



[About the Program](#)

[Nominations](#)

[Winners](#)

[Newsroom](#)



**Winners**

[Home](#) > [Winners](#) > [Previous National Winners](#) > [Brian P. Coppola - Acceptance Speech](#)

[Find a Winner](#)

[Previous National Winners](#)

[2009 National Winners](#)

[2008 National Winners](#)

[2007 National Winners](#)

[2006 National Winners](#)

[2005 National Winners](#)

[2004 National Winners](#)

[2003 National Winners](#)

[2002 National Winners](#)

[2001 National Winners](#)

[2000 National Winners](#)

[1999 National Winners](#)

[1998 National Winners](#)

[1997 National Winners](#)

[1996 National Winners](#)

[1995 National Winners](#)

[1994 National Winners](#)

[1981 - 1993 National Winners](#)

[About the Program](#)

[Nominations](#)

[Newsroom](#)

[+](#) Share

**Brian P. Coppola - Acceptance Speech**

**2009 Outstanding Doctoral and Research Universities Professor of the Year**  
**Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of Chemistry**  
**University of Michigan, Ann Arbor**

When you travel to a new place, one of the first things you learn to say is "thanks": merci, grazie, danke, gracias...

In China, where I spend some of my time, you say 谢谢 (xièxiè)... which I like best of all because it says "thanks" twice (谢谢). In fact, when you are in China, it is commonly said four times: 谢谢谢谢.

So I'll start by saying "thanks" four times:

Thanks to the Carnegie Foundation, and to CASE, for organizing this amazing honor.

Thanks to my family and friends, because they are both the tolerant recipients and unsung provocateurs of the first drafts of anything I do.

Thanks to my teachers, past and present, for all the things they let me get away with - although I see more intent than accident in their actions.

And thanks to the University of Michigan, for taking countless risks with me, for its support, and for its incredible undergraduate student body. Ann Arbor is simply a wonderful place to be a professor.

Being a professor also includes endless chances for learning, so I want to tell you about four important lessons from my own continuing education.

The first one is from David Smith, a Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University. David said: "Education is not a neutral activity."

Educators should not only teach the examples, but also understand that they teach by example. The fact is: long after the details of "the stuff" are gone, lessons that matter can linger and cling: the development of intellectual character, moral citizenship, interpersonal respect, mentorship, and leadership.

Last September, a student from the first class I ever taught as a professor, back in 1982, died in a freak accident. He was a beloved country doctor in Wisconsin, and his best buddy (Greg, also a physician) wrote to me. I had not heard from either of them since they graduated.

Greg wrote: "Ben and I always saw ourselves as teaching our patients according to your example. The memory that just stuck with us was you sitting on the edge of your desk before starting a lecture. I don't know if you did that on purpose, but I have to tell you, that casual act helped disarm a lot of the intimidation and fear Ben and I had about organic chemistry. It was a brilliant teaching move. We use our own version of that all the time."

At its best, education blends multiple lessons that include the subject matter along with every choice, large and small, that shape the learning environment.

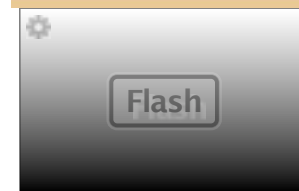
My second lesson comes from Ralph Williams, a Professor of English at the University of Michigan, who believes that authentic education requires a "Full Human Presence."

When you stand up in front of people and take a position of moral or intellectual authority, the only thing you cannot be is invisible. Ralph reminds me that I am in control of the choices I make in a classroom, and that those choices shape me as a whole individual - whether I like it or not.

**NOMINATE**

The nominations for 2011 are now closed.

**PHOTO GALLERY**



[View photos from the 2010 U.S. Professors of the Year celebration](#)

**PROGRAM SPONSORS**



[More Sponsors](#)

Mentorship spans the human experience, particularly in the classroom. If you present yourself as a scholar whose only religion is academic rigor, you basically end up looking like an idiot. It cannot be done. Students, like anyone, will evaluate you as a complete person based on the information they have, like it or not. So what sort of lesson - as a fellow human being - do you want to convey?

The third lesson comes from the educational research of Elaine Coleman while she was a professor at the University of Delaware.

Coleman demonstrated something so fundamental that it changed forever the way I think about education: students learn better when they are explicitly aware of the need to teach others what they are learning.

I think this is profound because, as professors, we use teaching events in order to evaluate student learning - we just call them exams, papers, talks, posters, and so on.

Let me say it again: examinations are teaching events for students. As a simple matter of empirical fact, when students think about studying for exams as though they were preparing to tutor a peer, then they end up learning more in the first place. Although I do not have time to talk about the details, my teaching statement includes examples of how I mash students together in order to get them to commit acts of teaching as a part of their learning... something I have been lately carrying into both K-12 and international settings.

The last lesson comes from Jef Mallett. Jef is the creator of "Frazz," one of the greatest comic strips in the world. If you do not know it, let me say that the title character, Frazz, can be thought of as the grown-up version of Calvin (from "Calvin and Hobbes") who, while independently wealthy, makes his living as the custodian at an elementary school.

Let me paraphrase the "Frazz" strip that appeared on April 27, 2009: Students are not the customers of education; instead, education produces deep, life-long relationships - between students and their peers, their teachers, and all the other communities they influence and are influenced by.

For years, I have tried to understand my exceptionally strong discomfort with the student-as-consumer mindset that has hit higher education like it was the right idea. In my not so humble opinion: the consumerist mindset drives a wedge between students and their fundamental interactions with each other, with professors, and with the outcomes from an authentic education.

In China, there are actually terms that express the special closeness of people within a learning community that we lack in English - such as "shīxiōng" (师兄, which colloquially translates as "school brother," and "shījiě" (师姐, "school sister").

Greg, my student from Wisconsin in 1982, whom I mentioned earlier, is still my school brother. David Smith, Ralph Williams, Elaine Coleman, Jef Mallett... countless others... are siblings in my learning community. Students are not the customers; they are our younger "school siblings." I wish we had a good word for it in English, because we need a way to talk about it in order to preserve it.

Despite what we hear in the news, our country's education system has many other strengths, particularly how we inspire creativity and invention by encouraging people to color outside the lines. What concerns me about consumerism is that the pressure to use subject-matter testing performance as the sole measure of educational accomplishment is misplaced, threatens to minimize authentic education to a form of certification, and puts our strengths at risk.

And before we, as a country, reduce education to test-taking, training for it, and then generating a ranking score, let's at least study carefully 2500 years of the world's exemplar certification system, namely, China's. The United States is embracing certification while they are beginning to abandon it, precisely because it does not make their students competitive where it counts. I can tell you with certainty that China is moving aggressively toward the American education ideals of individualism, creativity, and our wonderful penchant for coloring outside the lines... not to mention encouraging the development of a full human spirit.

Let's strive to improve... but let's not lose what we do so well.

Let's continue to get it right - 谢谢谢谢.



TO BRIAN, WHO REALLY DOES HAVE IT RIGHT,  
JE  
MACLETT

Copyright © 2006-2011 Council for Advancement and Support of Education