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I Got Those Last Week of August Blues—But I Know the Cure! (Regaining That First Grade Enthusiasm)

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Web Authors
9/1

Ferpa Training
9/3, 9/9, 9/10

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Winthrop University

I Got Those Last Week of August Blues— But I Know the Cure! (Regaining That First Grade Enthusiasm)

The calendar says it's the last week of August, so here we are again. We are back, from whatever we were doing during the summer. (Some of us, of course, never left. To those of you who held down the fort all summer, thank you! The fort looks good.) The returning students are back, and the new students are here, thankfully in big numbers.

As I stood in the Blue Line yesterday, watching all those freshman file between the ranks of applauding faculty roasting in the sun in our colorful regalia, I thought ahead four years, as I always do in that moment, thinking ahead to the day when we will line up once again, also in our regalia, with many of these same students filing past us. How different that day will be!

Yesterday, the students were mostly dressed in shorts and dark blue Winthrop t-shirts. Four years from now, they will be wearing black graduation gowns. Yesterday, most of them

did not make eye contact with us: they talked to each other, or they stared at the ground, or, most often, they stared at their phones. Four years from now, they will seek out faculty members for handshakes and hugs and last words of encouragement. Yesterday, they were anonymous, faces in a crowd. Four years from now, many of them will be familiar faces, faces that bring back memories of classes shared, projects completed, papers written, good and hard times lived through. Yesterday, they looked a bit shell-shocked and bored by the ceremony. Four years, from now, they will be exultant—and more than a few of them will be crying.

The ceremonies share so many details, but how different they are! Think of what happens to those students between the two.

I had the honor of welcoming them on behalf of the faculty yesterday at Convocation. My theme was "we've been waiting

for you." I gave several examples, including the work people do to make the campus grounds and buildings so nice, the student life people who plan programs, and the new general education program, which these new students will be the first to take advantage of. But at the end, I told them that the "you" we have been waiting for is not the students as they are now.

"We've been waiting for you," I said, "but the 'you' you were when you started first grade." I reminded them of their enthusiasm to be in school, to learn, to be, finally, a student. I also said that much of that enthusiasm has likely been extinguished by their long journey so far. Then I challenged them to regain that enthusiasm, that eagerness to learn, that joy in being a student.

But I was also tacitly challenging all of us. While it is up to each of these new students to recover that joy of learning, that is more likely to happen if we do

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what we are supposed to do. And just what is that? I can think of many things.

We have to be masters of our disciplines, of course. And we have to stay on top of the changes that come every day. But we also have to be able to communicate our content clearly. In addition, we have to make that content and our disciplines interesting and appealing to people who are mostly between the ages of 18 and 22. (The new list that profiles what our new students are like just came out—I only saw the first item: “They have never licked a stamp.” Hmmmm...)

We have to make good plans, but we have to be flexible with those plans, given all the changes and disruptions that pop up over the course of the semester. We have to cover a set amount of content, but we also must pay attention to the mastery of the skills it takes to make sense of that content: content will likely change in most of our disciplines, and students will forget much content anyway. But if they master the skills, they will be able to survive in future classes, future jobs.

We have to help our students grow, from day to day, from class to class,

as they move from their entering courses and go deeper into their majors. We have to challenge them, but we also have to nurture them. And then repeat that process, over and over.

We have to be good role models as scholars and practitioners. We know the old canard is false that says, “Those who can’t do, teach.” But we have to prove that, in our research and writing and performance and our art. We have to be ready to mentor a young person, to give back the guidance that someone gave us long ago.

(Those of us who are classified as staff rather than faculty share all of these criteria, although in slightly different ways—I’m sure you know how.)

And finally, we must have that same enthusiasm that we want to rekindle in our students. We must have that joy, that joy to teach, that joy to learn, that joy of being a student.

If the journey has extinguished that enthusiasm for many of them, our journeys have extinguished it for many of us. Part of me starts dreading the third week of August by the end of July. I think about all the summer projects I have

not completed, how much I have to do to get ready for classes to start. I yearn for the endless summer that surfers talk about.

Yesterday after convocation, I had classes at 5:00 and 6:30. As much as I dread classes starting up again, I felt the exhilaration of walking into a new class of students for the first time. Fifteen minutes into ENGL 600—Materials and Methods of Research in English, surely the most deadly course title in our major, I was filled with enthusiasm, with joy, about the journey these new graduate students and I will take as we learn to be advanced researchers. These graduate students shared that enthusiasm. I will wager that they were not this way a few years ago when they were freshmen. Along the way, somebody helped them regain their first grade enthusiasm. Thank you!

That joy and enthusiasm is happening all over campus this week, in every college, in all of the offices that serve students, in all of us who devote our lives to educating young people. And in the process, educating ourselves. Isn’t this a great job? Hooray for the last week of August!

Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

Register for a TLC Session
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The 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Watch for the call for papers and sessions for our annual teaching and learning conference. Last year's was great, and we expect this year's to be even better. Stay tuned!

Thought For the Week

OCTOBER: This is one of the peculiarly dangerous months to speculate in stocks in. The other are July, January, September, April, November, May, March, June, December, August, and February.

--Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar*