



Cedarville University
DigitalCommons@Cedarville

Psychology Faculty Publications

Department of Psychology

Spring 2000

Inspiring Greatness in Students (2000)

Michael W. Firmin

Cedarville University, firmin@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/psychology_publications

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Firmin, M. (2000). Inspiring greatness in students. *Torch*.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.





*Dr. Michael Firmin, associate professor of psychology at Cedarville, has allowed us to reprint his article, "Inspiring Greatness in Students," which was recently published in **The Teaching Professor**. Dr. Firmin's passion and calling, like that of other Cedarville faculty, is investing his life in the lives of students.*

Inspiring Greatness in Students

It gives me deep joy to "inspire greatness" in students. By this I do not mean for students to become inflated "big shots" who think that they can conquer the world before they have exercised the painstaking discipline and demonstrated maturity to warrant greatness. Rather, I mean urging students to fulfill the potential that they genuinely possess and to push themselves toward the outer limits of their capabilities. Consider the following six guiding principles.

Principle One: *Believe in Them*

Believing in students involves sizing up their abilities and interests and assessing how far these could take them in the future if they are developed, honed, and disciplined. Some students react with surprise when I share my belief in them and their latent potential. Having someone that they respect express confidence in what they could do in time provides the impetus for them to stretch themselves toward new goals of personal excellence.



by Dr. Michael Firmin

Principle Two: *Give Them Early Chances*

This is putting my money where my mouth is (so to speak). That is, if I really believe in some students, then I am willing to take some risks with them. All great people were once young and immature, made mistakes, and embarrassed their mentors. But the greatness eventually achieved made the clumsiness along the way worth the effort and pain of getting there.

My own mentors gave me chances to develop and hone abilities early in my college experience. As a college senior, I was given a level of responsibility that amazes me even today. Various faculty and administrators believed in me and expressed their confidence in what I could do. Having experienced this efficacy early has made me want to instill it in my own students—to pass a baton.

Principle Three: *View Them Through the Lens of Time*

Let me use Laura as an example. When I think of Laura, I do not see a young 23-year-old woman. I see a future school psychologist with a Ph.D. who is a leader in her field. I see someone who has made a significant difference in the lives of disadvantaged children, someone eminent and successful. Of course, Laura is none of those things today. She is a good student who is working in a pharmacy to pay her way through graduate school. But that is not the Laura I see in class every Monday night.

I try to challenge students like Laura with a sense of “destiny.” That is, she may not ever achieve what I envision for her—and whether or not she ever does is not important. It is not for me to determine students’ paths.

But what I do want to do is to encourage students not to sell themselves short of their destinies. I want them to think in terms of all they can do and be.

Principle Four: *Be Genuine With Them*

Students know. They can tell if you are being fake or just trying out some sort of motivational spin. Believing in students, giving them chances, and viewing them through the lens of time needs to be part of who I am as a person. It is an expression of my being—not simply an exercise or experiment I am trying on students. There is a lot at stake: students’ self-concept, confidence, efficacy—not to mention the time, money, and energy that they may

expend in pursuing goals that they believe they can reach. Inspiring students to greatness has to be something that you genuinely and deeply believe in as a person.

Principle Five: *Take Time During Teachable Moments*

Inspiring greatness takes time. It takes a lot of time. Students need me at inconvenient times. I am forced to prioritize these demands on my time and forced to make choices on the spot without the luxury of time to think and analyze.

For me, the battle is often won or lost with the pencil I hold in my hand. If I can discipline myself to put my pencil down on the desk, most often I have won the battle of giving students time and individual attention. If I continue to clutch that pencil with a death grip, students get the implicit message: They are an interruption. And during these times, unfortunately, my urgency is at the expense of their future greatness.

Principle Six: *You Cannot Inspire Everyone to Greatness*

Not all my students are destined to be great. This is not to say that all students do not have tremendous future potentials. They do. But not all will become *great*. In sum, I find myself inspiring only a few students to greatness. This is not always a “selection” process; sometimes it is simply more of a phenomenon. That is, students may express (overtly or covertly) a desire to be mentored, I may take an exceptional interest in them, or the connection simply happens. In my own experience, there is no real science to it. If there is a



remote pattern, however, I would say that in all cases a certain “goodness of fit” occurs between me and the student.

So inspire students to greatness! You may not be able to do it for all, but the ones for whom you do it will be worth investing your life in higher education. It has been for me, and I have only been at it for a decade. T

Michael Firmin, associate professor of psychology, joined Cedarville College in 1998. He spent 10 years on faculty at Baptist Bible College in Clarks Summit, Pa., where he was director of graduate studies. Firmin has an extensive graduate education, including three master’s degrees and a Ph.D. He is also completing a second Ph.D. at Syracuse University. Firmin has served his community in the roles of pastor, conference speaker, professional counselor, and assessor for persons with mental retardation. When not spending time with his wife, Karen, and daughters, Ruthie (10) and Sarah (7), he enjoys driving around in his MG-B.

