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# Our University – Casting a Vision: Teachers as Leaders

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# Our University – Casting a Vision: Teachers as Leaders

*Second in a series on teaching excellence*

Teaching is leadership.

There are many distinctive views of teaching but, in the end, teaching is about leadership. I do not think it possible to find a great leader who is not a great teacher or, conversely, a great teacher who is not a great leader. Fundamentally, teaching and leadership require the ability to cast a vision and pursue it doggedly; little else matters.

We have worn out the idea of vision in contemporary thinking. Anyone who can conjure up an image of the future is deemed to be a visionary. I think not. Vision casting, to have meaning and value, demands the vision to have motivating purpose. That purpose must be seen as worthy so that a person or group of people allows the vision to affect the path of their lives.

This is what great teachers do all day long. In an introductory history class of three hundred students someone might say it is impossible to cast a vision for this group that ties basic history to their lives.

Not for great teachers. They lead in such a way that students can't help but follow.

In a seminar class with a few graduate students, the great teacher helps them think about their own goals and aspirations relative to something larger than themselves, whether in the context of a career choice, a mode of scientific investigation, a painting, or a story.

Victor Frankl, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, captures the essence of both vision and teaching in the tension that exists between the two:

*"What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him."*

In comparing Frankl's experience as a survivor of Theresienstadt and that of a student in freshmen English, any perceived trivialization is unintended. Rather, the importance of finding value in experience as the way to direct the future is a significant part of both teaching and leadership.

I believe Frankl would agree.

This is exactly what excellent teachers and leaders do.

There are many counterfeits for casting a vision. I have heard it said that a person standing in front of a classroom (I won't call him a teacher) can get good student evaluations by bringing doughnuts to class.

What a degrading insult to students who have earned the right to avail themselves of the opportunity that excellent teaching provides. A teacher who thinks pandering to students in any way is a means to be perceived as a good teacher shouldn't teach at all for the disrespect that it presents to students, the contempt for sharing and pursuing a vision with students, and the neglect of the most fundamental responsibility of standing in front of a classroom and saying, "I believe..." to students.

This is as misinformed as a leader who believes pandering to the "led" will get high marks, support, or respect. Politicians who try this eventually get found out, as do teachers who stoop to such wickedly myopic belief.

This trivialization undermines good leadership and good teaching.

Teaching and leading with passion is always the result of deep conviction that you have something worth believing in, whether it's introductory Western Civilization, or High Energy Particle Physics.

Without a teacher's vision any class is a waste of time. Those in front of the classroom with nothing to say should get out of the way.

Our university deserves nothing less, and our students deserve every ounce of vision that we can squeeze out of ourselves as it is teaching excellence emphatically realized.