Being asked by the Center of Teaching Excellence to share my thoughts on teaching is quite humbling. The implication inherent in the request is the invitee has something memorable or profound to share, especially to those completing their certificate in university teaching skills and embarking on careers in higher education. We’ll see. In all probability, my story on how and why I came and stayed at this incredible institution is markedly different than yours. Teaching was never a career goal, but rather a means to an end. Thirty years ago when I started at St. Louis University, a Bachelor’s degree was the terminal degree for physical therapists. That single bachelor’s diploma allowed me in the door. My clinical skills were determined to be exceptional, so I was recruited to assist in the preparation of others to follow. At that point, my short-term goal was to gain tuition remission, while pursuing a Masters in anatomy. My long-term goal was to return to the clinical environment with advanced knowledge to better care for my patients. I achieved neither. Yet, my life has been fulfilled in immeasurable ways. I have known the jury of explaining a difficult concept to a student and seeing that concept become a reality in their eyes. I’ve had the inquisitiveness and energy of young minds push me further along the path of personal intellectual pursuits. I’ve shared the passion I have for physical therapy with those who will take that passion and put it into action by becoming knowledgeable, caring, compassionate, ethical clinicians. I’ve witnessed those I’ve taught become colleagues who in return have taught me. I’ve experienced all this and more. So too will each of you in your own unique way. Has the journey always been a smooth one? Absolutely not, nor will yours. There will be days when the lecture or discussion group failed, the online course went places unnamed, the experimental teaching project was a disaster, and the infamous course instructor evaluations required a conference with the department chair and his subsequent plan for personal professional development. Yet these are not negatives, but rather the needed steps to becoming a reflective
practitioner of the art and science of teaching. That is the one thought I hope will take root in
your heart and soul: to become a reflective practitioner of the art and science of teaching. It is my
challenge and gift to you. Reflection is a basic tenet of all Jesuit philosophy, and its role in
permitting you to develop as a teacher is invaluable. The reflection must be an honest appraisal
on one’s own strengths and weaknesses. It must be performed on a regular basis and include a
commitment to address ways to affect positive change. It can be performed under the guidance of
colleagues and consultants, but ultimately the responsibility is yours and yours alone. The word
practitioner means that you will always strive to improve. The complacency of mediocrity will
not be acceptable to you, but rather you will continue to practice, to practice improving your
skills at every opportunity. The art and science of teaching are just that: companions of necessity,
two halves of a complete whole, and the threads that should be interwoven into every teaching
moment. One enhances the other. Their joining provides a sound basis for your teaching practice,
as well as the creation of something unique that is you, and your passion for the subject matter.
My final thoughts on becoming a reflective practitioner of the art and science of teaching are
based on the movie The Wizard of Oz. I believe that individuals who pursue teaching excellence
are similar to Dorothy’s ever loyal companions: The Scarecrow, searching for a brain; the Lion,
desperately seeking courage; and the Tin Man, desirous of a heart. Every reflective teacher I
have ever admired is one who pushes him or herself to become a lifelong learner and
subsequently disseminates that new knowledge to his or her students in a manner that inspires
and engages the students in the teaching/learning process. Reflective teachers are the ones who
have the courage to challenge themselves, to venture outside their comfort zone, and try
innovative teaching techniques that may or may not be successful. Reflective teachers are those
who have the heart to acknowledge and respect the dignity of every student and his or her
individual needs, which may extend beyond the confines of a classroom. Like the Scarecrow, Lion, and Tin Man, you too have the capability of finding within yourself the intellectual ability, courage, and generous heart to go beyond the present and carve a new path for yourself and your students, one that is exciting, creative, challenging, joyous, and meaningful. As a reflective practitioner of the art and science of teaching, you and your students will walk that path together. Sometimes you will lead, sometimes you will follow, and more often than not, you will walk side by side. It is a journey well worth the taking. Thank you.