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10-1-2006

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Irwin, Bonnie, "Riding a Unicycle Across a Bridge While Juggling: The Musings of an Honors Administrator" (2006). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive.* Paper 20.
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Riding a Unicycle Across a Bridge While Juggling: The Musings of an Honors Administrator

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My favorite metaphor for the life of an honors administrator remains that of a plate spinner. Those of us of a certain age remember them from the *Ed Sullivan Show*: frantically running from pole to pole, these acrobats had to keep the plates spinning so that none would fall crashing to the stage. Meanwhile, in the background, some classical, frenetic piece of music, often Khachaturian's *Sabre Dance*, would be playing, faster and faster. Indeed, if a university can be likened to a circus—and many are tempted to do just that—honors administrators are the plate spinners.

The phone and the e-mail alerts on our computers are our background music. Unlike the plate spinners of the circus, however, we often find that our plates are not of uniform size and weight: recruitment, enrollment management, retention, development, assessment, budgets, curriculum, undergraduate research, study abroad, national student exchange, service learning, grant writing, editing, proof-reading, parent worries, student crises, *et alia*. Some of these will begin to teeter at a much faster rate than others. Some we could bear to hear crash to the floor; others we do not dare let leave our sight.

Every new idea becomes a new plate, fragile but crucial to the success of our students, and we find ourselves running at such a pace that the more appealing items on Rew Godow's list of roles get pushed to the background. Can one still be a lover of wisdom, for example, if one only rarely has time to *think*? Indeed, I posed this very question to my provost as I prepared to apply to be an honors dean. After all, should not all leadership positions at a university be occupied by thinking people, those who reflect as well as manage, those who inspire not only through their actions but also because they do still hole up in a library or a lab and contemplate those ideas and questions that led us to this vocation in the first place? Real, deliberate thinking itself thus becomes another plate, spinning perilously close to all the others that far too often brush up against it, sending it skittering across the stage.

As a full-time administrator, I am blessed with the opportunity to devote my full energies to administering our Honors College, but at the same time, the siren song of my research, as well as the e-mails and phone calls of the contributors and series editors who await the next stage in my monograph project, are always echoing in my brain. The sparse thinking time I have is often now devoted to my program and not my research, the peril of the new-ish administrator still trying to be a faculty member. Moreover, those administrators who do not have at least a small scholarly agenda often find themselves victim to faculty jibes that we do not have "real" academic jobs. We also must model the scholarly life for our students to a greater extent than administrators who do not have quite as much day-to-day interaction with students.

Sometimes I also think of what we do as a form of civil engineering because, in order to make our programs integral to our colleges and universities, we are road and bridge builders. We not only build connections but often have to design them. The community of honors deans and directors brought together by the National Collegiate Honors Council means that most of us do not have to start with a blank sheet of blueprint or schematic paper, but at the same time, no one director's bridge will fit each dale or chasm another must cross. The bridge I build with the Business School will have a completely different design, span, and dimension than the bridge I build with the Housing Office or the Foundation. Yet in order to build a vigorous program, all these bridges must be built.

If we are lucky, those whose domains we wish to reach with our bridge will also be building one our way. We watch the two sides magically come together much as Joseph B. Strauss watched the two sides of the Golden Gate Bridge fall into place in the 1930s. Sometimes, however, our potential partners are busy building bridges with others on campus. In these cases we must be *civil* engineers, making our cases politely, diplomatically sometimes but persistently always, until the other half of the bridge starts coming our way. This work is often energizing but can also be mind-numbing, entailing countless meetings, e-mails, meetings, and memos until we can get the designer, the engineer, and the project manager all seeing the same vision from either end of the bridge, making sure we agree on the length of the struts and the placement of the pylons. Those bridges we most need are those that will have to withstand the most traffic, and like the spinning plates of the acrobats, our students must be assured of their safety in crossing those bridges we have built.

At the beginning of the academic year, I learned that one of my new students rides a unicycle and another juggles. We chatted together about how few individuals can do both simultaneously. Yet when I think about it,

honors administrators do these things figuratively each day. Our success, like that of the plate spinner or bridge builder, hinges on maintaining our equilibrium while keeping our eyes, hands, legs, and, yes, even minds focused on the achievements of our students. And every once in a while, we find time to muse a little, write a little, and share our thoughts with our fellow plate spinners as they make their way across their own bridges, riding their own unicycles, and nodding in understanding.

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