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Teamwork for NCHC

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(What follows is a revised version of the presidential address that Lydia Lyons delivered on Saturday, October 31, 2009, at the annual NCHC conference in Washington, D.C.)

Having had the opportunity to listen to NCHC presidential addresses since 1995, I find today's opportunity a humbling one. Some of our presidents have used the conference themes as points of reference, but our first four conferences starting in 1966 had no themes. Ada Long and I share the experience of having chaired our NCHC conferences in San Antonio: she in 1994 with the theme "Crossing Borders" and I in 2008 with "Crossing Frontiers." Theme or no theme, some presidents have grappled with defining honors or, even more challenging, the NCHC.

Intuitively, we know what honors is, yet we have difficulty in explaining it to others and sometimes even to ourselves. Listen to the hallway conversations! However, our work in NCHC has given us frameworks within which to analyze honors. Frames of references should help us understand where we are and also where we should be going. That understanding should lead us to action. First, we need to understand the background of these frames, and then we need to question whether they work for us, knowing that we may need multiple or oddly shaped frames.

I am tempted to give once again the history of honors in our nation, followed by the history of the NCHC, but others have done so and done it well. So I will take us back only a decade to when we were on the brink of insolvency. I recall many earnest voices, but I hear one voice especially, that of Gary Bell, calming, reasoning, convincing, and reassuring. Our membership agreed to a painful dues increase.

Even then in those times of doom and gloom, NCHC leadership understood the acute necessity of permanent headquarters and an executive director. Plans for restructuring the NCHC with a professional executive director began in 1995; in June 2002, Past President Rosalie Otero wrote: "A permanent office could serve and expand the membership, guide public relations and publicity, coordinate programs and institutes, and, in general, provide a host of important services to the members, individuals, and institutions of NCHC" (45).

Our membership endorsed the concept, and the work began in earnest. We were changing the culture of NCHC, and we worked hard at the task. We came to understand Vince Lombardi's definition of a team: "Individual commitment to a group effort—that's what makes a team work." We were white-water

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rafting, at times desperately; we lost an oar or two. In our zeal and passion, feelings were hurt, and we realized, as Mark Twain said, "Nothing so needs reforming as other people's habits."

After our raft hit a rock or two or three, the University of Nebraska, Lincoln provided the space for our national headquarters. We owe and continue to owe our gratitude to the University of Nebraska, Lincoln and particularly its honors director, gentleman and scholar Patrice Berger. Our facilities are outstanding. We have a place of our own; Virginia Wolfe would approve.

Then, our raft flipped over as we struggled with adjusting to an executive director, a major cultural change in any volunteer organization. I started to thank all those who bailed out the water and righted our raft, but I wouldn't ever leave the podium, so I will single out for recognition Liz Beck, who came out of retirement to be Interim Executive Director as we went through the process of a new search.

That process was successful under the presidential leadership of Hallie Savage, and Cindy Hill became Executive Director. I am pleased to say today that, under Ms. Hill's leadership, the national office has met and exceeded the Board of Directors' mandate for a professionally run office. Ms. Hill has succeeded in hiring, training, maintaining, and encouraging an excellent staff.

Our raft has navigated through the exciting, challenging, and sometimes dangerous churns of foaming waters, and we have now come to a serene pool of water, but we must be mindful that, even in these smooth waters, undercurrents are projecting us forward. We must take command of our raft. We cannot be complacent nor abdicate our responsibility to be a positive force in higher education. NCHC must position itself to play an active role in higher education, or ever mindful of Will Rogers' admonition that "Even if you are on the right track, you will get run over if you just sit there."

Just as in white-water rafting, we must keep a careful collective eye on what lies ahead. You may be thinking that we are each doing everything we can in our own universities and colleges and have no time to work or to increase our work for NCHC. After all, we have an executive director and staff in our established headquarters. But I remind you that we are still a volunteer organization. Teddy Roosevelt could have been defining our work when he said, "Far and away, the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing."

Please join committees of your interest and help address the important issues of those committees. Our conference printed program always includes the committees' meeting times and locations. At all our conferences, you have an open invitation to attend any of the meetings, including your Board of Directors' meeting.

Like every organization, NCHC has a personality. The shared values and assumptions that are at the center of our organizational culture allow us to thrive. Our statements of Vision, Mission, and Core Values present our shared focus on excellence in and respect for honors education. As our mission

statement says, we are a professional organization that provides support for our members as they develop, implement, and expand honors education. Through the years, NCHC members have initiated and maintained a wealth of activities: curriculum development, program assessment, teaching innovation, national and international study opportunities, internships, service and leadership development, mentored research, and outstanding publications.

I ask you to look especially at the sentence in our mission statement that defines the NCHC as “serving Honors professionals, and advocating support for an excellence in higher education for all our students.” Our students are high-maintenance, and we devote countless hours to their care. As an organization and as honors administrators and faculty, we need always to exercise that care with respect for our students in all their diversity within both institutional and national contexts.

We all face obstacles to serving all of our students all of the time: we face a growing percentage of students with serious mental health problems; we are frustrated by the culture of cheating that plagues education today; and, as Past President Sam Shuman said in his 1992 presidential address, “In spite of some genuinely valiant, even heroic, efforts American pre-college education continues to sink into a bog where accreditation is confused with competence and inadequate baby-sitting mistaken for learning. . . .” (1).

We live in a culture of cheating and quick fixes, and our students bring the consequences of this culture into our colleges and programs. I was intrigued this summer as I sat in the audience at a conference of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars when the speaker asked his student audience how many were having a birthday; hands went up, and one student grabbed her driver’s license to prove her birthday even though no one had asked for proof. The culture of cheating that this student took for granted has arisen in part from all the misleading slogans and empty promises that they have encountered: cleaning products kill 99.9% of germs; state lotteries promise instant wealth; news reports come out with more attention to speed than accuracy; AP courses are designed to accelerate the degree process; ACT and SAT scores are quick and easy criteria for admissions even though we know that they are not good indicators of success in honors. Students who have been raised in an environment that values instant results are tempted to produce instant work, even if that means copying from others.

In spite of all the negative trends, we bring students to a place where they find comfort and discipline, intense work and play, purpose and action. We model honors on the front porches of the past.

We have no quick fix for higher education. NCHC’s Core Values posit collegiality and a shared purpose of NCHC. The time is now to reexamine what our shared purpose is as we try to prepare our students for an increasingly complex world. What we know today will change tomorrow, but this need not cause confusion or suspicion. Instead, the multifaceted realities of how people think, feel, and act should encourage us to remain open to possibilities, to

change, to common ground. We should be able sometimes to cooperate and sometimes to disagree with one another. That's human nature and the enduring gift of relationships.

In planning for the future, we must balance new opportunities with the uncertainty of change and resulting new trends. We must continue to encourage enhanced personal, social, and intellectual development while at the same time helping our students develop within themselves rather than focusing only on external validation. We in honors give mixed messages in trying to create environments where students can develop themselves as whole, healthy citizens with a sense of worth but all the while awarding plaques, certificates, and medallions. When our graduates march across stage with medallions clinking on their chests, cords on their shoulders, and shawls around their necks, the irony should not be lost on us.

In honors, we recognize the importance of life-long learning and social responsibility. Even though social responsibility is ever more challenging today, we are up for meeting this challenge because we must be. Our NCHC membership has an abundance of expertise and energy, and we must use our creative tensions to move the NCHC from its present to its preferred future (Chait, Ryan, and Taylor 29). We must recognize our external and internal influences, celebrate our uniqueness, and also identify what binds us, what we have in common. With that commonality of purpose, we will position NCHC as an important voice in higher education.

One of the 2009 conference goals was to give meaningful opportunity to reflect on and experience the spontaneous character of an honors education. Our organization distinguishes itself because we encourage student involvement through their election to the Board of Directors, committee memberships, and presentations. We must reaffirm that students are at the center of all we do, helping them wherever and whenever we can.

We must embrace another of our conference goals by focusing on superior quality while recognizing the constructive nature of learning. NCHC always provides, as this conference has promised, "opportunities to take risks, to stretch, to innovate, and to learn." T.S. Eliot notes, "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."

On the Crosstown Expressway that I often travel, signage warns "stay in lanes"; under most circumstances on the Crosstown that is good advice, but equally important is knowing when not to stay in one's own lane. The time is now for NCHC to move out of restricting lanes. We can no longer paint our landscapes with the paint-by-numbers sets of old.

The time is now for NCHC to join other higher education organizations of similar interests and to initiate such partnerships. In summer 2001, Past President Joan Digby wrote: "For a long time, NCHC has been good at teaching and learning, at talking and listening—but mostly to each other. . . . We were too self-directed and as a result, too few people knew about us. If our mission in support of excellence in undergraduate education is to expand, then

we need to talk, think, partner, and work with others" (74). In honors, we have been at the forefront of what later became trends in higher education. Unfortunately, in our zeal we didn't stop often enough to document, report, promote, and share our own best practices.

In our collaborations, knowing who we are, what our goals are, we must take the lead and make our voice heard in higher education, presenting reasoned and articulate positions on the issues from an honors perspective.

I began this talk with the metaphor of white-water rafting, and I'll end it with another sports metaphor: biking. Soon after we were married, my husband had a custom-made, two-seated bicycle built for us. As I am 5'1 and he is 6'2, any standard design wasn't enough to make for a long-range bike trip or even for cycling a few feet. The perfect bike for us had to be specially designed, and even so it was useless without our learning to ride together. Having not married until close to the age of fifty, my husband had to learn not to push off without warning—especially since my shoes were clipped to the pedals. I, like many honors directors, needed to learn to give up control. From the back seat, I couldn't be the one to pedal first. I simply had to stay balanced and trust that we would not crash to either side as he initiated the first pedal with a strong forward thrust.

If we are to be the voice of higher education, we could take some lessons from that two-seated, custom-made bicycle. We need clear goals, a custom design, assigned tasks, new patterns of behavior, changing roles, strength, commitment, and trust. If we master these lessons, we can work together to make the NCHC move forward with speed, balance, and grace.

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