



4-11-2018

In Pursuit of Excellence: From Patient Centered to Student Centered (text and video)

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Recommended Citation

Folse, Vickie Noltkamper, "In Pursuit of Excellence: From Patient Centered to Student Centered (text and video)" (2018). *Honorees for Teaching Excellence*. 50.
https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/teaching_excellence/50

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I am honored to be the 45th recipient of this award for teaching excellence and particularly humbled to be the first School of Nursing faculty to be recognized. However, I believe that many School of Nursing colleagues before me were equally deserving of this recognition. I am hopeful that my current nursing colleagues will be recognized in future years and am particularly grateful to the faculty, staff, and students who nominated me. Their favorite quotes about excellence are combined with mine on the slides you will see throughout my presentation.

Let me begin my remarks about teaching with a quote from Barbara Colorose that sets the stage for our short time together today. “If kids come to us from strong, healthy functioning families, it makes our job easier. If they do not come to us from strong, healthy, functioning families, it makes our job more important.” My own story is not unlike other first generations students. If you are the first person in your immediate family to attend college, please stand and be recognized.

My parents divorced before my first birthday, and I was raised by a single mother who was reliant on welfare, food stamps, and a medical card. I now reflect on how fortunate I was to have known poverty as my accomplishments were in spite of (and perhaps because of) my unyielding desire to climb the socioeconomic ladder. My focus on having a better life – which for me meant without government assistance – and helping people around me improve their lives – was my catalyst for excellence.

My journey of excellence as a school age child focused on a few things I could control: my academic performance and my ability to develop and maintain meaningful relationships. I wanted to be defined by more than being the only free lunch student in my class, and so I made my mark by making friends and rising to the top of my class.

My soft skills were cultivated by life experiences. I was articulate and well read, in part because I was held up as a corporal punishment poster child in the 70s, and would be an ad for implicit bias today (poor kids are delinquent and dishonest, you know). In addition to regular paddling by the principal, I spent most recesses and gym classes writing encyclopedia reports and copying sections from the dictionary. Please understand, my “offenses” were things like not purchasing school supplies by the end of the first week of school and passing notes in class (the contemporary equivalent of texting during class). I was once punished for buying rawhide necklaces with an embossed leather initial for a dime and selling them throughout school for between 50 cents and a dollar (based on other students’ ability and willingness to pay). Today, we would call this entrepreneurship, but I clearly peaked before my time. Moreover, my business plan was flawed because those that payed the full dollar talked to those who payed less, and that is how my plan was revealed to school administrators.

I was persuasive and skilled at conflict resolution, in part because of the opportunities I had to convince the phone company or the electric company to accept a partial payment to make calls or turn back on the lights and power the refrigerator. Without a safety net, disconnection of services were common for my family, particularly when bill money had to be diverted for an expense like school pictures or a field trip to the zoo.

My ability to think critically and to problem solve was also well developed. A family with no car becomes resourceful. A child living rent free in a one-bedroom at the rear of someone else’s property has a series of everyday experiences that are invisible to those whose basic needs are met. My desire to never again rely on the charitable delivery of a free box of food or bags of used clothing motivated me to pursue excellence.

Perhaps most important in my journey was my mastery of connecting with people and using communication to understand myself and the people around me. I committed early in life to serving others, and realized this was possible for me by earning good grades to assure scholarships to attend college and then deciding to become a professional nurse (and later an educator of nurses). As a poor kid, the idea of having a job right after college was appealing, and although I had no idea what it meant to be liberally educated, the idea of studying nursing at a four-year school at the same time I studied English, philosophy, and religion, was exciting.

I embarked on this deliberate journey of excellence in grade school, and it was cemented as an undergraduate at Illinois Wesleyan over 3 decades ago. Excellence at Illinois Wesleyan and in the School of Nursing was not optional; instead we were keenly aware – and often reminded – that we had been admitted to the “Harvard of the Midwest.” As a nursing major, we were charged with the responsibility to demonstrate that a professional school not only belonged on a liberal arts campus, but that its existence made us a stronger campus community.

Nursing majors quickly learned that graduate school was required for those of us on a journey of excellence, so within 3 years of leaving IWU, and while working full-time as a registered nurse, I completed my first graduate degree. The direct patient care experience I had at what is now OSF Saint Francis Medical Center allowed me to demonstrate my commitment to patient-centered care (sadly a term that hadn’t even been coined in the 1980s). My interest in understanding WHY a patient was experiencing such debilitating symptoms and WHAT I could do about it turned into my Masters thesis and later my doctoral dissertation. My expertise in treating eating disorders, and understanding the role of the family in recovery, became the foundation for my rewarding research career. Because anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa

rarely present without comorbidity, my interest in depression and anxiety, including the impact of suicidality, widened my clinical and research focus on vulnerable populations.

I recognized the impact simply talking – really talking – to another person could have on that person’s wellbeing. I used not only the knowledge and skills I had developed in a small private liberal arts university, but relied heavily on my soft skills. For example, as a new graduate nurse, I talked a suicidal patient into giving me her loaded gun after she barricaded the two of us in the medication room for 2 hours (this was not something we learned in school). I established relationships with patients that moved them toward goal directed behavior without labeling them as noncompliant or treatment resistance, but instead by understanding their story.

A 2013 study by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) found that half of novice nurses were involved in medical errors and that 65% of those errors were due to poor clinical decision making skills. Kavanagh and Szweda (2017) measured the entry level clinical judgement of new graduate nurses and concluded that only 23% were at the level needed for safe patient care.

I don’t believe this crisis in new graduate competencies is limited to nursing majors! We hear from prospective employers that new graduates often lack the soft skills necessary to establish meaningful relationships. Having worked with thousands of students over the years, I believe most Illinois Wesleyan students are better decision makers than most, but the need to place emphasis on skills like critical thinking remains central to our mission at Illinois Wesleyan.

As we strive for excellence in the School of Nursing, we place tremendous emphasis on critical thinking, and are confident that an education grounded in the liberal arts serves as the foundation for clinical reasoning and clinical judgment skills. One of our core competencies we have in the

School of Nursing is student centeredness, so we have a shared set of values that allow us to ask one another, “Is that a student centered decision?” I am grateful we are not educating future nurses in a vacuum and am indebted to my colleagues across this campus in working tirelessly to assure students are liberally educated both in and out of the classroom. It’s in everyone’s best interest (particularly those of us who are aging) to assure that our nursing graduates provide excellent care and to cultivate soft skill in all of our graduates. Transferable skill such as communication, problem solving, and critical thinking, allow our students to adapt knowledge they are gaining at Illinois Wesleyan into real world settings and to prepare for the complexities of our global society.

I have shared a journey of excellence with patients and their families as well as with students and their families. My background allows me to conceptualize the student who doesn’t complete the assigned reading or who doesn’t meet a deadline in a unique way. I wonder, does she have the money to purchase books or does his campus job combined with working an off campus job during nights or weekends interfere with the student’s ability to prioritize academics? I ask myself does this student have anyone at home to ask or the support needed to navigate a complex problem. My expertise in psychiatric mental-health issues proves valuable as I consider the depression or anxiety that immobilizes a student, or the conversation – or lack of conversation – at home about how school is REALLY going that might prevent him or her from moving forward on a journey of excellence. I particularly enjoy teaching Gateway so I can identify early challenges with self-regulation like who is – and who isn’t – showering regularly or who can’t get out of bed to get to class. I love teaching Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing because our focus is on being patient centered and on recognizing that “psych is everywhere” and that relationships are healing. My journey of teaching excellence has broadened in Barcelona and I

am even more aware of how life events outside the classroom (like being pickpocketed or the opportunities for decision making when the legal drinking age is 18) that can interfere with learning. I am equally mindful of life transforming experiences that will accelerate the development of soft skills and position these students – and other students who study abroad or study away – for a lifetime of successes.

One of my honors as a Kemp Award recipient was addressing first year students at New Student Convocation last Fall. After consulting with my own college age daughters as well as current and former IWU students, I developed a list of 21 tips for Adulting. I know the critical thinkers in the audience were quick to see the parallel with 21 pieces of advice for the incoming Class of 2021. If you weren't so quick, please fully use your remaining time at IWU.

As you reflect on my message today, consider how to direct your own journey of excellence. Another powerful quote I will share today is “The heart of human excellence often begins to beat when you discover a pursuit that absorbs you, frees you, challenges you, or gives you a sense of meaning, joy, or passion” by Terry Orlick. Begin by establishing a culture of excellence including being authentic in your pursuits and surrounding yourself with people who are equally committed and who share your values. Using the knowledge I gained from writing R's from the dictionary, I posit that rigor, relevance, repetition, reflection, and respect promote and maintain excellence. Striving for excellence assures you take personal responsibility for decisions and actions, and requires that you lead by example which will elevate the most vulnerable around you. Thank you for being a part of my journey and I wish you well in your own pursuit of excellence.