

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD: Universities must offer high touch, high tech



NOVEMBER 03, 2013 12:00 AM • [BY ELAINE MAIMON](#)

Research presented at a recent meeting of the American Sociological Association and soon to be published in a book, "How College Works" (Harvard University Press), explores the reasons that college students select majors.

What is your guess about the most important factor in their choice? Perception about job possibilities? Tuition incentives? Pressure from friends or family? The answer is "none of the above."

Here is how Inside Higher Ed (Aug. 12) summarizes the findings:

"Undergraduates are significantly more likely to major in a field if they have an inspiring and caring faculty member in their introduction to the field. And they are equally likely to write off a field based on a single negative experience with a professor."

Inspiring teachers in introductory courses make all the difference. Yet far too many universities assign these first college courses to the least experienced and lowest paid part-time instructors. Something is wrong with this picture.

Consequently, Governors State University has decided our freshmen will be taught by experienced, full-time faculty members who understand the significance of introductory courses and enjoy teaching first-year students. Classes will be small, with no more than 30 in each section and only 15 in English composition. Because of inspirational teaching, I predict students will ponder many exciting options when they select a major during the sophomore year.

In this era of high tech, GSU is going against the tide by investing in "high touch" for our freshman class. Still, the university is fully committed to the intelligent use of "high tech," where appropriate, for more advanced students.

Our bachelor of science in nursing is entirely online, following the “high-touch” clinical experiences in community college registered nursing programs.

Our new doctorate in leadership is a hybrid made up of online classes and intensive face-to-face weekend seminars. And undoubtedly our talented professors will be incorporating “high tech” elements in their “high-touch” core courses.

We are keenly aware, however, that students entering the university for the first time require more — much more — than a computer screen can provide. At every commencement, I welcome the graduates “into the community of educated women and men.” First-year students deserve a full-scale introduction to that community — what it means to think critically and innovatively, to communicate effectively, and to take on the responsibilities of informed citizens.

In 1872, at a dinner for alumni of Williams College, President John Garfield famously said, “My definition of a university is Mark Hopkins at one end of a log and a student on the other.” Mark Hopkins was a professor of moral philosophy and rhetoric at Williams and later president.

Private, high-cost campuses like Williams College have a long tradition of great teachers introducing an elite group of students to big ideas. Lower income, first-generation college students also deserve a meaningful initiation into an engaged intellectual life. Unfortunately, I detect a disturbing, divisive national trend influencing public universities to short-change less privileged students, convincing them to settle for impersonal education and training for a narrow vocationalism.

Governors State University, with the most affordable tuition in Illinois, in direct opposition to this trend, offers students a seat on the log with great teachers at the other end.

The early action deadline for the 270 spaces in the freshman class is Nov. 15. For further information, please email Kristy (kgoodwin-peterson@govst.edu).