

Experience Is the Best Teacher

Good evening. It is a privilege to be with you here tonight on this eve of International Week 2007. I can already tell from the events of this evening that this is going to be a spectacular week ahead. As I'm sure that you are ready to party, I'll keep this brief.

Although we all hail from many countries and cultures, I am guessing that there are a few parental aphorisms or truths that are universal. For instance, how many of your parents have said to you, "The only way to succeed in life is to get a good education?" Or how about, "You can't always get what you want."

Well I have another one for you, "Experience is the best teacher." But before you roll your eyes and nod off, let me explain how I think that this relates to you.

We gain knowledge in different ways. We can get it from books or by doing something. What we learn through experience is more lasting than that which is acquired through reading. In fact, our own experience is accurate, complete, and permanent. It is first-hand knowledge. For example, a child does not stop playing with fire 'til she burns her fingers. She learns from her own experience.

The value of international students to a university is not a matter of political correctness, but cuts to the core of experiencing and constructing knowledge about the world. And these experiences are not limited to international students. They are shared with the entire university and the surrounding communities. Indeed, you provide us with a collective experience in which we all engage with each other without relying upon any one perspective. You challenge us to articulate what we take for granted. You play a vital role in helping us to experience our own cultural differences. You bring diverse forms of knowledge to our teaching, our research, and engagement functions and you improve our university.

Gaining firsthand experience in a multicultural learning environment also augments cultural literacy that links the academy and a developed sense of responsibility to one another. The following is from a study by the Meteri Group and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. It is a Profile of a Culturally Literate Student and I would like to share it with you:

- They will understand that culture impacts their behavior and beliefs, and the behavior and beliefs of others.
- They are aware of specific cultural beliefs, values, and sensibilities that might affect the way that they and others think or behave.
- They appreciate and accept diverse beliefs, appearances, and lifestyles.
- They are aware that historical knowledge is constructed, and is therefore shaped, by personal, political, and social forces.
- They know the history of both mainstream and non-mainstream American cultures, and understand that these histories have an impact today.

- They are able to take the perspective of non-mainstream groups when learning about historical events.
- They know about major historical events of other nations and understand that these events impact behaviors and beliefs, as well as relationships with others.
- They understand the dangers of stereotyping and other biases; are aware of and sensitive to issues of racism and prejudice.
- They can communicate, interact, and work positively with individuals from other cultural groups.

The Iowa State University international student experience is a portal to cultural literacy and to increased mutual understanding. It creates a balance of theory and practice. And ultimately, it elevates teaching cultural diversity to the act of experiencing it.

Thank you and enjoy your week.