

Involvement, excellence, and whole person the right formula

February 28, 2016, By Daniel J. Bauer

Our newspapers continue to publish one report or opinion piece after the other about the frightening condition of present day higher education here in Taiwan. An obvious mood of pessimism hangs in the air like a sand storm we cannot shake.

The other metaphor that comes to mind is that of a sinking ship. It seems as if the whole gang of us, from high administrators to instructors to students, are passengers now aboard a new version of the Titanic.

So many questions abound. What to do in the face of our drastically dwindling number of high school students straining at the bit to make it into our spacious, well-equipped, smiling, even hospitable classrooms? And what to do with an ever-growing number of students who appear to see a diploma (a piece of cardboard!), not knowledge or academic achievement, as the primary goal of a college career?

I suspect society wants us to stop focusing on the topic of our pool of students. Our sources for local students, and the type of students many of them are likely to be, will not change. What people are crowing about is the necessity to pool resources.

So, we see the headlines about major universities forming committees to investigate the ins and outs of merging in the near future. We read of universities with well reputed programs for both undergraduate and graduate students now scrambling like white mice in a science laboratory through mazes of worrisome statistics. Every institution and every one of us wants to survive. We all know that's not going to happen. It is Darwin all over again with us, too.

Here follow a few verses that show why I don't earn my living as a poet.

It's dog eat dog out there as far as the market goes //
Nothing but growling and barking, everybody
knows. // So, shutter up programs, departments and
such // Individuals don't matter all that much // A
sharp axe is swinging, some heads go a winging //
Through the air they fly with amazing speed //
Fewer jobs for fewer students, that's what we need //
/ Better a few get hit and their noggins go bust //
Than the whole darn school wind up empty and stale
like an old bread crust

I do not mean to give the impression I am light-hearted in the face of a crisis that carries the potential to seriously hurt thousands of people. I do mean to hint that university life in Taiwan has become a challenge about which we're not sure we should laugh or cry.

What is my response to these problems which are so much bigger and more important than I am? The answer: to do my job. As I begin this new semester, my response to our educational crisis is not only not to panic, but to be hopeful. Things look rough institutionally for all of us, but teachers everywhere still have much to give.

I intend this new semester to stick to a formula that has served many of us very well in the past. I speak of the trusty, not rusty, IEW formula.

The "I" is for "involvement in the classroom." "I aim to keep right on fighting the good fight to get my students to involve themselves in their education when we are together. This means not soft-pedaling written homework, but demanding it. This means no ongoing chit chat or snacking in class. This means that, except for educational purposes, no touching a smart phone while we're at work, either. Some of my colleagues have given up. They say they don't care if students play with toys in class. Well, I care.

The "E" is for "excellence." Let's not "dumb down" our teaching methods or our materials. Let us push our students. I want to help my young friends lift themselves up to the level of a reasonably well educated person. Speaking and writing English so others understand us is not enough for English majors. Our goal is to develop an excellent grasp of English, to truly master it.

The "W" stands for "whole person." Students and their parents need our voices and modeling to see that a university education is more than a matter of scores or tests, and more than learning how to jump through hoops like seals in a circus act. An education is to lead a person from darkness into a place of light. Becoming an educated person means becoming a different kind of person.

Our challenges are great, but we've got a job to do. With hard work and a little help from above, we can do it. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points

- 1) How aware are you of the educational crisis in Taiwan now "raging"? NOT TOO AWARE . . . A LITTLE BIT AWARE . . . VERY AWARE
- 2) This column focuses on the half humorous but yet serious "IEW" formula - - involvement, excellence, and whole person. WHICH of the 3 - - I or E or W - feel most important to you this semester?
- 3) What is your honest opinion of the gentle mix of smile and humor with serious discussion in this column?

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