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FROM DAVE'S HOME OFFICE

Jim Sanford

We all like to be recognized for our good work, and thus it was an honor to have been selected as one of the two teachers who received the 1991 GVSU "Teacher of the Year" award. In my heart, I realize that I was fortunate, since there are many talented and outstanding teachers at our University who should similarly be recognized.

My overall classroom success probably comes from my genuine love for the classroom experience, especially the interaction with students. There is something about walking into the classroom that makes me feel more alive. Although I have been teaching for over twenty-four years, I have never missed a class because of illness. No matter how bad I am feeling, when I walk into the classroom, I suddenly feel much better. Even if I won ten million dollars in the Lottery, I would want to continue teaching at GVSU.

In the spirit of David Letterman, a fellow Hoosier, I thought I would share a "Top Ten" list of teaching tips. Most of these tips are obvious, but I think teachers need to reflect, at times, on the basics, because teaching is so important a profession.

10. Be enthusiastic and knowledgeable about your subject. If you can't get excited about your course, the students won't either. A good teacher can make any material exciting. For instance, last week I heard Jonathan White, Professor of Criminal Justice, talk on "An Overview of Terrorism" at the University Club Luncheon Series. His forty-five minute talk was outstanding not only because he was knowledgeable about his subject, but because he was so enthusiastic. The audience was spellbound. Teachers need to present their material with fervor, and, if they can't get truly excited about the material, at least they ought to *act* as if they are excited.

9. Be organized. Although I have been teaching for many years, I still spend many hours preparing for each class. I believe that there are no shortcuts for teaching success. At the beginning of the semester, I give my students a general outline of my lecture notes. Then I embellish these notes with current news articles, stories, humorous anecdotes, and questions I plan to ask. I update my class notes each semester but retain anything that seemed to work particularly well in a former class. Thank goodness for computers! It is also important to use multi-media and other technology tools in an effective way, and doing that means many hours of preparation.

8. Make your grading system clear. Students want to feel that their grade fairly reflects their accomplishments and is not the result of the professor's whim. If teachers do not have a grading system that students believe is fair, they will get poor

evaluations. Thus, on the first day of class, I tell students exactly how class grades will be determined, and I don't change the rules later.

One practice that works especially well for me is to prepare all my tests before the semester begins, so that I can be sure of covering in class the material that is on the exam. I give students a review sheet of key points covered in class so that they will clearly understand the material that will be on the exam. I hear about professors making up their exams the day before the test and including material that was not covered in class. In their defense, these professors explain that the material is in the book, but students complain and take out their frustrations on the teacher-evaluation instrument. How do you know if your grading system needs improvement? Look at the comments on your teacher evaluations.

7. Use humor with a point and be entertaining. I am always pleased when student evaluation comments describe my class as "fun" or mention my humor in presenting the material. For instance, one comment read, "I was dreading this class at the beginning of the semester, but Professor Sanford made it fun and very interesting and it became my favorite class I took this semester." While I don't think of myself as a overtly droll individual, I use subtle humor in class. I want my students to have a good time. Thus, I look for humorous or entertaining material that can be related to the material I cover. By being organized (point 9), you can save your best stories and jokes and eliminate the ones that didn't work.

6. Make the class interactive. Know the names of your students and call on them regularly if class size permits. Students pay more attention if they know you are likely to call on them, and you learn quickly whether or not the students understand the material. In addition to in-class interaction, use technology to allow the class to interact with the global community.

5. Be a counselor as well as a teacher. One practice that I recently started is asking that every student in my class schedule a twenty-minute appointment during the semester to discuss "advising" issues. There are several benefits to student advising. First, students appreciate the added individual attention. Second, you acquire information you would never get in class, especially some understanding of the student's classroom performance. Third, you can actually help students with career advice by steering them in the right direction. For instance, encouraging some students to attend graduate school will start them thinking about it. If you conduct these "advising" sessions with sincerity and good intentions, not only will you have performed a valuable service, but students will remember it when completing the teacher evaluation instrument.

4. Challenge your class to work hard. Regardless of student complaints, I think students really want to be challenged and work hard. Inherently, students know that "nothing worth having comes easy." Are you getting comments like the following on your teacher evaluation forms? "I really enjoyed the class even though it was a lot of

work.” “I feel that the tests were very hard. There was too much material that we had to know.” If not, maybe you need to make some adjustments.

3. **Remind students why your course is important.** Students will appreciate you more if they understand why your course is important to their education. Thus, you need to figure out ways to make your course relevant. Although this may sound strange to others, I believe that a good business law course (mine is actually entitled “Legal Environment”) is the most important course a student can take at GVSU. It involves critical thinking and the exploration and study of the legal, regulatory, ethical, global, political, environmental, and social factors that influence business in a changing world. In that light, I can convince students that this course is important to their future.

2. **Realize that you can't please everyone.** In reviewing some of the comments from my past teaching evaluations, in regard to the question in which students were asked to discuss my greatest weakness, I found some of the following comments: “Replace Professor Sanford with a real instructor.” “Instructor should back off a little. I think he scared some people out of the course.” “He was aggressive, obnoxious and intimidating when the course began. As time went on, he relaxed and became much more pleasant. Maybe he felt he had to establish his authority but he came on pretty strong.” “Some questions on the test were a little tricky.” “Often embarrasses students.” “Manner is somewhat intimidating.” Some students don't like my calling on them in class and challenging their responses, but I continue to use that technique and explain to the class that it is beneficial. Regardless of how hard you work, not everyone is going to appreciate you. However, if 99% of your students think you are great, that should make you feel good.

1. **Really enjoy your students.** If you don't like students, you should be in another profession. Students can sense when teachers don't like them. If you do like them, but it doesn't come across to them, maybe you need to show them in little ways. For instance, you should know their names. Invite them to your office and act as if you are really glad to see them. Write encouraging and helpful notes on their essays. On their exams write comments like “nice improvement since the last exam—keep up the good work.” These little items of individual attention are always appreciated.

The bottom line (a favorite business term) is that good teaching requires a lot of additional work that might not necessarily be rewarded with additional pay or recognition. Your motivation for doing the extra work must come from a genuine desire to do a great job in the classroom. The real reward will be enhanced student learning as a result of a better classroom experience.