

# **Frederic Gratto & Katherine Gratto**

## **Some Values Are Never Out of Date: Teaching Students to Help Themselves and Serve Others**

**Frederic Gratto & Katherine Gratto**  
University of Florida

---

Good character, like good soup, is made best at home, but sometimes it doesn't work this way. It is evident that students don't always learn the skills, attitudes and values at home that they need to do well socially and academically while in college. Therefore, the business of shaping character, coaching for success and impacting lives often becomes the duty of those who work in the higher education enterprise. This is a worthy responsibility and one that we ought to welcome because of the tremendous, positive impact we can have. We should be happy to provide examples and guidance to help students because we know that undergraduate education helps develop character and encourages civic engagement. Since we want a better society we need better people and today's students are the citizens of the future. It's good to know that there are lots of things we can do, inside and outside the classroom, to encourage students to help themselves and serve others.

The first thing we can do is neither in the classroom nor outside it. It's in our own heads. It's called perspective. The most beneficial perspective inclines us to believe that students are the most important people on campus. Without them, there would be no need for our institutions. Students are not just cold enrollment statistics. They're people with needs and feelings, just like us. They aren't people to be tolerated while we do our thing on campus. They are our thing. They're not dependent on us. We're dependent on them. We're not doing them a favor by serving them. They're doing us a favor by providing us the opportunity to serve them.

Having made this mental adjustment, one of the next things we can do is look around the classroom to see if it is neat, clean and appropriate for the type of learning we want to take place. It should be. If there are problems, we need to contact someone in the physical plant so action can be taken or at least get the problem placed on an action list. Another thing we should do is observe the exterior environment. What does the campus look like? Is it maintained at a level similar to a sandy fish camp or can people see that the appearance of campus is a major priority for the administration? We need to be aware of our surroundings and develop mental yardsticks to help us judge how well maintained the buildings and grounds are. We do this when we go to restaurants and when we're looking for a motel during a family vacation. Students make similar judgements and certainly notice what a campus environment looks like. This is important to know because a recent report by the Carnegie Foundation found that students consider the appearance of campus one of the most important factors when choosing which college to attend.

At the University of Florida, we are quite aggressive in our pursuit of creating a beautiful and safe campus. We build sidewalks where necessary to eliminate paths across lawns but we also create patios and brick seat walls to intercept foot traffic when appropriate. As a result, we solve problems and create places where students can spend time together outside the classroom. Instead of worn out places that students merely pass through on their way to somewhere else, we have created destinations that students seek because they

provide a place for social interaction. No one likes to sit in the sand, unless they're at the beach, but students sure like to sit on walls and visit with each other. Creating settings like these helps students and demonstrates our commitment to creating learning environments.

Another thing we can do to help students help themselves is remind them how important college is. You might not think they need to be reminded because they are already in college, but they do. Great books by Alexander Astin, Pascarella and Terenzini, Arthur Chickering, Art Sandeen and several others discuss the impact of college on students and confirm what most of us already know, college does make a difference. Once the human mind is expanded, it never shrinks back to its original size. Going to college is likely to cause students to have higher expectations in life, more tolerance of others, greater vision, more concern for personal health, more discretionary income, an increased concern for the environment and a greater inclination toward civic involvement. These are wonderful consequences of a college education and there is a cost to acquire these long-term gains. College is a demanding experience. Some courses are especially difficult. Studying all the time is no fun. The expense of college and the time commitment can be overwhelming. But, college is worth it. If it was easy and didn't cost very much, everyone would have a college degree. Students need to be reminded of this and encouraged to stick with their goals and cling to their commitment. Regarding commitment, students need a little help understanding what this means, as we all do sometimes. A few summers ago, a friend of ours was the baseball coach for boys ten to twelve years old. The team had to forfeit the last five games of the season because three boys quit the team. They said it was too hot. In Florida, it's easy to see how they could feel this way but it's not easy to understand why parents would allow them to quit the team and let down their teammates by not honoring their commitment. What message did these young boys get? What will they do in a few years if high school is too hard? What will they decide someday in college if classes are too difficult? Will they quit or take easier classes that might not lead to such a good job? What will happen someday if they are married and tough times come along? Will they honor their commitment or not?

Faculty and staff can help students by getting involved in their lives and providing guidance. This is certainly an opportunity and it might be our obligation as well because students sometimes need help with the small stuff, things most adults figured out a long time ago. For example, on our campus recently, an athlete didn't hand in his assignment on the day it was due because he was out of town playing in a basketball game. When he returned he said he did not hand in the paper because he wasn't on campus that day. He knew about the assignment well in advance of the due date but apparently he did not know about planning ahead and managing priorities. He does now and it was gratifying to help do a little coaching to help this young man.

There is a small town near our campus that is well known as a speed trap. It seems as though everybody in our part of the state knows that no one should ever speed through this town. Part of our culture as local motorists is the knowledge that speeding through this little town is a bad idea. Tourists don't have this embedded knowledge, but we do. It's part of the local culture. Culture, of course, is just the way we do things around here. It affects what we do or don't do. On our campus the culture dictates that no one parks on the lawn, ever. We don't drive on the grass at the University of Florida. Likewise, we can have a culture in our classrooms which eventually pervades the campus. This can be accomplished by letting students know how they must perform to do well in class, by expecting the best from them and being surprised if we don't get it. We also shape culture by expecting students to be on time for class and by doing so ourselves, for

instance. This is easy to do because unlike hitting a baseball which requires a lot of skill, being on time does not require hard to come by ability. Anybody can be on time because all it requires is self-discipline. Students need help with this sometimes and this reality provides opportunities to offer advice to help students help themselves. There are lots of other things we can do to shape the culture on campus. Admission requirements, academic standards, and targeted graduation rates affect the way we do things. As individuals and departments, there are plenty of things we can do as well. Peter Senge in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, identified five ways to help us and students, of course, to consider our moral and civic obligations. These are Systems Thinking, Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Shared Vision, and Team Learning.

Systems Thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes, patterns of change not just snapshots in time and understanding interrelationships. Using this perspective we can stop to consider how our organizations impact students and how we as individuals impact students. For example, the University of Florida Physical Plant works in teams to help with Traffic Safety Days and People Awareness Week. Interested individuals also volunteer to work with student orientation at the beginning of each semester and Gator Nights at the campus union. This activity occurs every Friday night of the semester and provides a safe on-campus alternative to the party scene downtown. Because staff serve students and spend time with them, it demonstrates that the administration is truly interested in the welfare of students. It helps team building as well.

Personal Mastery is just what it seems to be, continually clarifying what is important and trying to get a little bit wiser every day. We gain ground toward personal mastery by considering priorities and how we spend our time. Personal mastery, taking charge of our lives, is also enhanced when we make healthy choices regarding exercise, eating right, developing good habits, and opportunities to learn more. We are examples for students whether we like it or not and whether we know it or not. Therefore, it's prudent for us to consider what we look like, what we say and what we do. It's also beneficial for us to occasionally consider what we really think. An attitude check is helpful especially when it illuminates our perspective about our jobs. For example, do you consider your position description the sum total of all that you can do or is it merely the beginning of what you can do? It is a tether or a launching pad depending on your perspective. For example, a lady custodian at the University of Florida considers her position description just the tip of the iceberg compared to what she can and will do. In addition to her normal cleaning duties, she arranges office plants and helps decorate offices. She frequently bakes birthday cakes for those in the buildings where she provides service. One day someone asked her for the recipe for an especially tasty candy bar cake. The next day the recipe was left on that person's desk along with two candy bars to mix in the cake. This is customer service and a good example of what it means to gladly serve others.

This component of personal mastery is demonstrated in our lives when we become convinced that serving others is one of the most important things we can do. Betty Ford, wife of the former president, probably said it best, "I don't think there is anything as wonderful in life as being able to help someone else" (Gilbert, 2001, p. 21). There is a profound impact on students when faculty and staff really believe this and act accordingly. Sooner or later students might see the value of service as well and the world will be a little bit better place. Another person who believed in helping others was firefighter Timothy Stackpole who died in the September 11, 2001 attack in New York City. He said, "The greatest high you can get in life is by helping somebody" (Ragan, 2001, p.20). Students ought to learn that they shouldn't just surround themselves with themselves. The

examples of faculty and staff can help them move out of their comfort zones. So, what should you do? Try to be the kind of person your dog thinks you are.

Mental Models are the images, assumptions and stories we carry in our heads that determine how we look at things. Our view of the world and the people in it is shaped, in part, by how we were raised and all the things we have experienced. What we think, know and believe determines our opinions about people, events, places, ideas and things in society. Your mental model is the lens that you look through to see the world. The problem is that our lenses do not always provide such a clear view. Sometimes, for example, people and things are not really as we think they are. We're not always right. It's a very good idea for leaders to remember this. Stephen Covey, the author of several fine books, including *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, related this story. He was on a train one evening returning home from work and he noticed three young children in the aisle in front of him who were being especially noisy and disruptive. Covey noticed that their playful activity was nearly out of control and that the man he presumed to be the father sat idly and did nothing to curtail the activity. He also noticed that some of the other passengers were starting to become annoyed as well so he asked the father why he had not done something about his unruly children. The father replied that he had noticed the children's behavior and so he apologized for it. He explained that the mother of the children had just died and their activity was probably just their way of reacting to a difficult situation. He reasoned that perhaps playing helped them not think about their mother's death. The lesson for us is clear. Our view is not always the right view, even if we're the boss, especially if we're the boss. Leaders need to be receptive to the input of others because we can't think of all the good ideas by ourselves. We do the right thing when we value differences in people and regard diversity as a good thing because we have so much to learn from each other.

Shared vision is another organizational component necessary for success according to Senge. He considers it pictures that people carry in their heads and hearts. These pictures create a sense of common purpose that permeates an organization and gives coherence to diverse activities. Vision from leaders reveals what can and should be. It charts the course. Shared vision becomes reality because people are convinced that the leader knows the way to success. The leader's vision, when internalized by people in an organization is easier to accomplish because it is what everybody wants. When there's a sense of ownership about a vision and it is aligned with people's values, people find ways to make it happen because they are encouraged by mutual support toward a common goal. There are many examples in academic settings where leaders have provided the vision of what ought to be and convinced others to follow. Likewise, the world of sports contains many examples of teams being transformed because of visionary leadership. Change starts at the top by sharing a vision and convincing others to support it.

In classrooms, faculty are at the top so they should have a vision that all students can succeed. Students ought to sense that we expect them to do well and believe that we will do whatever we can to help them. Somehow, they'll know if we're really interested in them and how well they are doing in class. Students can acquire the same vision as us because when faculty and staff make the effort to connect with students, the shared vision is that academic success is expected. There are several ways to get involved with students and touch lives. One way is to spend time with them outside the classroom. Lots of settings are appropriate. One of them is your home. We like to invite students to our house to watch football games. They come frequently for some home cooking as well, especially during holidays because many of them live too far away from their own homes to travel there for a short period of time. This helps students sit up and notice that someone cares.

Another nice thing to do is invite students to participate in some of the things you do, such as jogging on campus. Physical fitness is important and it's something many college students are very interested in. We have found that students appreciate an invitation to spend time with faculty, especially when there is an opportunity to do something that's fun. Certainly, cooking hamburgers on the back porch grill is one of them. So is bowling.

Faculty can do nice little things to show students that they care. Something as simple as sending a thoughtful email to students who get an "A" in class can make a positive impression. Likewise, sending a helpful email to those who failed class also lets students know that they could have done better and were expected to. Communication via the grapevine is very effective so simple gestures such as these are soon discovered. Over time, faculty members and entire departments can become known for their caring nature and this enhances academic reputations. An illustration from the last century may illuminate the point that faculty ought to make each student feel important. Queen Victoria of England commented that when she was with English Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli she felt that she was with one of the most important people in the world. However, when she was with English Prime Minister William Gladstone, she felt as though she was one of the most important people in the world.

Team learning is the fifth and last component necessary for organizational success, according to Senge. It occurs when everybody in the organization is learning something new and different, perhaps something even better. It occurs when good enough never is. It occurs when students, our most important customers, expect satisfaction and we expect continual improvement. Team learning occurs when we learn as a team. For example, at the University of Florida, the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Vice President for Academic Affairs recently initiated the concept of One Team. Together, the vice presidents and those who work directly for them attended a workshop to learn more about leadership, teamwork, and customer service. The intent was to discover how they could work together to meet the needs of students better. This collective focus illustrates the fact that there are always new ways of looking at things and that perhaps we need to get out of our comfort zones to better resolve problems. An amusing situation from the I Love Lucy Show fortifies the point that sometimes your comfort level can cause you to fail. Ricky came home from work one day and saw Lucy kneeling on the carpeted living room floor looking for her earrings. Somewhat surprised by this, he asked: "You lost them in here?" She replied: "No, I lost them in the bedroom but the lighting is better in here." Just like Lucy, we can do our jobs better and really solve problems when we get out of our comfort zones and look for new ways to do things, especially when we do it as a team.

Senge's way of looking at organizational performance includes Systems Thinking, looking at the big picture; Personal Mastery, getting wiser everyday; Mental Models, reconsidering our view of the world; Shared Vision, pursuing goals as a team; and Team Learning, acquiring new knowledge as part of a team. Together, these concepts provide an interesting and effective way to evaluate organizational effectiveness. For us as faculty and staff it perhaps boils down to this: we can't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands. Sometimes we just have to toss something back. We received help while in college. Now it is our opportunity to help students so they can learn to help themselves and serve others. This is the right thing to do because students are the most important people on campus. When we meet their needs and impact lives, we serve our institutions well because this is what really matters in college.

## **References:**

Gilbert, R. (2001). *Bits & Pieces*. February.

Ragan, L. (2001). *Bits & Pieces*. December.