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# A Humanist in Honors: Another Look at Catherine Cater

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# **A Humanist in Honors: Another Look at Catherine Cater**

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In 2000 Catherine Cater marks her 55th year of teaching, a career which began in 1945 upon completion of her Ph.D. in English at the University of Michigan. Since 1962 she has taught at North Dakota State University, and although she officially retired from the faculty in 1982, she has continued to teach philosophy, direct humanities tutorials, and advise students on a volunteer basis. When the faculty at NDSU recognized her with the university's most prestigious teaching award, they made note of her role as the embodiment of the teacher-scholar "who has kept alive the tradition of liberal studies at NDSU; for her, the best that has been thought and said is appropriate for all students, and she has made that tradition accessible to all." The grace of her own scholarship has dignified that tradition, while her graciousness and perceptive guidance have encouraged generations of students, and colleagues alike, to see dignity in their own work.

She arrived at NDSU by way of Moorhead State University, Olivet College, Ann Arbor, and Talladega College in Alabama, where her family moved in 1918, a year after she was born in New Orleans. Set in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, Talladega was a town she describes as having had a Faulknerian courthouse square which witnessed the regular passage of wagons loaded with cotton bales. Her father, a progressive administrator with close connections to Robert Hutchins and the University of Chicago, had become dean at Talladega. Under his guidance, an exchange of personnel and ideas developed between Chicago and this southern inter-racial college, where she received her B.A. in 1938.

In 1939 she obtained an M.A. in English from the University of Michigan. However, with so few positions in higher education

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available to women, and needing to find a job, she returned to school for a degree in library science and was subsequently hired to head the circulation department at Fisk University in Nashville. Three restless years later she returned to Ann Arbor on a fellowship, “a young person in a great hurry” who began to work on Platonism in Milton, but soon published an article on southern poets, and this led to a dissertation on Faulkner.

Her first teaching position was at Olivet College in Michigan. Those who know Catherine Cater know how naturally she associates experimental, interdisciplinary, and experiential with teaching. The opportunity to teach at Olivet was ideal. In 1945 it was a highly experimental institution with a cosmopolitan student body. Guided by the idea that the greater difficulty lies in learning how to “include oneself in the world,” its curriculum focused on areas of human endeavor rather than academic disciplines, and the emphasis was on a tutorial system which favored primary experiences: doing rather than studying sculpture, for example, especially if it was not one’s own field. Olivet was, for four years, the high point of her teaching experience. But it coincided with the rise of Senator McCarthy, and Olivet’s unconventional approach attracted attention. She and others resigned in protest when four faculty members were dismissed on political grounds. Although financial difficulties ultimately intervened, they developed plans to open a new experimental college in New York, even obtaining the federal government’s promise of a former army barracks as a campus.

In 1949, when Catherine again began looking for a job, the placement director at Michigan predicted that as a woman she had “as much chance of being placed as a person without arms.” So she simply began writing letters, all with northern addresses. All but one of the replies were negative; many said that although her credentials were attractive, their institutions simply were not ready for someone with her background. The positive response came from Moorhead State University in Minnesota; it offered a one-year replacement position teaching English and, of course, library duties. However, the absent faculty member failed to return, the library dropped out of the job description after a year, and in the next 13 years (1949-1962) she taught English and humanities courses, set up a campus radio station, founded

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a student-faculty group called the “Concentrics,” who gathered to talk and exchange ideas, and gradually came into contact with colleagues in English at North Dakota State University across the river in Fargo. Most importantly, she met Delsie Holmquist, who also taught in Moorhead’s English department. Together they experimented with the general education curriculum: “a chance to be creative with courses in critical thought, anthropology, and philosophy.”

Catherine resigned from Moorhead State in 1962 and went to North Dakota State, followed by Delsie Holmquist two years later. In addition to her duties in the English curriculum, she soon developed a course which would become legendary at NDSU. “Approach to the Humanities” was a year-long interdisciplinary survey of the arts and humanities which attracted students from every corner of the campus, and for which she and Delsie literally traveled the world collecting course materials. In the early 1970’s she participated in the Tri-College Humanities Forum, an experimental, intensive humanities program which drew on the resources of three institutions in the community. In 1968 she founded the honors (Scholars) program at North Dakota State, directed it for many years, and continued to teach in it until 1998. Along the way, she did post-doctoral studies at Kenyon, Columbia, Berkeley, and Cambridge; directed countless tutorials in philosophy, literature, aesthetics, and the arts; was recognized with every major teaching award offered at North Dakota State; chaired the graduate program in English; inspired and guided the development of the first university-wide interdisciplinary courses at North Dakota State; advised the student government on the acquisition of a significant collection of modern art; and, most recently, has been teaching a full range of philosophy courses for NDSU.

Catherine attended her first NCHC conference in 1968 and has had an active role in all but one annual meeting since. She was elected president of NCHC in 1974 and, over the years, has served on virtually all of its major committees, chairing the publications board and taking a special interest in the honors semesters. She has never ceased to be active at the grassroots level as well, organizing many workshops and special sessions, encouraging and inspiring new members of the honors community.

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Generations of students keep in touch with Catherine Cater, still drawn, as they were in tutorials and large classes alike, to a teacher who is herself so evidently and joyfully a learner. Students sense that she is willing to take a chance: on them, on their ability to grapple with even the biggest philosophical questions, and on the likelihood of conversation leading to discovery. To be in Catherine's classes, or sometimes even in casual conversation, is to risk being surprised at the unaccountable engagement one begins to feel in the subject. A graduate student who assisted her in "Approach to the Humanities" recalls that once, on a lark, Catherine, Delsie Holmquist and he set out on a drive to Canada with no purpose other than being in the countryside with good company. The changing scenery led to a discussion of the work of abstract expressionist painters as a form of landscape, while farm trucks loaded with freshly harvested potatoes sped along in the opposite direction. They slowed down and parked on the side of the road and began picking up potatoes that had fallen from the trucks into the ditches. Back in the car, with the trunk full, Catherine's comment was, "Now when I eat potatoes I will have a greater understanding of Van Gogh's painting *Potato Eaters*."

The persistent questioner, seeking connections rather than answers, she draws one in with the simplest and greatest traits of a teacher: human, wide-ranging, curious and, perhaps above all, generous. It is to such a teacher, colleague, and friend that these essays are dedicated.