

# WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A GOOD AND AN ENTHUSIASTIC TEACHER: A Personal Reflection

## I. Preface

I am truly honored to be the recipient of the 1996 Florence J. Lucasse Lectureship award for “excellence” in teaching. I would like to thank all of you very much, for joining me and my family to celebrate this happy occasion. This award means a lot to me for the following three reasons.

First, to me, this award represents a clear confirmation (endorsement) by my colleagues and students about the high esteem they have of me as a teacher--my chosen profession.

Second, it means a good deal to me to receive this award from an institution where excellence in teaching is expected by students and accepted as a norm by the faculty. Believe me, K-College is blessed with many dedicated and outstanding teachers.

Third, this award has been a source of happiness and pride not just for me, but for the entire Hussien clan.

## II. Introduction Remarks

When I began preparing for the “brief” remark that I am about to make tonight, I started with a firm decision that, whatever topic I choose to speak tonight, it should be something that would inform the audience (you) about me. (That is, who I am, what I do, what turns me on and what turns me off.) Once I made this crucial initial decision, several ideas started to cross my mind. Before I start discussing the main topic that I finally chose for tonight, I thought it would be quite appropriate to give you quick synopsis of some of the other topics that I have been seriously considering for this event.

- *What is a son of a very zealously pious and illiterate salt merchant from a very isolated place in Africa doing in a place like this--one of the elite private colleges in America?* You may say what is this all about! Well, you see, like many other first immigrants to this country, whenever I get a chance, I would like others to know about my humble origin; my insatiable drive to succeed; my remarkable personal achievements despite the enormous odds against me; etc. If you don't believe this, ask my two daughters who are repeatedly reminded “how life has been incredibly easy to them,” followed by “a personal story of difficulties that their father had to go thorough under similar circumstances.” Their normal response to my serious commentary about their “easy” life, is “here goes Daddy!”

- *The information technology (IT) revolution and the future of higher education institutions.* I was contemplating to address this issue primarily from the perspective of the concerns I have about the future of my own professional career. You see, under the current law, I have at least fifteen years before becoming eligible for early retirement. My greatest fear is then, given the extraordinary speed at which information technology is transforming the classroom teaching, will I be able to continue using a blackboard and colored chalks for the next fifteen years? You see, to me, blackboard and chalks are not just tools any more. More than anything else, they are my security blankets. If you don't believe me ask my students. Also ask Susan Wong (our registrar) on how insistent I am in my demand for a class-room with a big blackboard. For this very reason, as you may easily guess, my favorite class-room is Dewing 305. My "fear" of the IT revolution is simply this. What would happen to my teaching effectiveness, if my "old reliable teaching accessories are declared obsolete in the near future. To me, excessive use of transparencies, slides, and computers makes teaching awkward and impersonal. I like to see the faces of my students in a clearly lighted class-room. That way, I can spot the students when they are sleeping! Furthermore, at the end of my lecture, I like to see my hands fully covered with choke dust--that way I know I was really laboring!
- *The "relevance" of economics to the average person.* Will economists ever respond to the mundane concerns of the average person, without using their favorite conditional (escape) clauses, such as, "if", or "other things remain equal". Ask economists these questions: Roughly, when should "I" expect the bull-market to end? What stocks should "I" buy if "I" want to get a 50% return on my investment? Will "I" be able to count on my social security when "I" retire fifteen years from now? Would economists be able to answer such practical and ordinary questions without a major qualification(s) that renders their response to these questions meaningless, and without an apparent disagreement among themselves. *Clearly, as you can see I have real concerns about the relevance of modern economics and the credibility of my fellow economists!*

*Is humanity marching towards an inevitable (unavoidable) collusion with nature? An ecological and economic perspectives!* I entertained this topic because it would have exposed the serious side of me--the paramount economic and social issues that have been central to my scholarly endeavors for the past eighteen years. I am a natural resource economist. As a serious field of inquiry, the subject matter of natural resource economics, deals with how a society should manage its dowry from nature *now* and in the *future*--between the present and future generations. What is at stake here is the management of environmental and natural resources in a *socially responsible manner*. Unfortunately, to achieve this goal, the necessary social policies and the moral and human implications are surely different depending on ones assumptions

about *natural limits* and *human's ingenuity* and *wisdom*. As such, this is a subject matter with good deal of controversies. If I go any further in this subject matter, I am afraid you will be bored to death. Enough of this!

- Finally, the moment has arrived to reveal to you the topic that I have chosen for today's event. *What does it take to be a good and enthusiastic teacher: A personal reflection.*

### **III. What Does it Take to be a Good and an Enthusiastic Teacher: *A personal reflection***

On the basis of my own experience, I can enumerate four major factors that I consider to be essential to succeed in and remain enthusiastic to teaching: (1) Strong academic program with a supportive, cooperative, and inspiring departmental colleagues. (2) Understanding, supportive and loving family. (3) Institutional environment that is conducive to teaching. (4) Students who are curious and with strong interest and will to learn.

Let me now briefly elaborate on each one of the above factors using my personal experience as a case.

#### **1. Strong Academic Program with Supportive, Cooperative and Inspiring Department Colleagues:**

I joined K-College in 1985. At this time, the faculty consists of: Tom Breznau, Tom Taylor, Fred Strobel, Phil Thomas. While none of these faculty members are with us any longer, I will never forget the enthusiastic support and encouragement that they had given me in my early years at this institution. Their strong support was also instrumental for my obtaining tenure at the college. Right after I became tenured, June 1988, I was asked to chair the department. My first major task as a chair of the department was to recruit a faculty for a position that Professor Hannah McKinney now occupies. To make long story short, since my initial appointment as a chair of the department many things have changed in the department. First, we have now an entirely new cast of faculty composed of: Mike Athey, Tim Moffit, Ken Reinert, Hannah McKinney. Second, our curriculum have undergone a thorough and substantive changes.

This new cast of departmental colleagues are very "special" to me. After all, I have chaired all the search committees that recruited them. Understandably then, their professional success means a good deal to me.

- I take special pride, when Hannah published her book; became a tenured member of the college; became the chair of the Kalamazoo City Planning Commission. Let me add also that it is always a heart

warming experience to observe the compassion Hannah regularly displays towards her students.

- I take a special pride, when I am notified that, once again Ken Reinert has published another article; when I read students comments about Ken's outstanding class performance; and his growing involvement in worthwhile community affairs; such as his roles as the chair of the diversity keystone, and as the representative of the faculty at large in FEC. etc.
- I feel very "fortunate" to be associated with a colleague like Tim Moffit whose love/hate relationships with his students never stops to amaze me, and in some ways also puzzles me. You hear his students openly complaining about how demanding his courses are of their "precious" time. Yet, at the end of the quarter, you read a course evaluation that are filled with positive comments beyond description. They consider him as the most inspiring teacher and consider his courses as the most relevant or practical--when compared, of course, with a course offered by a bunch of theoretical economists--the rest of us!
- Although he has not been with us for a long-time, I have been quite impressed by the tireless effort that Mike Athey is putting to make the Monroe Seminar a big and worthwhile event at K.
- This year we have added one more faculty member working with us with a part-time appointment--Mr. Mike Stull. When we appointed Mr. Stull, I assured our Associate Provost, Lonnie Supnick, that he is an outstanding and student oriented teacher. He then said to me that he will support his appointment under one condition. If Mr. Stull would not turn-out to be as good a teacher as I promised him to be, it will cost me half of my salary. Well, six months after wards, Mr. Stull is still with us.
- These are my departmental colleagues. They respect me, and I respect them. I am truly blessed to work with colleagues who inspire, support and push each other; and whose love for teaching is unquestionable. We are always ready to learn from each other--we even circulate our students evaluation.
- Furthermore, because of this cooperative environment that exists among us, we have been able to create, design and implement an economic and business curriculum which is of very high quality and consistent with the overall educational philosophy of a liberal arts education.

Thus, it will be hard not to be an inspired and effective teacher given the kind of colleagues that I have and the curriculum that we have been able to design over the past seven years.

## **2. Understanding and loving family members:**

- It does not matter what profession you are in, family support is an essential ingredient to one's professional success.
- I am truly blessed of having a family that is loving and extremely supportive.
  - Sophia and Aida have been my constant source of joy. I have yet to see the kind of horror story I have been told to expect when they become teenagers. I am graying, but not a single one of my gray hair can be attributed to these two kids.(They are all from my students!) I want to specially thank them for one thing. Like most teachers, I have the habit of carrying work at home on a rather routinely basis. This means, compromising with family time, and I want to thank (officially tonight) for being so understanding. [Sophia's story! work hard to get A, to go to good college--more work, to get a good job that you work hard, etc...]

About my wife. What can I say! You see, we both came from a culture where complementing one's own spouse publicly is sort of considered as a social taboo. My general tendency is to say nothing or very little about my wife publicly, especially if she is with me. In my wife's case, consistent with her culture, her tendency is to put me down! Today, I am going to break a cultural taboo, and confess publicly that Fumie is not just my wife, she is my partner in everything I do. This is the truth. Since our marriage, I do not think there has been anything (family or professional matters) of significance that I have done without significant consultation and inputs from Fumie.

## **3. Institutional Environment that is Conducive to Teaching:**

Over the last seventeen years, I have been quite fortunate to be associated with two excellent teaching institutions; Allegheny and Kalamazoo Colleges. These are two institutions that uphold educational missions that I can readily identify with, and I am especially attracted by their unwavering commitment to teaching and to a Liberal Arts education. In addition, because of their excellent reputations as teaching institutions, they attracted students with academic quality and personal discipline that are conducive for designing and implementing innovative and challenging academic programs. A teacher is only as good as the material (students) that she/he has to work with. To this extent, there is no substitute for working with highly motivated and able students. My association with these two quality educational institutions has had another positive dimension. This has to do with the opportunity that I have had working with a group of faculty who truly consider teaching to be their first priority.

The upshot is clear. It is hardly difficult to sustain one's enthusiasm to teach, a key ingredient for effective teaching, when working in an environment where excellence

in teaching in constantly heralded by the institution, expected by students and accepted as a norm by the faculty.

#### **4. Students Who are Curious and with Strong Interest and Will to Learn:**

As a faculty, generally, we have the tendency of bashing our students. This is true even in an institution like K where we are fortunate enough to have an abundant number of hard working, well-disciplined and curious students. However, I often found it curious that when we complain about our students it is generally geared towards the current generation (the ill-prepared freshmen; the lackluster sophomores; the elusive juniors; the freaked out seniors, etc.). Fortunately, this does not last for ever. A decade or so after their graduation, we start to see them differently. Often, and unashamedly, we say to each other, you know, compared with the current generation of students, a decade or so ago, students used to be more serious, curious and engaging. They were simply fun to teach! How quickly we forget! Or, how unappreciative we are of our current generation students!

I don't claim to be any different than my other colleagues in this regard. That is, I am also inflicted with the habit of bashing current generation students. At the same time, I want to tell you this. I am in a teaching profession for one and only one reason. For the immeasurable satisfaction I receive from observing the personal and intellectual development of my students.

Thus, the last and by no means the lest factor that contributes to my continued excitement to teach is the personal satisfaction I receive from observing the intellectual, personal, and professional growth of the students that I have been teaching and advising over the past seventeen years. To this end, I have no problem putting in extra hours to help students when they are struggling in my own classes; consoling them when they are feeling psychologically and emotionally down; and recommending them to potential employers or to graduate schools. I also enjoy participating in informal gatherings with students and in more formal ceremonial events designed to celebrate their achievements of my students, such as academic honors awards, graduation and weddings. Furthermore, nothing gives me more pleasure than the enduring quality of my relationships with most of my students. I truly enjoy receiving letters from my former students, and I often read them several times before putting them away for my memorabilia. It is really true that by the virtue of teaching in an institution like Kalamazoo College, I have the pleasure of knowing that the membership of my extended family is growing every year. To the extent that my contributions have been positive, the very prospect of being abler to enlarge my circle of influence is a sufficient enough factor for me to continue being excited about my career as a teacher.