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An Honors Director's Credo

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An Honors Director's Credo

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“**F**inis Origine Pendet” wrote Manlius: the end depends upon the beginning. True enough. But what if we looked at a desired end to work backward and see what steps we might take to get to that place? What do we want for our children, for our students, and for the graduates of our schools? What do we hope to see when we look across our desks at job applicants? What do we watch for on television when candidates for office are explaining their reasons for wanting to serve and what they intend to accomplish if elected? What do we want for the people we love and for those we might not know but whose future prospects will affect our own?

My hope for students, regardless of their age, is the same as my hope for my children: full brains, open minds, the ability to read, write, think, and speak clearly, the optimism and service ethic to believe that they can change the world for the better, and the initiative and *savoir faire* to figure out how to do that. I want them to know when to lead, when to follow, and when to stand against the crowd because the crowd, while often wrong, is seldom uncertain. I want them to treasure their loved ones and treat them well, to know that the troubles they face in life have been faced and overcome (or endured) by others, to be able to be alone without being lonely, and to respect themselves. I want their souls to be full and their bodies to be clean of so-called recreational drugs and excess alcohol. I want them to challenge me, to make their own way through life, and to help others.

Here's what I believe: to help them get to this desired end, every student deserves the sort of education currently reserved for the economically and culturally fortunate. All students should have the opportunity to be engaged as active participants in their education and its application, to think about Falstaff's notion of honor, to analyze Thatcher's foreign policy, and to assess their own place in the world. Student education, rather than grades and test scores, should be our nation's concern; achievement in the school, community, and world ought to be valued above the ability to fill in the correct circles on scantron sheets. While I don't care whether I personally agree with students' political and religious leanings, I think they ought to be given the opportunity to think about their beliefs, test them, challenge them, and, when appropriate, either return to them or replace them.

I am espousing an old-fashioned, liberal-arts, “free your mind” education, but I am not proposing that schools ought to consult E. D. Hirsch's lists of cultural literacy or that students ought to read Plato's “Allegory of the Cave”

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because doing so will somehow make them better people. Like Richard Ira Scott and Phillip L. Frana, I believe that “We study great books not simply because the canon is what one studies but because its answers have stood the test of time in coping with recurring human problems” (28). Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” raises such issues as how we construct rules and ways of living despite having only very partial knowledge about the true nature of the world around us. Our assumptions are going to be wrong; however, as human beings we must construct such hypotheses as we go through life or risk everything. What person couldn’t benefit from wrestling with this concept as well as the myriad others encompassed by Plato’s allegory? This allegory isn’t important because it is canonical. It is canonical because it raises issues that are important to us as we go through our lives and try to make sense of the world and because it has spoken to readers through the generations.

We all live in a material world and have to be equipped to participate in it, but it is just as important that students be equipped to think about the reasons they make the choices they do and have the aspirations they have. In fact, most of us could probably use more space and time to think about the world, about reality, about what we value, and about the sort of legacy, if any, we hope to leave. Plato, Toni Morrison, Thomas Jefferson, and Goethe all offer the possibility of engaging with these ideas and leaving that engagement enriched and deepened; this is more worthwhile than equating the value of reading these texts to increased scores on a final exam or the GRE.

Students should leave secondary school and college with the ability to read well, write and speak clearly, think deeply, be honest, do effective research, and be skeptical, although not cynical, about the various voices and institutions vying for their allegiance. These abilities aren’t “instilled”: they have to be taught, modeled, encouraged, and developed over time. Too often I think we lose sight of the bigger picture, which is that we are all engaged in the practice of preparing students for their lives. In our own lives, how often have we assumed that if *our* child or *our* nephew earns a poor grade in a class, he must be exhorted to work harder or should be transferred to a different section of the same class so that he will excel; however, later that day, at work, we are baffled by a student’s horror and shaken self-image at having earned a B+ on an exam. Where, we wonder, did our students learn to confuse grades with learning?

At a practical level, I have protected the honors program scholarship of a first-year English major who thought it would be “interesting” to take Calculus during his first semester, flunked his first two exams, and had to remain in the class in order to retain his full-time status. He flunked the class, but he had tried heroically all semester long, which seems far more important than the fact that his grades temporarily fell below our suggested minimum 3.4 GPA. This student tried, learned, and came to grips with the new concept of himself as a man who could neither work nor think himself out of every situation. We have talked several times about Calculus and about that F, and he tells me that this class and grade were among them most important experiences of his life.

Of course, complications abound. Liberal-arts education is expensive, and our universities and schools often lack the funds to offer small classes and focused guidance to everyone. Further, reflecting upon Falstaff's discourse on honor is not practical in a world in which jobs skills and the ability to learn new skills are prized. In addition, some would argue that there is no point in asking students to question accepted truths when we ought to be providing more certainty in an uncertain world. Some might argue against pie-in-the-sky dreaming that has no practical application and that does not distinguish between the strengths, weaknesses, and backgrounds that students bring with them when they matriculate. If the end depends upon the beginning, we in higher education have no way of allowing for what has happened to our students before they arrive on our campus.

In response, I propose that we consider students' first day on campus to be day one in our efforts to help them attain a first-rate, timeless education for active, thoughtful, and even influential citizenship. The specific details of this first-rate education differ from school to school, but the qualities I have described above ought to be ones that any curriculum strives to inculcate, whether the student is enrolled at a community college, a private liberal arts college, or a large land-grant university. Sadly, though, William Deresiewicz is persuasive when he asserts that ". . . when students get to college, they hear a couple of speeches telling them to ask the big questions, and when they graduate, they hear a couple more speeches telling them to ask big questions. And in between, they spend four years taking courses that train them to ask little questions—specialized courses, taught by specialized professors, aimed at specialized students" (6). What can we do to take students where they are on day one and guide them through college asking the big questions and attaining an education that will equip them to lead good, productive lives?

Here is one possibility. Knowing that my first-year honors students at Clarke College in the fall of 2005 came from a variety of backgrounds (good schools; poor schools; sheltered family life; co-parenting of younger siblings), I set them all to reading Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* as the second class text after Mark Haddon's *curious incident of the dog in the night time*. Haddon's text and our conversations about it had given me some idea of their facility as decoders of text as well as their willingness to participate in the give-and-take of class discussion. When we started *Discipline and Punish*, a notoriously intimidating book, I assured students that nobody on campus, from first-year through senior year was at that moment engaged in reading and reflecting upon a more difficult text. What I didn't tell them was that I had no illusions that they would understand the text particularly well. If, at graduation, they remembered the concept of the panopticon or the original and purposes of the penitentiary, I would be thrilled.

I had chosen this book because I knew that none of them would have read it, and so it would put all of them in the same situation. The alumni of "good" high schools, who had read novels instead of short stories in English class and

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had taken a raft of AP classes, were as confused as the less well-read students even though they had a wider array of coping strategies to use as they read the text and could share these strategies with their classmates. In discussions, my more academically confident students expressed uncertainty about what Foucault was “getting at” while students who had let the much less rigorous discussion of Haddon’s novel wash over them hazarded opinions, ideas, and questions about the panopticon and whether mastery of the body would yield mastery of the soul. With me acting the part of goalie, keeping the ball in play, the class nibbled away at *Discipline and Punish*, complained about it, and bonded over their shared sense that they were doing something difficult but kind of cool. If they read it again, they will be surprised by how much they missed as first-year students; however, I am surprised and heartened by how much they caught and how they both critiqued it and wove it into their academic lives.

For instance, in the spring of that academic year, Clarke College’s first-year honors students gave group presentations at the regional honors conference that drew on their study of Foucault. Messing around with an unwieldy text, sharing and debating ideas about it, seeing the implications of what they’d read in their world and in their research, practicing their arguments in front of their classmates, making Powerpoint presentations for their audience, and then going off to Minnesota to share their work with strangers: these are only some of the results of having a disparate group of smart students engage with a text too obdurate for them to master during their first semester of college. Rather than setting them up to fail, this text and the discussions, research work, and writing assignments it entailed helped give the students a confidence that comes from meeting a tough challenge and from developing the intellectual skills they will need in other contexts.

Taking on a difficult text is only one example of how a curriculum or a classroom teacher can provide solid, thought-provoking opportunities for students at various levels of ability and with varied educational backgrounds. Day one of their college experience was day one of our work together, and we didn’t look in the rear view mirror at their earlier education; rather, we built upon the tools they had and helped them move to another level. Every student became a better writer, problem-solver, and public speaker than before, regardless of the quality of their early education.

This class also required that I learn to cede control of the speed and focus of our conversations about Foucault. I could not walk into the classroom with a list of goals to accomplish or words to define and be ready for the starts and stalls of a discussion about the text. On one day, it seemed that the room was populated by the brightest minds on earth, but on the next day, when they were cranky and convinced that I had answers I refused to share, I wondered why I chose to become a teacher. I would be tempted to give them a mini-lecture on the contexts in which *Discipline and Punish* was written and published and the ways scholars have responded to it; instead, I would ask if anyone wanted to hazard a guess about the answer to the question a classmate had just asked and then show us what in the text yielded that possibility.

As I learn anew each time I decide to imagine the first day of classes to be the first step in my students' educational process, I cannot predict what will happen in class; I can only control the tenor or productivity of discussion, not the content. I leave class with my head reeling from seventy-five minutes as the referee of a free-wheeling, spirited discussion that comes close to going into some weird direction, and then I overhear one student tell another that I—the teacher who sat there listening to everything, reading body language, prodding one student to develop her thought and another to engage that thought—didn't "do" much of anything in class. If "doing" means performing, they are probably right; however, if "doing" means encouraging students to figure things out for themselves and with each other, they are not. They may take a while to realize what has happened in class, but they probably will. In the meantime, with my head aching from mental exertion, I may well become cranky about that "did nothing" comment and toy with the notion of putting myself front and center of the classroom the next day so that my students can see how hard I work.

I could never say that the activities of this two-semester sequence of classes at Clarke College were definitive in students' education or that they ought to be replicated in curricula across our colleges and universities. Rather, I would assert that the courses enacted some of the practices many of us want for our students. First, the Foucault reading assignment mitigated some of the differences in students' previous educational experiences by putting everyone in the position to be confused and then to work their way out of the confusion. Second, while Foucault was addressing himself to an older, more academic audience, his observations and anecdotes lend themselves to both theoretical and practical application, allowing both future engineers and future poets to be intrigued enough to imagine themselves doing the research and the experiments required to culminate in fifteen-minute presentations at the regional conference in Saint Cloud, Minnesota.

Interestingly, the shyest students in August of 2005 turned out to be among the most polished presenters at the conference. Multiple speeches with constructive peer feedback, constant revision of their research topics, experimentation with Powerpoint, and a year with a solid peer group dedicated to their own and their colleagues' improvement all combined to help these students imagine themselves as experts prepared enough and worthy enough to hold the floor at a conference of students and faculty members from other schools.

Yes, the end depends upon the beginning. We teachers and administrators cannot reach back to our students' first days, assuring them ideal upbringings and educations; however, instead of despairing about what we cannot do, we can do our best to work with our students where they are and to help, guide, and cajole them toward the places they and we would like them to be. We can coach our students to free their minds to pursue the big questions of life and question the meaning of the education they are undertaking. These questions are worth asking, and we owe it to our students to give them the tools to ask them and to come to their own conclusions.

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