

**“What I Wish They’d Told Me.”**  
**Ezra Brown**  
**Virginia Tech New Faculty Orientation**  
**August 19, 2005**  
**Copyright © 2005 by Ezra Brown. All rights reserved.**

Welcome! We’re glad to see you here at Virginia Tech. It’s a good place to be, and we hope that you’ll help us make it better. Hey, that’s why they asked you to come here. You’re a remarkably talented and varied bunch, you know. Just to mention three of you, one of you brand-new PhDs was the fifth woman to finish the Pikes Peak Marathon – and you ran the entire race in a skirt. One of you veterans survived a tough New Orleans childhood, played NCAA varsity basketball, and is well into a fascinating career. One of you new faculty members is returning to your alma mater after a long and productive career in the business world. Between the three of you, you’ve visited every continent and a large number of Pacific islands. But you’re not alone. Everyone in this room has a similar story to tell.

And this splendid variety extends to your work. You’ll be working in labs, in classrooms, with undergraduates, with graduate students, doing teaching, research, extension, outreach, student life, athletics, dramatics, arts, budgets, engineering, records, business, agriculture, architecture, sciences, mathematics...the list goes on and on.

Now, I’m the “veteran” faculty member here. To see what that means, how many of you were born after September 9, 1969? (GROAN!) That’s the day I began at VT. But what am I doing here, besides standing between you and your mid-morning snack? Well, after 36 years, they figure I’m bound to have learned a few bald truths about academic life. Since bald truths are clearly the only ones I know about, my job is to tell you about some Things I Wish I’d Heard – and heeded – on first arriving at Virginia Tech. Your job is to listen. You may finish before I do. If so, when you hear the words “Snack Time!”, that means that it is, and I’m finished, and we can both get some coffee.

Thing One is **Rule Zero: It’s Gotta Matter.**

You have come to Virginia Tech with Great Promise, Great Qualifications – and Great Expectations. And one of these Expectations is that you go on to do something significant with your academic career...to Make Them Glad They Hired You...to make a difference in your field and at Virginia Tech. My question to you is this: will you? “Significant”, of course, means many different things. It could mean that you want to write great plays...to find a cure for AIDS...to design beautiful and useful things...to pass along the wonder and the beauty of your chosen field to fertile young minds...to prove the Riemann Hypothesis...to make a zillion dollars.

If whatever you do is to be significant, then it has to matter to you. Indifference just doesn’t cut it. Rule Zero applies: It’s Gotta Matter.

You may know people who have overcome tremendous barriers—financial, physical, emotional, family, cultural—to accomplish significant things. You may know others with every opportunity and advantage at their disposal and who accomplish little or nothing of significance. So, what’s the

difference? Determination, that's what. Persistence, that's what. Passion, that's what. Having It Matter, that's what. Rule Zero, that's what.

Thing Two is the **Ego Minimization Principle: Get Your Ego Out Of It.**

Get your ego out of your research. The focus is on the research itself, on the thrill of discovery and the agony of writing up results and the joy of seeing what nobody else has seen – not on you. Get your ego out of the classroom. The focus is on the students and on the material – not on you (you want the students to learn and love the material, don't you? Of course you do!) Get your ego out of the job, whatever it is. The focus is on the job, not on you. This is the most valuable lesson I've learned since I began teaching calculus back during the Johnson Administration. And that's Andrew, not Lyndon. Get your ego out, and the results will amaze you.

Thing Three is the **Completion Postulate: Be The One Who Gets It Done.**

You are here to do a good job as a new faculty member, and there are people here who can help you do that. How do you get your computer hookup squared away? How do you find a source of supplies for your new Lab – or your new Golden Retriever? Where's my desk? Where's my key? Who takes care of my grant admin? If you don't know, ask. If you don't get a good answer, ask someone else. When you find out, you'll know. You'll learn the ropes. Do what it takes to get the job done. We'll help you. There are people who suffer in silence because they are like the Fourth Son at the Seder – they don't know how to ask. Be someone who Facilitates The Transaction. That's a good reputation to have.

You teachers will learn the next two soon enough, so why not right now?

Thing Four is the **Reality Rule: It doesn't matter how smart they are. They are still 18 to 22 years old, and all that that might imply. And don't you forget it!**

Help them make the transition from the childhood to adulthood. They may look like grownups, but they are trying to fit in, to stand out, to find their way, to make friends ... and they're also suffering from terminal (but nonfatal) cases of Hormone Poisoning. They won't always do the right thing. If they did, they wouldn't need us. Oh, yes: want respect from your students? Here's how: know your stuff, be helpful, and have respect for *them*. Over the years, my philosophy of teaching has been to meet the students where they are and then raise the bar of expectations, to treat students with kindness and humor, to help students confront their fears, and to show them how to know and love the subject matter. Develop your own philosophy of teaching and practice it every day. It'll pay off.

Thing Five, the other side of that particular coin, is the **Awareness Axiom: Be acutely aware that what you say matters. They are listening closer than you think.**

Just a word, a remark, a stray comment – but somebody listened and took it to heart. Our job as teachers is not to show students how smart we are. Our job is to show students how smart they are. There are two types of students, the captivated and the captive. The captivated ones are easy. Find them interesting and challenging projects and then jump out of the way. Eventually, they will be your colleagues. For the captive ones, simply saying "Well done," or "You should sign up for such-

and-such a class; I think you have real talent,” or “Yes, you can do it,” or “Don’t stop now...you’re doing just fine” could make a world of difference to a student with the ears to hear, the heart to listen, and the determination to act. Here is one such story:

A student took a class from a teacher and did very well, but was struggling in the follow-up class, taught by someone else. In desperation, the student went to his first teacher and asked for help. The first teacher picked a random problem from the current section and said, “Here, work this problem.” The student worked it – so quickly that the teacher said, “Wow, that was fast. You must really understand this.” The student said, “I do. It just now clicked.” He had no further trouble in the follow-up class, and over the years he told this story many times. Thirty years later, the two met again, and the student was able to thank his professor for what he did so many years ago, and for making such a difference in the student’s life. The professor had forgotten, but was genuinely touched by the student’s gratitude.

They Are Listening Closer Than You Think.

Thing Six is the **Rule of Engagement: Engage the University.**

Be a part of it; don’t stand apart from it. After all, it’s you and it’s me and it’s all of us here. Become an active part of the community. The Virginia Tech motto is *ut prosim*, which means “That I May Serve.” Take that motto to heart. Join and serve the community; it’ll make you feel good.

So: It’s Gotta Matter. Get Your Ego Out Of It. Be The One To Get It Done. They Are Still Young. They Do Listen. Engage The University.

And finally, Thing Seven: **Catch The Joy.**

Those who miss the joy miss everything.

Snack Time!