Professionalism

I was prompted to write this note as I remembered that today marks the 65th anniversary of a day simply called D-Day. On that day, the largest invasion ever known was mounted and young men and women drew strength and courage that they never knew they had, fighting for a war started by others. I can also title this note by calling it “Duty and Honor,” old-fashioned ideas that I live by.

How can we be professional, or how do we develop a sense of duty and honor, in what we are doing, under far less exacting circumstances? I would like to share three thoughts.

Excellence. This is the modern mantra of quality in every product that we buy. Turn this mantra around and ask yourself: Are you giving your best? Or are you happy with just squeaking by? We at the ARC take pride in our reputation. You may not know it but over the years we have built a reputation for excellence, thanks to the collective efforts of our alumni.

Some of you have suffered my acid tongue as I express my displeasure at shoddy work. We are here to build an institution and, for almost of you, to move on to better things. As Churchill said, quoting Horatio Nelson, “England expects that every man should do his duty.” The professors expect everyone at the ARC to do her/his duty. Anyone who drops the ball or slackens is imposing on someone else. Live your days, every day, as a challenge to do the utmost. Otherwise, you have wasted a day and you can only blame yourself for squandering that most precious resource—time.

Excellence. Excellence means that we do not cut corners. Something that has bothered me tremendously is the almost blind reliance on the “internet” as the source of all wisdom. Here’s another saying for you, this time regarding statistics but it might just as well refer to the internet, “He uses statistics like a drunken man uses the lamppost, for support rather than for illumination.” Are you using the internet for something other than illumination? Some of you have given me a blank look when I ask you questions regarding your work. I interpret the blank look to mean “internet unavailable.” Some of you are a little more cunning and tell me that you will give me an answer in a few days. Please remember that professors are quite smart people, and quite cunning, too.

Another short cut that has ruined many careers is copying, known technically as plagiarism. I have rejected many theses due to “cut-and-paste.” As professors supervising your work, we have a duty to warn you of this unethical behavior. We also have a duty to check. But, please be clear, the ultimate responsibility rests with you. There have been famous institutions which have withdrawn the degrees awarded due to plagiarism.

Excellence. Excellence is bound closely to a sense of duty and honor, which is reflected in a person’s character. Over the past five years or so, I have encountered an increasing number of students at the ARC who have shown extremely poor decorum. Here is another quote known sometimes as the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This is a universal maxim, not bound by culture or ethnicity – treat others with courtesy, treat elders with respect, and so forth. It is sad that we as grown-ups behave in a spoilt, childish manner. I want to make it very clear to you that not answering requests from professors, not turning up at meetings, giving lame excuses, yelling at one another, are all reflections of your character, and not acceptable in a professional environment. What a crying shame indeed. Are you ready to be a professional?

I need to go back to another war to wrap up, the Vietnam War. If you have never been to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., ominously known as the “Wall,” you should. If you have, you know how terribly emotional it is to walk along it. As you go by, you will likely see this sign: “All gave some, some gave all.” The challenge I have for you is to “give some” so that you will actually take back a lot.

Have a good summer.

Frank Lu
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