

CELEBRATIONS

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Celebrating Excellence— Again

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In May 2009, the NISOD Excellence Awards Program will celebrate its 20th anniversary of providing world-class support and recognition for teaching and learning. NISOD's International Conference on Teaching and Leadership Excellence has served as an annual gathering for faculty, staff, and administrators who aspire to reconnect with like-minded colleagues, be motivated by informative speakers, and enjoy the sights and sounds of Austin, Texas.

One particular event that serves as a hallmark of the conference is the celebration of the NISOD Excellence Awards recipients. This public show of appreciation for superb teachers and leaders in our institutions is a testament to the sincere commitment of the NISOD organization and its members to celebrating excellence. Each Excellence Awards recipient is provided a unique silver medallion, engraved with The University of Texas and NISOD insignias, and adorned with a ribbon of burnt orange hue. By wearing the medal during the conference, recipients are recognized easily and frequently congratulated throughout their stay in Austin.

While the pomp and circumstance of the Excellence Awards Program is conducted with a refined touch, the overarching statement is that teaching and leading on the front lines of the community college mission rest on the shoulders of these recipients. Better still are the countless moments of magic that have been performed at their respective institutions. Each person has a story. Mine has been strengthened by the advice, support, and mentorship of friends and colleagues with whom I have studied and worked. No task is ever completed without the contributions of others, and my experience is no exception.

I arrived on the campus of The University of Texas at Austin, having an appointment with Dr. John E. Roueche, Professor and Director of the Community College Leadership Program (CCLP). I was considering the program for my doctoral studies and anxiously awaiting the scholarly suggestions that were sure to follow. After exchanging introductions, I began to elaborate on my job

experiences and not-so-successful attempts at finding a career path—ice delivery, law clerk, lawn services, retail sales, golf cart attendant, booking live bands, and bank teller—not exactly a straight shot at long-term fame and fortune. Having reviewed my résumé and listened intently to my laundry list of jobs, Dr. Roueche responded: “The experience of a bad job will make you appreciate a good one.” Hindsight is indeed 20/20, and at the time I could find no valuable lesson embedded in my varied professional stops; however, I have since cherished every day that I have served as teacher and administrator.

Without those early job challenges and frustrations, I could not appreciate the gift of being a teacher. Teaching is a truly good job. It is not pursued for worldly riches and glory, but the intrinsic rewards are far greater than could ever be measured. Great teachers understand the calling and the around-the-clock work to improve themselves, their discipline, and, in turn, their students. When coupled with a supportive team of staff and administrators, teachers can serve as the primary catalyst for student learning and educational accomplishment. Being a teacher is an honor and privilege, but it is hard work. Quality teachers are purpose-driven and relish in the success of others. They recognize the great difference they make in the lives of others and, conversely, the benefits they receive in learning from their students and coworkers. These teachers are the unannointed saints of our country and worthy of high praise and recognition for their daily contributions to the world around them.

After completing my CCLP doctoral coursework, I relocated to Louisiana to pursue my graduate internship and finalize my dissertation. I worked for Dr. Walter Bumphus, then President of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, and currently serving as Professor and A.M. Aiken Regents Chair of the CCLP at UT. Later, I served as Executive Assistant to the Chancellor for Dr. Myrtle E.B. Dorsey, current Chancellor of Baton Rouge Community College (BRCC). During my time at BRCC, I taught an American Government course. My class was filled with the diverse array of students and learning styles that are represented at many of our institutions. I learned that excellent teaching did not always equate with unparalleled knowledge. Rather, unconditional support for student success, combined with high expectations for individual effort, was the trademark of learner-centered instruction.



During one of my internship visits with Dr. Bumphus, I recounted some stories from my government class. I explained the challenges I had in keeping the entire class focused on the learning objectives at hand. Dr. Bumphus added: "Teaching and leading are closely related; the fundamentals of both are very similar, but sometimes the audience isn't as captive when you are leading." The observation was delivered with a degree of humor, but the premise holds true. In essence, teaching requires identifying common goals, working with a diverse group to achieve those goals, remaining persistent, listening intently, and consistently reviewing your course of action. These characteristics, of course, are reflective of effective leadership, as well.

It is important to note that, when leading, the measure of achievement is not an individual grade. Instead, goals and strategies are established in hopes of assisting the entire organization to become more productive and student-centered. In addition, the voices of dissent are more vocal, and related actions are more pronounced. Viewing teaching as leading is an exciting and challenging endeavor. Now more than ever our colleges need quality teachers to assume positions of leadership. Likewise, we must work to strengthen the opportunities for aspiring educators to receive exposure and training to prepare them to take advantage of such opportunities.

My next position was as a founding faculty member and department chair at Cy-Fair College in Cypress, Texas. I later served as a dean. The college was a new addition to the North Harris Community College District (Greater Houston Area). Dr. Dianne Troyer served as the founding president of the institution. The district since has adopted the Lone Star title, with individual campuses being recognized as affiliates of the Lone Star College System. My colleagues who participated in opening this new institution can recount the long hours and frantic pace that were required to prepare for the groundbreaking year. Through teamwork and cooperation, the main campus opened in fall 2003, serving more than 4,000 students.

Later that year, I was asked to attend the NISOD Conference to receive a Teaching Excellence award. This was a great honor. Truth be told, it was the culture and environment created by my coworkers that provided the context for my teaching accolade. Team members at the college were committed and unified around a common goal—to establish and open an innovative, state-of-the-art college that was prepared to serve the students and community. The results were amazing. College leaders supported the fundamental concept that everyone was involved in the learning process. Every job was important and critical to the overall mission of the institution. The student services division, IT department, maintenance staff, book store, business office, and other areas worked as a cohesive force to make sure the college met its goal. All institutions depend on these areas to provide the canvas needed to produce the art of teaching and learning. It is amazing what groups of people can

accomplish when everyone is contributing. The success of Lone Star College–Cy-Fair is a shining example.

Last year I returned to my home state to serve as Vice Chancellor for Academics at The University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville, led by Chancellor Deborah Frazier. Located in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains, it serves as an open door of educational advancement for area students. Most members of the college team were raised within the region and feel a special attachment to the institution and its mission. I work with outstanding division chairs and faculty members who have established a tradition of excellence for instruction and student success. A caring culture makes the institution a very special place to work. Last summer my teaching excellence award experience had rotated full circle as I awarded a NISOD medallion to one of our instructors. Being able to reciprocate the acts of acknowledgment and appreciation that were afforded me earlier was a touching moment. Having the opportunity to recognize and support the talents of others is a tremendous benefit of working in administration.

We can all remember that special teacher who inspired us to try again, work harder, and achieve our goals. Teachers are the foundation for all education institutions, and they should be recognized as such. Similarly, many traits of excellent teaching are synonymous with excellent leadership. We need more teachers willing to use their classroom talents to embrace the challenge of leading our community colleges. Beneficial change is created by participation and action. Additional moments of teaching and learning are contributed by a variety of individuals on every campus. Each day these people make a difference in the lives of our students. Our interdependency on coworkers is more important than ever.

Participating in the NISOD International Conference on Teaching and Leadership Excellence and, specifically, the Excellence Awards Program is a great way to demonstrate your institution's support for teaching and leadership excellence. *I hope you will identify the individuals that make your institutions special places to work. This substantive show of gratitude would be appreciated, and the memories of the event will last a lifetime.* Their stories will be added to the thousands of others that have been shared and celebrated at this annual conference.

Whether you would like to recognize a fantastic teacher or coworker, learn more about community college and higher education leadership, or work on your goals for the future, attending the conference is a must. Enjoy the remainder of your spring semester, and travel safe to Austin for NISOD's 2009 Conference.

About the Author

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