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# Honors in Practice

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**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS, 2014**



## “... and we are a-changing, too”

JAMES S. RUEBEL

Ball State University

*(What follows is a revised version of the presidential address delivered on November 8, 2014, at the annual NCHC conference in Denver, Colorado.)*

From antiquity to now, “All things change” has been a common aphorism. The Romans ascribed the comment first to Heraclitus, who did indeed assert—along with statements such as “you cannot step into the same river twice”—that all things change (πάντα ῥεῖ, *panta rhei*: after Plato, *Cratylus* 401d). The Romans translated the aphorism as *omnia mutantur*, which appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (15.165) as “*Omnia mutantur, nihil interit*” (“Everything changes, nothing dies”). Ovid’s comment is hardly surprising in a book titled *Metamorphoses*.

As a pedantic footnote, though, Ovid’s irony and humor here are often overlooked. The speaker of this comment in Ovid is Pythagoras, who asserts in this section the immortality of the soul in support of his theory of reincarnation. The Latin, though, is a close approximation of the counter-claim made by the materialistic poet Lucretius that in fact the soul does die, being composed of matter, since all material bodies eventually change to something else while matter itself is permanent. To Lucretius, the phrase “*Omnia mutantur*,

*nihil interit*” would mean that souls die and are changed by recycling their matter into something else; the matter that composes them remains.

Even before I have really begun, I am already digressing. A later variation on Ovid’s aphorism (source unknown) was “*tempora mutantur, et nos mutamur in illis*”: “Times change and we change with them” or, a quite legitimate translation, “The times they are a-changin’ and we are a-changin’, too.”

So my theme here will be change and stability.

Speaking of Rome, as in fact I was, I speak also of the problem of permanence and change, of continuing heritage and progress, as our problem in a new millennium. Our longstanding tradition seems ready to move: forward one hopes, but doubtless into some uncertainty.

In 2005, I was a facilitator of a Faculty Institute in Rome sponsored by the NCHC Honors Semesters Committee, and the theme was “Rome Unearthed.” Unlike some historic cities, Rome is no longer a palimpsest, where tradition is buried and occasionally uncovered. Rather, past and present are continuously before us, side by side. This confluence of present and past is the product not of accident but of centuries of argumentation and planning.

Giuseppe Morganti has said that “a ghost wanders around Europe, haunting the dreams of the people who are in charge of city planning in historical towns.” Whenever they plan to make room for an underground line, to build parking areas, or to construct new buildings, they must realize that the towns have a past. This past reappears, in a most untimely manner, under pneumatic drills. Urban archaeology can therefore seem intrinsically opposed to development or progress: new discoveries bring work to a halt. Why don’t cities choose instead to move along, bulldoze the rubble, build Trump Tower on top, and enter the new millennium? One kind of reason is the love of learning, the love of beauty, and the value of venerable *things*, but also our western tradition has maintained a desire to preserve not only the memory of objects but the memory and meaning of places. Last week I gave a class on Rome for a colleague, specifically on a speech by Cicero, and one student asked me whether the places I referred to are still there. What a splendid question! The question was multi-layered in itself, but to have it asked by a freshman whose only connection to Rome came from reading in translation an open-air courtroom speech was thrilling. Not only does Cicero’s speech endow the space with value and meaning, but the reverse is also true: the space—tangible, real—enriches the text.

What we now accept or expect as natural was not always so. Disputes, difficulties, and failures were rife throughout the centuries leading to the twentieth, when things became more or less settled. Historians of Rome are aware

that it was plundered and pillaged for material remains for a thousand years after the so-called fall of the Roman Empire. Much of the classical city lay buried under meters of muck; the forum area was referred to in the Middle Ages as the “Cow Pasture” (*campo vaccino*).

As early as 1519, though, Raphael, in a letter to Pope Leo X, suggested systematic digging to bring the ancient Roman monuments back to the original ground level of the classical age (Morganti). Only thus, Raphael felt, could the city renovate its lost ancient heritage. Apparently a few years earlier than Raphael’s letter, Francesco Albertini said, “*Roma quanta fuit, ipsa ruina docet*” or “How great Rome was, the very ruins tell us.” A policy of measured preservation and restoration, though, had to endure a lot of mistakes and opposition. Napoleon, for instance, had plans for the space of the Roman forum, plans that ultimately failed but that led to a planned design of urban preservation long after his death. Rome was under French rule from May 1809 to January 1814, and during this time the problem of the ancient monuments and excavations was first officially posed; the relative value of recovery and of preservation against progress and development was conceptualized and addressed.

In May 1812, French planners elaborated a project, not preserved, to create a garden in the area of the Roman Forum: a picturesque English-style garden, as was fashionable in the late seventeenth century, with groves, meandering pathways, and small hidden corners (see Morganti and Nicasio for much of the material in this paragraph). The Forum appears in this project as a vast open space planted with trees, an archaeological square open to the ruins and to the city, while the Palatine overlooking it is a public garden, bound by fences, with guarded entrances, and with the preserved structures of the Farnese gardens at the top serving as a romantic background. The French departed in 1814, and this design was not to be implemented. A plan for progress, re-imagining the ancient space in a modern garden, went the way of all memos to departed administrators. But the project marked a turning point in the debate on the arrangement of archaeological areas. For the first time the problem of the ancient remains in the modern city is clearly stated as such.

The great archaeological park imagined by Napoleon was meant to include the entire area of the classical city, from the Capitol up to the Appian Way. Napoleon’s dream was accomplished only in 1965, mainly surrounding the Appian Way, after more than a hundred years and in a quite different form, sifted through the vision of Mussolini. The enacted plan is the one we know, the one visible to us in our adult lifetimes: some restoration (carefully chosen), some preservation of ruins as such, some structures left buried. The

city makes structural changes with great care in order to adapt to new times without losing the visible heritage so valued by its native culture. As a symbol of the combination of change and preservation, the remaining Colosseum is almost perfect.

As a result, we can now visit the space where Cicero gave his speech, in fact numerous speeches, and can stand virtually upon the spot where Caesar's body was later cremated. At the same time, urban development continues, carefully respecting the historic center (called the "Centro"). We can see partially or fully restored temples, basilicas, monuments of all kinds that provide texture and meaning to this space, full—as my students have said—of Ruebel's rubble. Visitors to this space, and even those who probably will never go there, more or less agree that this balance between progress and remembrance, change and tradition, was necessary, that it was determined correctly for the most part, and that it has long-lasting worth not just for Italy but for everyone who values the humanities.

Examining this process is useful because it emblemizes the process of valuing both tradition and progress, of keeping our vision focused on the future while maintaining our center. In order for progress to make sense, we must first question the value of specific changes, achieve a shared vision of the end goal, and come to an understanding of what our "center" is.

Precisely this process has been dominating discussion, argumentation, and planning for the National Collegiate Honors Council at least since I officially joined in 2000 and doubtless for many years before among our long-standing contributors, both our founders and others whom we have recently honored as Honors Fellows. These outstanding honors educators have defined our organization, nurtured it, and shaped its growth over the past forty-nine years.

For the last fifteen of those years, my relatively brief engagement with NCHC, a series of conceptually powerful events—at chronologically discontinuous and seemingly disconnected moments—have reflected this process of organizational change by way of sharpening and defining our organizational identity. My preliminary point is going to be that what seemed at the time like unrelated issues were not just interrelated but were organic products of the maturation of our organization, on the one hand, and the simultaneous changes in education spurred by exponential growth in technological power, on the other. The consequences challenged the identity of our organization.

In 2000, the president of NCHC was Joan Digby. In her presidential address, she called for an aggressive, intentional, and articulated national presence: letters to editors, position papers, op-ed pieces. In the next few years

the organization was establishing a national office, reflecting the sense that, in order for NCHC to be a national (and now international) voice, a stable and continuous national office would be crucial. As an organizational member, not a member of the NCHC Board of Directors at that time, I didn't see or hear the deliberations of the board on this issue; I heard only the presentations at the annual meetings and read the email chains.

During these same three to five years, I first heard John Grady give a series of important presentations, to me it seemed annually, on essential questions: What is the value-added component of honors? How can we know that more students benefit than the select few who receive a lot of attention? How can we prove that bright students will not simply perform better with or without an honors program? The evidence available at the time was mainly anecdotal. A couple of dissertations related to this subject (Shushok, Rinn), but they were confined to data on specific questions at specific institutions, and the questions posed were limited.

Meanwhile, a nationwide movement toward outcomes-based assessment of learning took hold. The movement toward this particular model of assessment had begun about a decade earlier, but universities were now adopting the model in response to demands from their stakeholders, boards of trustees, and legislators to measure what was learned using quantifiable rubrics, not just explain what was being taught. While honors had taken part in the general discussion of assessment since the early 1990s—hosting, for instance, a three-day NCHC Forum on “The Problematics of Honors Assessment and Evaluation” with fifty-two participants in Chicago—it was almost entirely out of the conversation about outcomes assessment until about five or six years ago when, in the summer of 2008, Past-President Greg Lanier and Jane Halonen offered the first in a series of now popular faculty institutes on honors assessment.

The issue of “certification,” discussed first to my knowledge at the 2004 New Orleans NCHC conference, was first and foremost a question about who we are and why we do what we do. As an organizational issue, certification was rendered moot this past February. As far as the current NCHC Board of Directors is concerned, that horse is dead. But the fundamental questions had to be addressed first: if we were certifying something, what would that be? How could we know the answer to John Grady's questions, and who says so? If not us, who? And the solution reached earlier this year was tripartite: first, a definition of honors education and an assertion program by program of the mission on the local campus; second, a commitment to routine assessment embedded in the NCHC Basic Characteristics; and finally, a commitment to



revision of the training and process for NCHC-endorsed program reviews. These steps may all seem to be about process but are, in fact, about identity.

When I was elected vice president of NCHC in 2012, much of the concern about certification was coming to a head. I naively started keeping notes on what I thought were the burning issues and major decisions of the time. These notes quickly became outdated. Last year in New Orleans, I scheduled a session on “Hot Topics”: I intended to talk about online honors education, honors for profit, a definition of honors education, and, of course, the question of certification. A year later, only honors for profit remains an issue not fully addressed by the organization even though a *JNCHC* Forum (spring/summer 2014) provided a lively, nine-essay debate on the topic.

What these strands and events have in common is an undefined sense of who we are: by “we,” I mean both we who have adopted honors as a profession and we the membership of the National Collegiate Honors Council. To a lesser extent, I also mean the organizational identity that drives the NCHC Board of Directors.

As an organization, we have been calling for ourselves to stand as a rudder for honors education and for education in general; we have sought to make ourselves the spokes-organization for questions relating to honors; we have sought public arenas for others to consult for our expertise; we have challenged those who take lightly the positions we advocate.

We have been largely successful. At an increasing rate of inquiry, we have been asked “What is honors?” by colleagues we would not have previously imagined. We now have international partners, for example, who seek guidance on the development of honors programs in nations throughout the world, places where “honors” as a programmatic idea only dawned in the past decade. As a point of perspective on changes in education, let me look back to 1966, the first meeting of the National Collegiate Honors Council held at the University of Kansas. The keynote speaker was Paul Miller, Assistant Director for Education in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. A few of you may have been there. In his remarks, Miller argued that the shape of university education was changing rapidly;

The issue is a collision between ten centuries of traditional sentiment about the university idea and the startling new demands placed upon it by the Western industrial world. . . . The modern claims of society on the university are manifest in the waves of new students, massive research programs in the present national interest, [and] the pull of knowledge to vexing public problems. (Weir 19)

Miller called for a thoroughgoing reform of the undergraduate curriculum (Weir 21) in light of the increasing need for relevance in the core curriculum, where he saw unlimited opportunity for rendering the liberal arts more relevant to contemporary political, economic, and social problems. (This was the 1960s, remember—relevance was all the rage.) His implicit point was that honors education and the NCHC as its advocate were the likely torchbearers of this innovation.

That was 1966. The arc of these comments from then to now is easy to visualize: some of the same claims, some of the same problems, some of the same kinds of hoped-for solutions. Even then, Miller saw a technological breakthrough, championing the use of the television as a landmark, game-changing educational tool (Weir 18). Those of you older than fifty will likely remember the hope for multi-section courses on television, with one instructor beamed to many rooms, replacing—as the skeptics among us might have said—the sage on stage with the fox in a box. When I came to Iowa State University in 1978, the classrooms in my building all featured somewhat forlornly bricked-up and plastered over cabinets of what had once been a television console: state of the art in the 1960s, obsolete by the mid-1970s. But the thing about technology is that it keeps on developing. Where a TV led to isolated learners listening to a fox in a box, current video links are capable of world-wide, synchronous coverage at almost no cost, generating an electronic classroom of fully engaged, discussion-based classes, where—with a little training—the faculty member controls the technology instead of the other way around. A colleague commented to me a few years ago that you can “almost smell the coffee the other person is drinking.” My flippant response was, “When he can hand me a cup, I will be impressed.” I venture to say that such a day is not only plausibly coming but is coming sooner than we think (Nguyen).

Within the past decade, we have articulated a vision of ourselves as a profession, if not a discipline (still to be argued). As the national organization of this profession, we have been exploring the limits of how we act as guardians of that profession as well as sustainers of our organization. While the annual conference remains the membership’s first choice among member benefits, we have long ceased to be a group that exists primarily for the purpose of having a conference, thus beginning to change the nature of the conference itself. Some of our many committees and task forces and ad hoc committees are, in fact, vehicles for carrying out functions of the organization that are necessary for its survival and well-being; some are vehicles for promoting honors education in concrete ways through signature NCHC programs; others either are or are becoming ways for us to professionalize the organization and to

develop it along those lines. Our growth into a professional organization, the focus and defender of honors as we believe we embody it, has begun but is not over.

Let me finish, as I began, with Ovid. In his *Metamorphoses*, he tells the story of Echo and Narcissus (3.339–508). Echo, who is fascinated with Narcissus alone, can express herself only by reflecting his statements, and she eventually fades into a specter. Narcissus is interested in no one other than himself and eventually changes into a lonely flower: beautiful but isolated. An NCHC plenary speaker whose name I no longer remember summarized this story well: “It means,” he said, “that you cannot be yourself by yourself, that we do and must define ourselves in relation to others.” As a professional organization, NCHC cannot be an echo or a flower of self-reflection. It must engage and interact with other professional organizations and exchange best practices with similar entities. It must also question itself continuously: What does a central office entail? What, as Hallie Savage asked long before she took the job, do we expect of an executive director? How big should the board of directors be, and who should be on it? How we answer questions like this cannot be a narcissistic process; we are not born with all the best answers, and they may not be what we would do on our campus in an academic environment.

Confronting these disparate issues in their totality indicates the maturation of our organization’s identity: trying to sustain and continue its strengths, its center, while adapting to a new era, new challenges, new responsibilities, and new expectations both in the United States and abroad. We have claimed the status of leader in honors education, and we have been successful in transmitting that message. Increasingly varied and global individuals, organizations, and institutions have posed questions to us and have asked us for guidance. The questions now being asked with increasing urgency are not easy questions that we had to think about twenty years ago. To sustain the organization in its growth to this status entails full professionalization. Your board of directors, executive director, and the full NCHC leadership is committed to continuing our progress to the maturation of a fully professional national organization. We need your continued guidance, your continued support, and most of all, your continued involvement.

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