

If I Knew Then What I Know Now...

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Today, I want to share a little bit about some of the things I've learned over more than two decades in a department that encompasses agricultural education, leadership, Extension and communication. And I'm going to do that by using one of the most loved themes in *science fiction*, and that theme is time travel.

We're going to go back in time a little and introduce the old, current me to the young me. It's like old Biff from *Back to the Future 2* going back to young Biff with the sports almanac from the future, which tells young Biff which teams will win over the next 40 years. It's like old Spock going back and meeting young Spock in the rebooted *Star Trek* movies.

So why have old Ricky go back to talk with young Ricky?

Ten years ago, I hit a milestone in my university career. It was then that my oldest child entered college, and I realized that I had reached the chronological age that I could be college students' father. That was huge for me. Up until then, I could have been a big brother, or maybe a young uncle. And for me, because I started at the University of Florida in 1995 at the ripe old age of 29, this was a big deal.

With this last fall class, I have been teaching college for 24 years – 22 consecutively at the University of Florida, and two previously as a lecturer at Texas A&M. But let's focus on the 22 years at UF. A lot has changed in those 22 years. I'm not sure if you ever read the list of items that Beloit College puts together, but I find it extremely interesting. Every year, Beloit lists trends that the new college class has always grown up with. Here are some excerpts from the fall 2017 class:

- They are the last class to be born in the 1900s.
- They are the first generation for whom a “phone” has been primarily a video game, direction finder, electronic telegraph, and research library.
- Peanuts* comic strips have always been repeats. That's sad.
- They have largely grown up in a floppy-less world.
- There have always been emojis to cheer us up.

□ Justin Timberlake has always been a solo act.

Just to name a few. So a lot has changed, just in their lifetime and in the “lifetime” of me teaching.

So it got me thinking. What if I could go back in time to the beginning of a young Ricky Telg’s academic career? What would I say? What would I do, as he prepares this journey? In other words, *if I knew then what I know now*, what would I do the same? What would I do differently?

Because let’s face it, when we get started, we don’t know it all. And typically, we feel too embarrassed to ask. We just spent tens of thousands of dollars and years of our lives getting an advanced degree. Aren’t we *supposed* to be ready? And the answer to that, of course, is.....yes and no.

Yes, because I think one of the purposes of an advanced degree is to teach you in areas that you don’t know about and to reinforce content in areas that you do.

And **no**, because I would hope that an advanced degree provides you with the view that there is so much that you don’t know, but we provide you with the skills and aptitude to try to learn it on your own.

Which again brings me back to “*if I knew then, what I know now.*” A lot of what I will share today comes with experience, a little maturity, quite a bit of ignorance, and just a few bumps on the head from the school of hard knocks.

So as I do my time travel bit, I think "Old Ricky" would like to tell "Young Ricky": Ricky, you did a good job keeping a “happy file.” Let me explain. Have you ever been just down? I mean really down. Let me tell you how to lift your spirits. Read a thank you card or letter from someone whose life you touched. Let me show you this. This is my “happy file.” In it contains many cards and letters of students, alumni, and clients that I’ve kept over the years. It’s not all of them, but it does represent a sizeable portion of them. I keep this folder in my desk drawer. And the cards range from a thank you for writing a letter of recommendation or for doing a workshop to emotionally impactful notes. So why do I keep them? Because I get down. And when I do, sometimes I’ll reach in my little “happy file” and pick out a card or letter or two. And it does my heart good to remind myself that we are in the business of positively impacting people’s lives.

If I had to do it over again, I would encourage me to take more psychology courses, especially in the area of educational psychology. And I would say that for anyone who wants to be a professor. Because my Ph.D. was in “educational human resource development,” I took one educational psychology class, but had I known then what I know now, I would have taken more. Why? The reason is that teaching doesn’t just happen in the classroom. I think graduates of our agricultural education, communication, extension, and leadership doctoral programs are very well prepared for conducting research and for teaching and learning what happens in the classroom. But I am not sure how well versed we are for the advising and heart-to-heart listening that goes on in our offices. In 1995, as a newly minted assistant professor, no one told me that I might have students come into my

office whose parents were going through a divorce, whose mother was dying of cancer, whose roommate had tried to commit suicide the night before, and more. And yes, these all have happened in my office. Now, a lot of how to handle some of this comes with years of experience and a little bit of wisdom, such as learning to keep my mouth shut and let the person talk. I always try to remember that God gave us one mouth and two ears for a reason: listen twice as much as you talk. This personal interaction is one of the reasons I am still teaching and advising. I think we do a good job of preparing our graduates with classroom management and content knowledge and skills development and research opportunities. But for many new assistant professors, as Young Ricky was and as many of you are or will be, we may not have the life experiences or the psychological knowledge to draw upon to know how to handle some of this. Of course, there are resources we can recommend that students access on campus, and part of our job is to be a resource for students, but in each case initially that I found myself in, I was a front-line responder, as many of you may find yourselves. I just want to be the best I can be to meet the needs of my students. To me, that means learning a little more about how people think.

Given that, the next would be to learn as much about your students as possible. I think I did that better in my early years, or maybe it's because I was closer to their age. But now that I'm older, I'll be honest, I am having a difficult time relating to the Millennials. Yes, I know they were born with a cell phone in their hand, but their need to constantly text or to be connected in my classes is driving me insane. And whose fault is it? Mine or theirs? Mine, because I struggle with how to engage them using the tools that they are using right now. If I had to talk to young me, I'd say to learn about my students. So the question to us is are we keeping up with knowledge about the next generation of students?

One way of learning about students is to find out how they're wired. That's why I would strongly recommend everyone to learn something about personality type – whether it's using True Colors or Myers-Briggs or some other personality type indicator. You learn a lot about yourself and about others by learning characteristics of personality type. I can't stress this enough. It's changed how I relate to people. I can try to talk to that person in his or her type. Case in point: I have been able to use True Colors, which categorizes personality type into four colors: *orange*, for those who are go-with-the-flow and spontaneous; *gold*, for the organized, follow-the-rules type (that's me); *blue*, for the emotional, relational individuals; and *green*, for those who are more rational and analytical. There's more to the different colors than that brief description, but that gives you the overview. By seeing that one student is green (rational) and another is blue (relational), you can talk to and advise the students in such a way that is attractive to his or her main color or personality type.

If I knew then what I know now, I would tell myself that it's important to adapt to the prevailing technology of the day, even if it means just riding the crest of the wave. When I got my Ph.D., my specialization was distance education development and delivery. And “the” delivery format of the day was satellite delivery. So I was learning how to use television satellites to get content from one point to multi-points. Now more than 20 years later, who uses satellites for distance education? Yeah, that goes back to one of my first points. If I had relied just on my Ph.D. only to teach me everything I thought I needed to know for my career in academia, I'd be out of a job by now because no one uses satellites

for educational distribution. This is where the concept of digital immigrants and digital natives comes to play. I truly am a digital immigrant – someone who was not born into technology but who has learned to function in it. Digital natives have had digital technologies existing in their world before they were born. Yeah. It's a challenge to keep up technologically, Young Ricky, so be ready.

Related to that: Try something new. Stanford University professor Robert Sapolsky found that if you're 35 years old or older when a style of popular music is introduced, there's a greater than 95 percent chance that you will never choose to listen to it. For eating at sushi restaurants, the window of receptivity closes by age 39; for getting body-piercing, by 23. The findings were reminiscent of studies that show that creativity declines with age, and that the older you get, the less open you are to someone else's novelty. Psychologist Dean Keith Simonton has shown that the decline in creativity and openness among great minds is not necessarily predicted by age so much as by how long people have worked in one discipline. Scholars who switch disciplines seem to have their openness rejuvenated. That may be because a new discipline seems fresh and original, or because a high achiever in one discipline is unusually open to novelty in the first place. Or maybe changing disciplines really does stimulate the mind's youthful openness to novelty. So the lesson here is to try different things. Think young.

Young Ricky, find a mentor quickly! You have to understand, when I started in my department at UF, back in 1995, we didn't have many senior faculty IN the department. Most senior faculty who had Agricultural Education and Communication faculty appointments were in administration, such as Dr. Larry Arrington, who was a district Extension director at the time, and Dr. Jimmy Cheek, who then was an assistant dean in the college of agriculture. Between 1993-95, then-chair Carl Beeman started replenishing the ranks with what he and others referred to as "young ducks." In about a two-year period, he hired Matt Baker, former department chair and dean, now professor at Texas Tech; Tracy Hoover, now associate dean at Penn State; Rick Rudd, department chair at Virginia Tech; and me. We were all pretty wet behind the ears. We kind of mentored each other. I guess we did okay, but it would have been extremely beneficial to have someone with a few more years under his belt to be a mentor to me. So if I had to tell myself something, I would have encouraged me more to find a mentor, even if it wasn't in my department or even at my own university. At the time 22 years ago, the landscape in agricultural communications on the national level also was different. There were very few "old ducks" then because the growth in agricultural communications really came about in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Now, agricultural communications has a richer pool of potential mentors. And I don't necessarily mean finding someone you can talk with about your progress toward tenure and promotion – although that's extremely important. I'm talking about finding someone you can establish a relationship with. I'd also remind us as senior faculty to maybe not even wait for a new person to ask for you to mentor him or her. Take it upon yourself to invest your time in someone.

In the magazine article "Why Leaders Still Need Leaders," Amy Simpson encourages leaders to find someone who can show you the ropes because you land in situations that call for wisdom beyond your experiences. She provides several reasons – including the following – why you find a mentor:

- *Investment*: Securing a mentor means you've found someone willing to make an investment in you.
- *Challenge*: Your mentor will push you to think outside your limited viewpoint and perspective.
- *Objectivity*: A mentor has personal distance from the issues you wrestle with and is able to look at your life with a more grounded and long-term perspective than you can.
- *Navigation*: A mentor can help you find your way.
- *Interpretation*: Having another set of eyes gives you twice the ability to interpret your world, thoughts, and experiences.

So senior faculty, invest in a young person.

Young Ricky, here's another thing: Dream. Yes, just dream. It doesn't matter if it's a big dream or a small dream. Just dream. I categorize big dreams as being seemingly just beyond your reach, but you keep dreaming anyway. For me, my biggest dream early in my life was to earn my Ph.D. by the time I was 30. I graduated from Texas A&M with my doctorate in May 1995 and turned 30 that October. So stretch yourself.

Have a vision. The Bible says where there is no vision, the people perish. The opposite is true, as well. With a vision, people prosper. The same is true for us. Without vision, we trudge through without direction. We don't prosper; we perish. So dream. Have a vision. And as you dream, set goals. Goals are well-defined dreams that are measurable. Getting in shape is not a goal; it's a wish. Running a half-marathon? That's a goal because you know you've accomplished it when you cross the finish line. So dream.

But also be content. It is okay to be content with where you are and with what you're doing. When I was being considered for an administrative position at another university several years ago, there was a major situation in my family that happened that caused me to pull my name from consideration. And it was the best decision I made because within two weeks after the new chair was named, my mother had a severe car accident, and a week after that my mother-in-law passed away after a battle with cancer, as well as three other significant events occurring in my family over the next four months. Had I taken the job and moved from Gainesville, it would have caused major disruptions in my family. It never occurred to me then until after all of these things happened, that maybe – just maybe – God was telling me that I should be content about where I'm supposed to be and with what I'm doing. This is not to say that I'll never change positions or do something different, but I would encourage Young Ricky to be content. Place priorities where they really count. Namely on your students. They need you. And on family. And yes, having three grandchildren who I get to see a lot – because they're all in Gainesville – does give me perspective on what is important in life.

Life is short. Dream. Have vision. Set goals. Be content.

Similarly, because life is short, it's okay to say no. Yes, Young Ricky, it's okay to say no. As a young assistant professor, you may not think you can, but, yes, you can. Be careful about trying to balance too much on your plate. I have been and continue to be concerned about the pace many of us maintain for ourselves. As we look to do all of these

activities, I would caution Young Ricky and many of us, just because we can doesn't always mean we should. Does this good "opportunity" take away from something "great" that I could be doing? Do I *really* need to be a part of this project? Will I be able to spend as much time with my family if I take on this opportunity? As a young assistant professor, I didn't think I could say no. Now, I *understand* there are some *opportunities* – like "requests" from the vice president or dean where it's really difficult to say no to – but you can. And sometimes you should. And I have, but it is not easy. Back in 2006, I was completely overcommitted with *opportunities* that I brought on myself at work, at church, and at home. All of these things were "good" things. But there were so many "good" things that they took a mental and physical toll. I was forgetting things, I felt sick. There was also an emotional and psychological toll. I ended up dropping everything at church, and it took about two years before I felt refreshed enough to get involved again. At work, I carefully examined what I was doing, declining those opportunities that I could say "no" to and saying "yes" to those opportunities that could move me from good to great. So practice saying "no." There is only one you. Guard your time and your physical and mental resources wisely.

Last thing, Young Ricky, remember why you're here, right here, right now. There is a masterful purpose for why you are here. You will touch the lives of young people who will go on to accomplish great things. And you will have had a major role in shaping them to reach their potential.

Let me say that this little bit of advice from Old Ricky to Young Ricky is true for us as well. We are here for a reason. Sometimes we lose track of that, when there are distractions, or "problem students" or issues, or whatever. But I want to tell Young Ricky (and us) that we may be the one person of influence that a college student needs. We have been entrusted with a tremendous responsibility. I enjoy all parts of what I do, but what gives me real fulfillment is working with students. You are here for a purpose. Remember that.

In closing, I want to visit for a moment the online lecture and book titled *The Last Lecture*. As you may remember, in 2007 Randy Pausch made a presentation to 400 Carnegie Mellon University students, called "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams" and about the cancer he was battling. The presentation and the ensuing book captivated the nation, particularly following his death in September 2008. He challenged his students to pursue what they wanted to do, to be who they wanted to be.

And I guess that's what I wanted the presentation today to focus on, even if I had to envision going back 22 years to do it. The truth is none of us knows what tomorrow holds, what *might* happen. But we do have today. We can make a difference today, and as faculty and graduate students at major universities, that means making a difference in the lives of young people. . .today. I may not have all the answers, probably not a lot of them. But my hope is that Young Ricky would have been better prepared for his 22 years as an adviser and teacher at UF if Old Ricky could have given him a glimpse of the future. But you know what? Maybe it's better not to know, to see into the crystal ball. Otherwise, what's the fun in discovery? Thank you.