

October, 2002 - Hermann Platt, History

After reading the previous "Teaching Tips," I don't feel I can say anything that hasn't been said before. I'd end up reiterating what appears to be the common theme: effective teaching must be a process where the students essentially teach themselves and, despite the wishes of many of them, aren't spoon fed. This proposition is to teaching what home and motherhood are to mainstream America. Who can disagree with these lofty ideals?

Nonetheless, as one of the most senior of the current faculty (going back to 1963), I feel I can provide a long-term perspective that might have some relevance to classroom techniques. I've seen the student body evolve from being all male, virtually all from Hudson County, with no knowledge of computer technology, into the multi just-about-everything it is today. And these changes are the superficial ones. We also have to deal with students confronting drugs, tensions sometimes arising from diversity, dorm problems, and many others beyond my imagination. In other words, what worked in the classroom of the 1960s may not be successful today. There are no teaching tips that will be applicable in all places at all times. Adjustments have to be made even on a year-to-year and class-to-class basis. Einstein's general theory of relativity is as important for education as it is for the operation of the universe!

Does this mean there are no constants, no timeless bedrock principles? Obviously not, or Saint Peter's can no longer claim to be a Jesuit liberal arts college. Whatever else, our "business" is to train people to think for themselves by evaluating evidence critically in all areas of knowledge. We should always be concerned, as well, with the moral and ethical dimensions of the issues that all at the College will find in their studies and beyond. President Isaac Sharpless of Haverford College (my *alma mater*), in an address to the graduating class of 1888 (a little before my time!), stated my thoughts far more eloquently than I do:

I suggest that you preach truth and do righteousness as you have been taught, whereinsoever that teaching may commend itself to your consciences and your judgments. .;. and see you to it that no other institution, no political party, no social circle, no religious organization, no pet ambitions put such claims on you as would tempt you to sacrifice one iota of the moral freedom of your consciences or the intellectual freedom of your judgments.

Hard advice for anyone to follow, perhaps even more today than in 1888, but if we can impart the spirit of those ideas to our students, then Saint Peter's will be true to itself.