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## The Final Word

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## The Final Word

Jackie Gribbons

Being invited to write the “Final Word” is both an honor and a huge responsibility. The invitation implies that the writer offers sage advice and counsel that might make a difference in how we go about what we do in our profession and our lives. In a way, I find myself in an enviable position since I will really retire at the end of the 2007 academic year, and I am compelled to seize this opportunity to share what may be some of my “final words” to the HESA community. This epistle will be a truly personal reflection, and I promise to avoid using two of the all too-often used embellishments: “passion” and “vision.”

After over five decades in education and 41 years at the University of Vermont, mine will be an unusual perspective from which to reflect upon what has been a long and fulfilling career in education, and I hope to pass on five of the most important beliefs and values that have been so enduring for me and have guided me through my journey. I surely do not profess to offer panaceas, but hopefully, some of these tenets will ignite those you wish to attain or validate those you already hold dear as you do your best work and envision your dreams for a hope-filled future.

BEING YOURSELF . . . Being yourself mandates that you know who you are and what it is that is the core and essence of who you are as a person. It begs the question: how can I be myself unless I know who I am? It isn't often that one chooses one's life work as early as I was blessed to do so. In the eighth grade I knew that I wanted to become a teacher. I discovered that whether I was teaching elementary school children, junior high school, undergraduates, or graduate students, several things resonated with me. . . . at any level, what was required was consistency, directness, honesty, fairness, and openness. It was important for me to find a comfort zone that permitted me to meet and greet others and reduce the possibility of intimidation that came with the implied power of my position.

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Consider the challenges of being “you,” everyday; or, of putting all of your cards on the table, all of the time; or, of telling it how it is and being a straight shooter without demeaning or destroying the recipient of the message; or, of being true to yourself while being open to possibilities—new thoughts, new feelings, new ways of doing, and new ways of seeing and appreciating your world. Being myself in these ways has mainly worked for me in my quest to be an authentic person.

Everyone has a set of tenets upon which is built a professional style, philosophy, ethics, and demeanor, remembering that integrity is at the core of everything. It has been my belief that our students and colleagues deserve to know who we are and how and why we make decisions that affect our desired outcomes. Surely we have known colleagues who have operated within self-serving hidden agendas, or who seem to have split personalities that have made us wonder who was showing up this time. I implore you not to be one of them.

BEING COMPETENT . . . No one expects us to know everything there is to know or to be exceptional in every skill set. But, the expectation is that we will learn what we need to learn in order to be competent in our practice. For me, it became a need to find qualities and skills I didn’t know I had. I soon discovered that there were experts in my discipline from whom I could learn and that these qualified people were anxious to teach others what they knew so well. I remember the times when I was appointed or elected to positions requiring skills or knowledge I had yet to master. Learning from others was essential, and I acquired tutoring in budgeting and financial management, fundraising and development, and strategic planning. I also learned that asking the right people for the right information would become central to the relationship and the outcomes both parties would be proud to cultivate. It became apparent that there would be more than one mentor in my life and that multiple mentors would be there when I needed to develop professionally. Eventually, I would become a mentor for others. This seemed to occur even when I was unaware of its status, so I learned to take extra care in what I said and did, never knowing who might be taking it all in as gospel.

Competence requires a full measure of confidence that you can do what you say you can do blended with a boat load of humility. I also learned the helpful lesson that no matter how often others told me how well I performed, there was no such thing as being indispensable. What a totally liberating realization this was for me! I could still try to do my best without feeling that I had to say “yes” to every new option because I knew there were others who could do what I could do . . . differently. Being competent brings material and intrinsic rewards and dilemmas. Salary increases and promotions may come with the territory as does increased responsibility and additional assignments to verify that you have proven yourself in the heat of pressure and demand. Ah, but to know down deep that you have really done an exceptional job may be the greatest reward of all! Competence is

huge, and in the end, the world will finally detect a “faker” — most of us would never want to fall into that category.

RESPECTING OTHERS . . . Social justice in its broadest definition is not a trendy concept. It is real and dictates that we must be committed to work hard to understand, appreciate, and respect all of the differences that encompass our expanding world. This requires that we take positive action to right the wrongs all around us. Social justice can and should be obviously prevalent on our own campuses. Supporting those who are marginalized, or extinguishing and looking beyond the labels, or treating others with respect for who they might be or become are all steps toward a more just campus. The issues are extensive and often daunting, but we can make a difference in our daily work. How about being a champion for the unpopular or struggling student; or, working with colleagues to create a climate that is safe and nurturing; or, developing your own sensitivity and awareness of barriers you never recognized before; or, just being honest that you need to learn more about the issues and actually doing it?

In our ever-changing society, I have been inspired by the honest caring of colleagues and students who believe that we have a mission and responsibility to make our institutions a place where we can all learn and prosper under the banner of genuine civility, opportunity, and respect. I know I still have much to learn and to do, and humaneness and hope have always been at the center of what has given me the courage to take the next step so that I, too, could make a difference. Be mindful that empathy, sensitivity, and caring are noble qualities but are not enough unless they include taking action in ways that matter and feel right to each of us.

CONTRIBUTING TO THE PROFESSION . . . Not everyone will become a renowned and prolific writer of scholarly articles and books. Not everyone will become the president of a prestigious national professional association. Not everyone will become the keynote speaker or presenter in demand. Not everyone will chair a committee or task force. But, everyone must become involved in the life, welfare, and growth of our profession. I believe we all have a responsibility to give back more than we receive.

Like many things we bring into our lives, we learn that involvement is good at our own time and pace and that the balance toward which we are striving is different for each of us. For me, the most rewarding experiences were those that came as the result of being involved professionally. These experiences became mirrors that reflected images that were new and self-defining for me. The support I received from others motivated me to become a leader in their eyes, and I was encouraged in ways that brought out the very best of me. I became aware of my strengths as well as my Achilles' heels. I delved into issues otherwise foreign to me, and I learned to do my homework before opening my mouth. Being surrounded by the

most highly recognized women leaders in the nation was like learning by osmosis as I watched, listened, and considered within a safe and nourishing environment. I marveled at the great minds and creative insights that produced significant policies and programs that would change the landscape of higher education, especially for women. I finally learned what the “big picture” was really all about. Best of all, I met my closest friends having served on committees and executive boards with these talented people with whom I developed lasting personal relationships □ many that are now more than three decades in duration.

And, so I challenge you to contribute to the profession at the local, regional, or national level and to test out your talents, give freely of your ideas, and reap the mutual benefits in ways that are meaningful, rewarding, and lasting. It is guaranteed that you will become a better person and professional for having given back to the profession and its constituents in life changing and substantive ways.

BEING HAPPY . . . I have seldom understood why folks remain in positions that become their life’s work, complaining all the while how frustrated, trapped, and unhappy they are. What a way to go. Some people choose to be happy, and some people choose to be glum. Happiness in the workplace can serve as a stimulus for well-being and contentment, enabling a person to overcome some of the greatest odds. When I speak of being happy, I am not thinking that everyday is full of “fall on the floor laughter” or “rose petals scattered across every pathway.” I am thinking instead that being happy is a state of mind that makes me eager to go to my work, engage with others in productive ways, and wonder at the day’s end where all of the time went (including those 14 hour days that seemed to never end and left me exhausted).

What I learned early on was that our profession is highly social and interactive and that most of us thrive in this kind of environment because we like to work with people for the common good. In fact, this is a major reason many graduate student candidates espouse when asked why they want to enter the higher education and student affairs arena. And many new and bright eyed professionals exclaim: “and to think I am being paid to do what I love!?”

For most, happiness is feeling good about who you are, what you do, and how others respond to your overtures. It seems that the climate must be conducive for happiness to occur and that happiness can be contagious. Think about how you respond when greeted with a smile, genuine laughter, and good will that seem to create energy otherwise absent. I have tried to smile and laugh a lot and to find humor in most things. Besides, rumor has it that laughter is good for mental health and the digestive system. As a consequence, I tried to see the bright side even when doom and gloom raised its uninvited head because I knew that this, too, would pass and tomorrow would be a new and better day.

Looking back, I can honestly say that happiness has been around me almost all of the time, and I continue to be grateful for the people who have been part of my life as well as the challenges and opportunities that I have created and have been placed before me. Feeling blessed and fortunate is an understatement of good fortune. It boils down, I believe, to a compatible fit with the University of Vermont and the trust and faith placed in me to do my best. Quite frankly, being happy is tied with good health as number one on my list of “must haves.” So, think about it . . . if we’re not having fun doing this thing called work, why are we doing it, anyway?!

As I close, I would be remiss not to include several additional insights that are part of my “job jar” . . . work hard, but work smart and decide whether you want to work to live or live to work . . . take control of your life, and make good choices . . . create just the right amount of personal and social distance between you and your students and supervisees so that you can offer the professional expertise they seek and deserve . . . become “expert” in something that captures your deep interest and commitment whether or not it is in your job description . . . do your best today—it may not be what it was yesterday or might be tomorrow—no one can ever ask more of you, nor can you ever ask more of yourself . . . try not to take yourself too seriously as it is seldom all about you . . . check your ego at the door along with your coat . . . remember that there is no perfect person, place, or position . . . love yourself first and then give to others what they need . . . respect the dignity of your own experience . . . and, be of generous spirit.

I learned a long time ago that nothing lasts forever, and I am aware that timing is everything. Being a “sports junkie,” I would love to liken my forthcoming retirement to Michael Jordan when he knew it was time to hang up his basketball sneakers. I, too, want to go out at the top of my game, while I am still able to dribble the length of the court to the foul line from where I take ascent to the final slam dunk. And like the game of basketball, I have realized that if I didn’t take the risks of scoring, I would have missed 100% of my shots!

In some ways, these past years have been surreal, but I will carry all of the memories with me forever. And, it is with deepest thanks and appreciation that I enter this final sentence.