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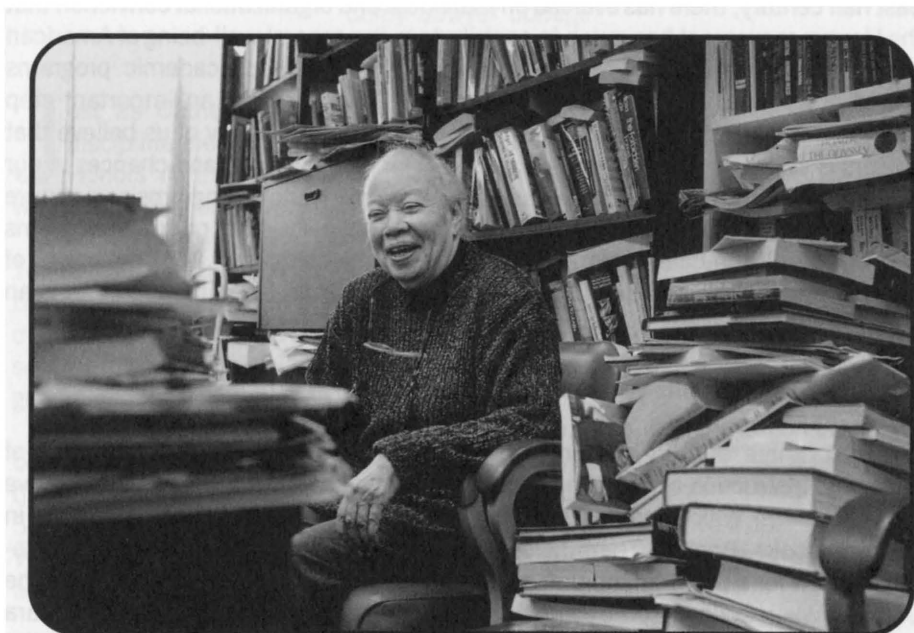
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Catherine's Plenty

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Catherine Cater, N.D. State University, Fargo, N.D., 2000. Photography by Dan Koeck.

This volume grows out of a session at the Fall, 1999 annual conference of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) in Orlando, Florida. There, surrounded by the delightful distractions of theme parks and tropical autumn weather, a group of academics with strong ties to the Honors movement in American higher education offered a diverse and stimulating range of perspectives on liberal learning as we move into a new century, a new millennium. The presenters included Honors faculty and directors, college presidents and deans, an important official of the national Endowment for the Humanities and the past editor of the NCHC's scholarly journal. Their presentations were as diverse as their positions, but seemed to most of us in attendance united in their thoughtfulness, originality and insight.

The occasion which brought together these presentations and presenters was a chance to pay tribute to a long and beloved leader of the NCHC, Dr. Catherine Cater. We begin the collection with a brief biography of Dr. Cater's career of extraordinary contributions to teaching, scholarship and Honors education in the Upper Midwest and nationally. Many of the essays herein explicitly testify to the authors' respect and affection for Catherine. The depth of that affection and the

height of that respect is well documented by the sincere passion of the paragraphs which follow, both those which overtly praise Dr. Cater and those which honor her indirectly through serious thought about issues which have been central to her illustrious collegiate career.

One of the most striking features of these essays, given the provenance of this volume, is that not one of them is entirely about Honors per se, and many of them are not explicitly about Honors Program issues at all. As the National Collegiate Honors Council and its member programs have matured and developed over the past half century, there has evolved an individual and organizational conviction that the Honors movement has much to contribute to the general well-being of American post-secondary education, well beyond providing enriched academic programs aimed at superior students. This collection of essays marks an important step forward in that evolution and, hopefully, contributes to it. Many of us believe that Honors is at its best when it focuses upon the larger challenges and chances in our colleges and universities, when we ask ourselves how Honors Programs can nurture academic excellence across our institutions and not just within our own programs and centers. If the core of Honors in America is the cultivation and “honoring” of devotion and achievement in undergraduate learning and teaching, then that is an enterprise which needs to pervade every aspect of all our schools.

This collection falls very roughly into several clusters of approaches:

First, three authors present three very different perspectives on issues of collegiate instruction at the turn of the century. We begin with a personal narrative by Ted Estess, which focuses upon one particular academic's entanglements in “Books, Books, Books.” There follows a dialogue in which a college seeks to re-define itself for a new millennium, a conversation between several members of the Colby-Sawyer College community led by Anne Ponder. Then a survey by Sara Varhus highlights the evolution of themes and issues which have surfaced in the dialogue within NCHC as revealed in its publications.

The second group of essays focus upon approaches to styles of learning. Faith Gabelnick and Bernice Braid mull communitarian and integrative approaches to the undergraduate experience. Carol Kolmerten re-calls our attention to one-on-one individualized learning; Jim Herbert offers a stimulating new look at the classroom; and Diane Levy speculates about international education, the world as classroom.

We close with two English professors and administrators, Sam Schuman and Paul Strong, musing about the importance of work and of play, respectively, in the undergraduate learning process.

Reflecting on the range and quality of these pieces, it is almost impossible not to cite Dryden's assessment of Chaucer: “here is God's plenty!” Here, certainly, are a range of stimulating and highly individual voices, speaking thoughtfully about a topic of central importance to our nation's future. That they do so in praise of a beloved colleague is a reminder that Honors, college education, and life are at their best when they are about the way in which the isolation of the individual consciousness can be bridged by the power of human love.