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Further Thoughts on The Future of NCHC

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I was one of the panelists with Sam Schuman in the final plenary session at the Fall 2000 conference. Since I was the outgoing president of NCHC, and had indeed gone out by the time we spoke to the audience that Sunday morning, I had already spent considerable time thinking about the future of our organization. Nevertheless, Sam's call to arms as the defenders of undergraduate excellence—clear and resonant—was the most important message of the day.

So let me open my reply in support of Sam's position paper. While he talks about a "dramatic revision of our organizational mission," his insight into numerous ways that honors can push the quest for excellence beyond the boundaries of individual students and programs establishes an expansive directive that I hope we wish to follow.

It is time, in other words, to affect the outside world. Many of us already sponsor the kinds of lecture series and extracurricular activities that encourage participation outside our program membership. Yet even Sam's suggestion of an honors award for excellence in a university service arena still remains more campus-bound than we need be. As long as we limit our quest for excellence to our immediate academic environment, I would have to say that we are not fully extended.

That is why I think it is time for NCHC to voice its standards in the larger world of higher education and the popular media. I believe that Sam is right in saying that "we have drifted towards a culture of mediocrity." And if he is also correct in thinking that honors faculty and directors hold higher standards than the OK, the C, the "good enough"—then we have the obligation to make as widely known as possible our revolt against popular mediocrity.

How can we do this? By interjecting our voice into popular media. NCHC needs a public voice that is reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in important magazines, newspapers and public radio around the country. When important issues in higher education and its funding are

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brought before the people or before Congress, NCHC should be among the first organizations consulted for a professional opinion. Currently our External Relations Committee is working with a Public Relations firm to develop new brochures about NCHC and publicize the work we do. But we do not need to wait for the completion of this project in order to get started. Whenever an article on higher education “begs” for a reply from the perspective of honors—reply! Write to the newspaper in your own voice, as director or faculty member. And when you give your institutional affiliation remember to say that you are a member of the National Collegiate Honors Council. Tell reporters or interviewers about NCHC and direct them to our national office or website. We can be our own best advertisers.

Getting our voice out there is important because I believe we have a lot to say and much of it extremely positive and optimistic. When people refer to the deterioration of standards and the mediocrity of our culture, they do not generally do so in order to applaud it. So if you have a great student who has produced a brilliant piece of research, publicize it as much as possible. Send an article to the local paper. In my experience, a well-written press release generally gets printed (almost without change) under someone’s byline! The External Relations Committee has recently asked you to submit any such articles that you may already have about your students. We wish to use stories about real students, real achievers in our new organization materials.

For a long time NCHC has been good at teaching and learning, at talking and listening—but mostly to each other. In the future we need to be talking with and listening to people from other organizations in higher education. In the year of my presidency, I made a great deal of this. I felt that 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. I believe we are making great strides in that direction. Every NCHC Honors Semester in the growing list is a beneficial partnership that extends our reputation for unique experiential learning opportunities. Every conference contributor is also an enthusiastic partner who carries home an important message about NCHC, its programs, students and intellectual values. Each year the list of conference contributors grows longer. Generally we meet these partners in the Idea Exchange, where they present a tremendous range of opportunities to our students. By reaching out we gain contacts

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that are mutually beneficial. I am pleased to say that our current President, Hew Joiner, is vigorously pursuing new relationships with important organizations that will modify and enrich the work of NCHC. And just prior to our Chicago conference, Sam Schuman and Anne Ponder will host a summit, bringing together more than a dozen leaders of organizations committed to excellence in undergraduate education with whom we may explore future avenues of engagement.

Some of the most recent explorations may also extend our influence abroad. While we have always had some members from the international community, “honors” appears to be on the rise in countries such as Holland, Australia and Canada. The fact that overseas institutions are contacting NCHC for direction in structuring honors components is a very positive development. Earl Brown has recently represented our organization in Utrecht, and we have every reason to believe that other invitations will follow.

If I am speaking practically about NCHC rather than theoretically about the future of honors, it is because I believe that our eclectic philosophy and methods have been clearly defined over the years and that the future of honors is generally secure. If we look at the number of honors programs evolving into colleges, we get some sense of how universities are using “honors” to market the excellence of their institutions. Thus, as honors gains in funds, status and centrality, its future becomes more secure. Now it remains for NCHC to become fully accepted as *THE* national organization of honors education—the central repository of information, the voice, the source.

Thus, if our organizational mission is to be dramatically changed or at least sharpened, I believe that change hinges on commitment to our public role. Since we have essentially defined and created American honors education, it is up to us to promote a broader use of our creative models. The future of NCHC must be as an assertive voice in the media and the marketplace of higher education.

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