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Haenicke, Diether, "Young freshmen have a knack for putting old professors in their places" (2009). *WMU President Diether Haenicke*. 36.

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Young freshmen have a knack for putting old professors in their places

*By Diether Haenicke
March 18, 2009*

All teachers have stories to tell about their students. A few bad ones, yes, but good ones usually. Any teacher who really loves teaching must also love those whom he instructs, and thus all stories about one's students tend to have a strong undercurrent of affection.

I confess to a special preference for teaching undergraduates, incoming freshmen in particular. They are still wide-eyed during their first year on campus, struggling with their new-found freedom from home, adjusting to many new responsibilities, tempted by a host of unexpected experiences and charting their way into a broad and often overwhelming academic territory.

Their newness makes freshmen often strikingly naive which, in turn, makes me most forgiving. Naivete has its charm; of course, only if it does not remain a constant state of mind. But certain freshman questions are disarming in their naivete. I prepare most conscientiously for each class and try to make each session count; so it baffles me when a student comes up to me and asks: "I am sorry I could not come to class on Monday. Did I miss anything? Did we discuss anything important?" I am always tempted to assure the student ironically that nothing important is ever discussed in my classes, but I fear I might be believed and hesitate to run that risk. What the student actually wants to know is if anything discussed on Monday will be found on the final exam -- which makes it important. A teacher has to learn that.

And freshmen indicate that they have their priorities right. How else can one interpret the not infrequent statement: "I have a real important class in marketing today; so I hope you don't mind if I leave your class early." That puts the teacher of drama and poetry in his place. Important stuff comes first, yessir!

When I teach a foreign language course, the material is highly structured -- much like a math course where one can't leave out multiplication or addition and still expect to advance to the next level without severe complications. The structured approach and repetitive oral pattern drills make regular attendance not only advisable but mandatory. But I have seen students who, after missing 10 out of 20 sessions, approach me shortly before the finals with the hopeful question: "What can I do to make up for what I have missed?" The answer to this question borders on the religious, since all the student can offer at that point is penance and vows of self-improvement. But it is too late to obtain academic redemption. And still he raises the totally unrealistic question: "But what if I ace the final?" Is that naive, or what? How could that possibly happen? "Hope springs eternal in the human breast," muses the teacher of poetry.

But there is also gratitude -- sort of. Once, after having dwelled a whole semester on the Latin and Greek roots in much of the English lexicon, a student expressed his appreciation thus: "Dr. Haenicke, I learned so much in your class. You helped me infinitesimally." I dared not suggest that he might mean "infinitely." How was I to know if his own assessment of the situation was not, indeed, more accurate?

The ultimate letdown occurred at the end of the last winter term. A very nice freshman in my class came up to me one day to reveal a discovery he had just made. He said to me: "Do you know there is a building on campus named after a guy with the same name as yours?" This time I was probably the naive one. Thirteen long years I was president of this university, and I thought that this fact would be remembered for some time. Obviously not by freshmen. Sic transit gloria mundi.

*This column was first published May 24, 2000 in the Kalamazoo Gazette
mlive.com/kalamazoo*