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Stability in the Context of Change

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(What follows is a slightly revised version of the presidential address that Hallie E. Savage delivered on Saturday, October 25, 2008, at the annual NCHC conference in San Antonio, Texas.)

Last year at this time, I began to think about what I might adopt as a presidential theme. What could NCHC reasonably accomplish in 2008? If you recall, at that time we hired Liz Beck as Interim Executive Director, and one month before the conference we hired Cindy Hill. Major changes were inevitable in our organization. I began my presidency with a goal to work with the Board of Directors to establish stability in the face of these organizational changes. The goal of stability was in response to the need for a national office that would provide the resources for NCHC's growth—stability to support growth in changing conditions.

Perhaps this focus was reinforced by the constant presence of change in the news. Barack Obama began his presidential campaign with a slogan for *Change*. Both Obama and John McCain now promote plans for changing our economy. Frequently they reference change as necessary in order to achieve economic stability. Is it possible to achieve stability in the context of change, or are they two mutually exclusive conditions? Furthermore, how do humans create stability as change occurs around them?

Infants are born into conditions of change but they arrive equipped. Developmental research in the 1980s was replete with studies documenting the biological predisposition of infants for early communication (Brazelton). The studies showed that the infant is predisposed to interact with and to learn from the environment. At birth, newborns express a preference for human faces and a readiness to communicate (Goren). The most important discovery was that early learning is not dependent on the infant's innate abilities alone but also on the ability of the mother to synchronize with the infant. The rhythm of early conversations and therefore early learning is fueled by the mother's timing her communication according to the infant's responses. This rhythm is fundamental for effective learning.

These studies reveal that in our earliest learning experiences we are responding to ongoing change. At no point in time does the learning environment stop the process and "teach" a skill. Rather the mother and infant create

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stability by their responses to each other. Flexibility and timing achieve stability in guiding the infant through the process of change.

The need for sensitivity and responsiveness is also evident in leadership. The anatomy of leadership has been studied by a diverse group of scholars. Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis (2008) have recently described leadership from the perspective of neuroscience. In Goleman's first book, *Emotional Intelligence* published in 1995, he promoted the vital role of empathy and self-knowledge in effective leadership. He proposed that effective leaders are not defined by a unique set of characteristics but by their ability to empathize with others. He defined empathy as the ability of leaders to understand what motivates other people, including those from different backgrounds. Furthermore, leaders need to be sensitive to the needs of their followers. In the last few years, this focus on empathy has led Goleman and other researchers to study what happens in the brain while people are communicating:

The primary finding of these studies is that certain things leaders do—specifically, exhibit empathy and become attuned to others' moods—literally affect both their own brain chemistry and that of their followers. (Goleman & Boyatzis, 76)

Neuroscientists discovered a class of neurons called “spindle cells,” so termed because of their shape. They have a body size about four times that of other brain cells, with an extra long branch to make attaching to other cells easier and thus transmit thoughts and feelings to them more quickly. Another class of neurons is also involved: oscillators. These neurons coordinate people physically by regulating how and when their bodies move together. You can see oscillators in action when you watch people orchestrate their movements when introduced; their movements look like a dance, one body responding to the other seamlessly. This research in neuroscience has led to leadership enrichment through training social intelligence—that is, through teaching leaders and CEOs to empathize with their followers and therefore listen more attentively. The end result of this approach is that leaders become more influential by engaging followers in discussion and then engaging their cooperative efforts.

Similar to the research in early development, research in effective leadership has identified more than a unique set of innate skills or abilities. Effective leadership is based on sensitivity to followers and on synchrony with partners and colleagues. Furthermore, stability is created as a byproduct of good communication that is maintained as changes occur.

So what does stability in the context of change have to do with higher education or more specifically honors education? In the year 2000, Arthur Levine described “9 Inevitable Changes for the Future of Colleges.” These changes implied great challenges to longstanding higher-education structures. For example, Levine predicted the emergence of three basic types of colleges: brick universities, click universities, and a blend of brick and click universities. Although initial research indicated that consumers preferred the convenience,

ease, and freedom of “click” education, they also wanted a physical space where they could interact with others and obtain expert advice and assistance face to face. How would each of the nation’s colleges determine which of these categories best meet their goals and mission?

Changes such as these elicit a sense of overwhelming challenge. If colleges and universities are to retain their vitality and stability, they must adapt to these changes. Curricular revisions and major redesign are essential. Furthermore, effective teaching requires faculty who are creative, innovative, and open to change. Thus, colleges and their faculties must change in order to thrive, and at the same time they must maintain stability in order to survive.

How do stability and change directly apply to honors education? In her presidential address last year, Kate Bruce suggested that change is integral to the nature of honors education:

We find that an honors experience can change us in ways that we did not anticipate and the effect feels meaningful. (19)

Inherent in her definition of honors is the need for communication among interdisciplinary scholars that enables creativity and collaboration. Kate’s definition thus produces more evidence that stability needs to be built within the context of change. Honors education requires openness to novel approaches and constant anticipation of change while remaining a stable educational structure.

As an organization, the National Collegiate Honors Council can only gain stability in its response to organizational change. Basic to our growth is a clear, shared understanding of the organization’s mission and vision. Effective governance requires shared responsibility for the organization. The roles of president, executive director, and board of directors must be coordinated such that responsibilities are synchronized in relationship to the mission statement. At the same time, a consensus about NCHC’s mission and vision has to be constantly reshaped in response to changes within the membership and leadership.

The national office can provide stability in the context of change. However, this stable condition will only result if changes are allowed to occur. For example, for many years the conference chair was required to provide administrative expertise in addition to the role of academic leadership. The presence of the national office affords the conference leadership an opportunity to release administrative roles, thus enhancing and augmenting the educational opportunities offered in conference learning. A new trust evolves through this collaboration between academic and administrative leaders, and this kind of trust is essential to promoting both stability and change.

NCHC’s mission has far-reaching implications for the future. We support the leadership and creativity of honors faculty and administrators charged with educating the “best and the brightest” nationally and, in recent years, internationally. We need to take a lesson from research in early childhood development, neuroscience, and effective leadership by actively engaging our empathy and synchronicity with academically talented students and with each other.

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Our innovations and adaptations to current global challenges are dependent on our organizational and educational stability in the context of our rapidly changing world.

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