was the only one open at the time.

A young student knocked at my door with tears in her eyes asking if this was the office where students could take the English placement test. Well, it wasn’t the office, it wasn’t even in the right building, and furthermore, as a new faculty, I didn’t even know where she should go.

I stopped what I was doing, found a senior colleague and we made a few calls to determine exactly where she needed to go. We pointed it out on a map and made a call to make sure that there was someone on the other end who could help her.

We sent this student on her way – smiling and thankful. What she doesn’t know is that the two of us also followed up with a phone call to make sure that she made it to where she needed to be. I tell you this because, I think that this anecdote is illustrative of what is typical at Oakland - we care about our students.

Students, I hope this example also has a message for you. You need to ask questions – there are many here who want to help. You also need to participate, and you need to be open-minded. Are you open-minded and willing to explore new opportunities?

This reminds me of a story. On a train, Picasso met a man who announced with some disgust that Picasso’s paintings didn’t look anything like real people. Picasso asked the man to show him something that did look like a real person, and the man pulled out a photograph of his wife. Picasso studied the photograph for a moment and said, “She’s awfully small, isn’t she?... And flat!”

I hope that during your years at Oakland you will not only open your minds to new ideas, and new experiences, but embrace them. Thank you for listening, welcome to Oakland, peace and good luck!

SUMMARY

Associate Professor Mary Stein spoke of strategies for finding success in the classroom during her speech at New Student Convocation.

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