

THE EXPONENT ONLINE

Reader's Choice for best professor '09 says goodbye to Purdue

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On April 16, I arrived on campus and, as usual, picked up my copy of The Exponent. A special edition containing "The Exponent Reader's Choice Awards," it made my heart skip a beat when I saw that readers had selected me as best professor for 2009. I felt joy and humbled gratitude. Now that I'll be leaving Purdue after 20 years of service, I want to share a brief anecdote and a few thoughts that encapsulate what Purdue students have come to mean to me.

When I first came to campus in the fall of 1989, to teach "Intro to Psychology," I was actually quite nervous as I surveyed a sea of expectant faces (more than 400 of them). But when my TA said, "Maybe you shouldn't speak – after all, you're a woman," I was so appalled that I forgot my anxiety and began boldly, "Welcome to Psych 120!" And after sensing a welcoming response, I fell in love with "introducing" Purdue students to the basic concepts in psychology.

Twenty years and more than 30,000 students later, I want to say a heartfelt thanks. My "last lecture," if you will, is an attempt to tell Purdue students what they – what you – have taught me.

First, you've completely conditioned me to lose my New York accent. In forcing me to pronounce words more clearly, you've also polished me!

Second, you've taught me that if I teach from my heart you'll receive with your heart. Students are not simply cerebral cortexes on campus to memorize and regurgitate facts. You are inquisitive, open-minded individuals who are good learners and good skeptics. You want to know that what you're learning is worthwhile – that it will resonate with you emotionally as well as cognitively.

Third, you've taught me that part of my preparation, as your educator, is not simply to be ready with the relevant lecture, but also to be prepared in mind and attitude. A professor's mood is mirrored back to him or her; the neurological mechanism partly responsible for such responsiveness is the "mirroring neuron." So, if I come to class excited about the day's lecture, that excitement will likely return to me 400-fold. Those are pretty good odds!

Fourth, you've taught me that preparing a good lecture is much like preparing a fine meal. It's my job to add just the right ingredients, in the form of accessible material, Power-Point images, student interaction, real-life examples, and so on. My reward has been the flicker of excitement and recognition in your eyes, letting me know that we connected over the pedagogic concept of the day.

Fifth, you've helped keep me young and hungry to keep up with a rapidly changing society so radically different

from the one I remember 20 years ago. You've also taught me that some concepts are timeless and some experiments continue to be "shocking" in their revelation of human nature, even if they might strike us now as antiquated.

I've also learned this:

– A good scientist remains skeptical, open-minded, and humble (especially in case he or she is wrong). Overconfidence abounds, and history shows us that consensus doesn't in itself constitute right thinking or right action.

–Never choose harmony with "group think" over doing what you know is the right thing. Creative solutions start in the mind of one who is not afraid to be different.

–If you can discipline your mind to meditate on what's good and right about yourself, others, and the world at large, then you'll feel more at peace and be in greater control of your life and emotions. Learn to change the channel of your stream of thought if it becomes overly negative. The choice of channel is actually yours! Your excitement will then be infectious.

–Create healthy self-fulfilling prophecies. Remember that much of life is malleable and subject to change. If you expect the best of others, your expectation will in itself be like a magnet drawing those qualities from another.

– Have the courage to be imperfect. Perfect people don't exist. It is in our failings that we often learn most about ourselves.

– Don't let anyone steal your inner joy. If someone wrongs you, forgive them often and quickly – it's good for your psyche (and for your immune system!). Your health and inner joy are your greatest assets: Guard them wisely and jealously.

Finally, remember never to be "functionally fixed" – the impediment to creativity. Push your limits and continue trying to make the world a better place. I know that Purdue students will play a significant role in many spheres of society, especially in the implementation of innovative solutions, and that makes me proud. To paraphrase Gandhi, be the change you'd like to see around you.

I am honored to have been your teacher. Goodbye to my Purdue. We are truly connected in our hope for the future!

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