

Wichita State University  
Academy for Excellence in Teaching  
Induction of New Members

Remarks

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[Introduced by Dr. Bill Vanderburgh, Director, Center for Teaching and Research Excellence, WSU]

Thank you, Bill.

I am extremely pleased to have this opportunity to visit with you today as you induct new members into the Academy for Excellence in Teaching. Let me begin by extending my most enthusiastic congratulations to the new inductees. What an honor to be recognized for great achievement in the classroom.

One of my favorite books about higher education is the book *Academic Duty* by Donald Kennedy, former President of Stanford University, distinguished scientist and recent past editor of the journal *Science*. Kennedy offers the book as a counterpart to the concept of Academic Freedom, a list of some of our responsibilities as members of the academy to accompany the list of sacred privileges that we have.

Kennedy discusses our duties: to mentor, to serve the university, to discover, to publish, to tell the truth, to reach beyond the walls of the university and to change. But the duty that he lists first is the duty to teach. He writes: *Of the many expectations that society has of the modern university, the most important is that it will teach well.*

I agree with the assertion that, in the end, it is great teaching that is the underpinning of great universities. And, like nearly everyone in this room, I have thought often about the teachers that made a difference in my career as a student and, because of that, transformed my life.

As an administrator, I am also interested in what makes a good teacher. Can you predict which candidate for a faculty position will be a hit in the classroom and which will not? Can you list the characteristics of good teachers? Can you measure good teaching in some quantitative way?

My sense is that, while there are certainly indicators of who will be a good teacher and who will not, and while there are certainly characteristics that most good teachers share and while it may be possible to measure some yield of good teaching or some secondary aspect of it, in the end, it is very, very difficult to describe a good teacher in quantitative terms.

Of course, that does not mean that we don't know what good teaching is or who the good teachers are. Some years ago I participated as a trainer in a seminar for new department chairs. One of the topics was how to evaluate faculty teaching. The group struggled for over an hour with the questions that I just posed to you: how to hire good teachers, what makes good teachers, how can good teaching be measured? Finally, I asked each member of the group to take out a piece of paper and at my signal write

the names of the members of their department faculty in rank order from the very best teacher to the very worst. It took no more than a minute for each of the members of the group to do this.

These department chairs had little trouble identifying the best teachers among their colleagues. What they had trouble with was defining what makes the best the best.

I have used this exercise many times and have always obtained the same result. Good teachers are recognized as such by those who teach for a living even though few can say why, exactly, they are so good.

I think that the reason for this is that teaching well is so hard to do, so demanding of the mind, so suspenseful and fraught with the possibility of failure, so dependent on a keen sense of observation, the ability to change and adapt on the fly, the wisdom to know when to criticize and when to praise and the stamina to do it all again and again, day in and day out with good humor and more than a little humility that it defies the constraints of quantification. It is no wonder that we recognize this even if we can't quantify it. It is so unusual and so delightful to watch and to experience.

For those of us who have committed our lives to institutions of learning, there is nothing as special as seeing a good teacher in action. And, for those of us who have the privilege to hold leadership positions in the university, there is nothing more important and satisfying as recognizing those who teach well.

I congratulate each of you here today for your commitment to the high art of teaching and, most especially to those of you being inducted into AET today, on behalf of President Beggs and the faculty of Wichita State University, I extend to you my congratulations and my deepest gratitude for your commitment to the noble profession of teaching.

Thank you.