

What Education is for:

In Appreciation of Mrs. Phillips

College of Education Faculty Meeting

Friday, August 17, 2018, 12:55 to 1:15 pm

We all have teachers who had a deep impact on our lives, often because they recognized something in us, some potential, maybe a dream, that others did not notice. One of the teachers who touched my life was Mrs. Phillips, my second grade teacher in Ohio.

I was blessed to grow up in the home of an educator, with an older brother and sister who were really smart and who I adored. As a result, when I entered second grade, I had already completed much of the work that second graders complete.

Mrs. Phillips noted my mastery of second grade material and rewarded me with time alone, in the library, to write books. She saw in me something that I could not even articulate today. What I do know is that she understood something about the person who I was to become, and she nurtured that growth.

Can you imagine a teacher in this day and age having the freedom to make such a decision about a student? To send him or her down the hallway to the library to have free time to write or to draw, to imagine or to dream?

Education has become diminished as a result of a national movement where there is no longer any room for dreaming. Indeed, the critique of education has grown over the years and includes many elements. I want to focus on one that has invaded the national narrative: that education, and especially postsecondary education, is not just first and foremost but should be singularly and exclusively focused on training workers for jobs.

Worse yet, the national narrative has so shifted to job training that, according to this narrative, higher education is no longer needed for a success in life, for higher education does not do an adequate job in preparing workers. This claim, of course, is not supported by the research, which consistently shows the way in which a college degree increases professional success.

The devaluation of the work we do in higher education (and in all of education) has led to a narrowing and reduction of our roles—to that of trainers of worker bees. And, according to the narrative, we don't even do that well. High school students really don't need to think about going to college.

I want to make two points in response to this narrative.

First, we must do a much better job in demonstrating the central importance of our work in the professional development of our students as we prepare them for careers (not just jobs, but careers). We need to articulate clearly the habits of mind that are integral for student learning, growth, and development and demonstrate how these habits of mind align with professional development. These include critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration.

But we must also be more intentional in our own work in developing these skills across a student's journey with us. This is work that we must do if we want to respond fully to the national narrative.

The most recent employer research suggests that it is not enough to develop this learning inside the classroom, but it must be applied in real world settings solving real world problems. Again, we do this well: Think about the four levels of student teaching in the teacher education program, or the internship expectations in other programs in the College of Education, which expect students to take their classroom learning and apply it so that they are ready to be teachers or athletic trainers or other professionals when they leave our halls.

But can we do that work more intentionally? We have launched this discussion about our General Education program, which is undergoing revision. We started this conversation about the Professional Education Sequence, the core of classes that all teacher education students take. We need to take up this work again in the coming year.

This work will allow us to reclaim the narrative about education and its importance to 21st century careers by more intentionally and systemically creating opportunities for student learning.

But we must do more than that, because a true education is about more than learning content knowledge and skills, more than about training professionals. And this, for me, is where the urgency grows.

The second point I want to make is about this national narrative is that we do more than simply develop minds, as if they were detached cogs in some corporate machine of work.

We are intent upon the development of the whole person—not just the habits of mind, the intellectual capacities, but also the habits of heart and the habits of spirit that are essential in the growth of our students as they transition into adulthood and become citizens of thriving communities.

We don't often talk about these emotional, social, and psychological capacities because they are so hard to assess and to measure, and thus to incorporate into a student learning outcome evaluated through a four point rubric.

In the narrow focus on vocational training, what is being overlooked is the development of such capacities as

- care and compassion which can lead to empathy, an essential component of the ability to collaborate across difference;
- honesty and integrity which are essential in the maturation of an adult but becoming more and more rare in our national leaders; or
- humility, the ability to have confidence without becoming arrogant and closed minded; or
- gratitude which leads to a willingness to recognize that life is a gift and with such a gift comes great responsibility.

These habits of the heart should be developed as much through our curriculum and co-curriculum as they should be modeled by all of us, faculty, staff, administrators, and fellow students.

And finally such capacities as

- resilience and determination, the willingness to persist in the face of discomfort and complexity so that when our students are challenged they know that through these challenges they learn and grow and become smarter, wiser, better.
- How do we teach the capacity of passion so that our students know that the true measure of a career is the alignment between their inner calling and the work they do in the world?

This work of educating the whole person, the mind, the heart, and the spirit is especially true for our human service professionals, for our teachers and counselors and principals and superintendents.

If they learn persistence and grit, they will be successful and touch so many lives, thousands of lives, tens of thousands of lives. I must say that I am blessed to know many of our students. I know that here at the

University of Northern Iowa the faculty are indeed developing our students' capacities so that they become whole.

But this work is so urgent that we cannot merely do this good work on our campus. That is necessary, but it is no longer sufficient.

Because of the role that we play in this great state of Iowa that has historically been a leader in education, the faculty, staff, and administration, along with our students, must lead the state, the region, and indeed the nation in this work of whole student development,

- to make it more intentional on our part,
- more systemic in our curriculum and co-curriculum,
- more integrated into our conversations and deliberations.

We must write a new narrative and capture the imagination through our work so that we become a bright light in this dim time.

What Mrs. Phillips understood about me in second grade was that I needed a different kind of stimulation, something more than sitting in the classroom learning how to write in cursive (an important, and lost skill).

But I wasn't special or different in that classroom.

She recognized and elevated the attributes of all of her students. She catered to the different intellectual, emotional and social needs of the entire class of 20 students, allowing each of us to realize our second grade potential.

That sounds really funny to talk in retrospect about my second grade potential at the age of 54. But if you are a parent of a second grader, or a teacher of third graders, you know that realizing this potential provides a foundation for so much more to come.