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Cultivating: Some Thoughts on NCHC's Future

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At the Fall, 2000, meeting of the NCHC in Washington, DC, the closing plenary session focused on "The Future of NCHC." It was a worthwhile session, ably organized and chaired by Ada Long, in which several thoughtful participants made interesting and valuable observations and suggestions. Unfortunately, the plenary session was scheduled for late in the morning of the last day of the meeting, so many conference attendees faced the choice of concentrating on NCHC's future...or their own. Reasonably enough, most opted for the latter by departing the meeting, hotel and city prior to the panel presentation.

In the paragraphs below, I reiterate my remarks from that session, not because they were particularly memorable, nor, certainly, because they were any more thoughtful than those of the other speakers. Rather, the rationale for wider dissemination lies in a somewhat radical approach to a topic of general interest to us all. I propose a fairly dramatic revision of our organizational mission, a kind of institutional "knight's move" or swerve for NCHC, which I hope it might be useful for us to ponder together.

The NCHC began its institutional life under a different moniker: the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student. Although many of us may cringe a bit at the out-front elitism of a phrase like "the superior student," that is, in fact, an accurate description of the initial focus of our organization. And, in the context of the history of American higher education, that "initial focus" was defined not really all that long ago: the ICSS was created between 1964 and 1966, when, for example, I had already graduated from college. My point is that we are a fairly new organization, much too young to be inflexible about our mission, constituencies, vision, directions.

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Today, providing opportunities for superior students remains our dominant emphasis. Individually and collectively, our Honors Programs and our state, regional and national organizations exist primarily to provide instructional options of enriched content and rigor to students of above-average talent and/or motivation. NCHC needs to ask if it is time to expand, radically, that mission. First, though, let me be quite clear that I do not think there is anything wrong with offering challenging academic programs to students who seek and can succeed in them. Our institutions and their students would be much poorer if we failed to provide those exceptional offerings to exceptional—swallow—“superior”—students.

Many of our programs, and to a very limited extent our honors organizations, have tried to push a bit beyond this notion of superior offerings for superior students, but we have not pushed very hard, nor gotten very far. What excites me about the future of Honors is the opportunity to move much much further in this direction.

My very first national Honors conference, attended by a couple hundred vibrant young faculty and administrators, now all old codgers like me, was in Williamsburg, VA., some three decades ago. The theme of that conference was something like “Honors as the cultivation of excellence.” It is astonishing that this thematic phrase has stuck with me all this time, but that is because this definition of Honors resonated deeply for me then, and continues to inspire me today. My point, of course, is that there is nothing here about just cultivating excellent students (although there is nothing about not doing so, either). Just cultivating excellence.

We restrict ourselves to one, rather small, albeit important, opportunity to cultivate excellence if we define ourselves as offering superior programs for superior students. There is no rule that we need to restrict ourselves in this fashion. Why can't an Honors Program, for example, in the name of cultivating excellence see as part of its mission sponsoring a lecture series on campus featuring some of the most exciting faculty from campus, giving excellent, stimulating, exciting talks... for anyone who wanted to attend. How about sponsoring other extracurricular or co-curricular events which brought absolutely top quality intellectual or cultural programs to the college or university. Why not have the Honors Program as part of the recognition system for seeking and rewarding excellence in instruction and/or scholarship in the faculty. Or the student body. Even more radical, why can't Honors Programs recognize and reward excellence beyond the

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academic program of the campus: in student services or campus staff. It is interesting to imagine an “Honors Program award for excellence in University service” going to a beloved and diligent food service worker or maintenance person.

I hope this all does not just seem the equalitarian fantasy of an aging child of the 60’s. It seems to me that there is, actually, a reasonable and hard-boiled theoretical underpinning to these utopian notions.

There have been countless shifts in American Higher Education in the years since Joseph Cohen founded the ICSS. Pollyanna that I am, I think most of them are good. Our institutions are more varied; our populations of students, staff and faculty are much more diverse; electronic instructional tools which were beyond imagination have become commonplace; we have come to recognize differences in learning styles across student populations; new pedagogies and new subject matters have been introduced and accepted into academe; etc. There have, though, been costs, and the one which concerns us here is that the assumption of *excellence* has been weakened, if not lost. It seems we have drifted towards a culture of mediocrity. Or, if that is putting it too dramatically, a collegiate culture where, too often, doing OK... is OK. Turning in most of your work in a class is good enough. Getting most of those financial aid award letters right is good enough. Keeping things pretty clean is clean enough. Actually showing up to teach almost all your classes is good enough. I hope I’m not trying to be a sourpuss here, but it seems to me that the genuine drive to be excellent, to know excellence when it exists and to be able to distinguish it from just “OK,” to reward that which is excellent around us, and to cultivate—stimulate, nourish, cherish, praise—that which is excellent surely has diminished.

My vision for the next phase of the National Collegiate Honors Council is that we decide it is time to stop bemoaning this slip into the mediocre and decide that there is no one in a better position to fix it than we are, that we take a position in the landscape of national higher education as the cultivators of excellence across departments, programs, populations, segments of our institutions, and institutions themselves.

This is not to suggest that NCHC, or Honors, become the stodgy defender of curricula, pedagogies or demographics of the past. Indeed, real excellence in undergraduate teaching and learning requires a certain daring, a willingness to experiment. Liberal education demands the

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liberation of open minds. While respecting and cherishing classical texts and classroom techniques which time has proven valuable and effective, we need to be the advocates as well of the risky, the new, the untried.

Undergraduate excellence needs a cultivator in American colleges and universities: I think it should be us.

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