

# PRESIDENT'S OCCASIONAL CAMPUS COMMUNIQUÉ

March 30, 2010

## **The President's Perspective – A Brief Essay**

Early in the school year a student asked me, “So what is it that you do as president?” I responded that I am the school’s chief story-teller. It’s my job (though not mine alone) to make sure people know the good story about North Park.

It’s the “good” story about North Park that I like to tell. And for the most part, good stories are easy to find around here. But occasionally I hear a story I would prefer not to repeat—especially those stories which reflect poorly on the student experience at North Park.

Today I have two not-so-good stories to tell. Here’s the first one. A year ago we participated in a national survey of student engagement in activities which are proven to foster learning. One such activity, measured in this instrument, is the quality of student relationships with faculty and staff. We’ve always prided ourselves that at North Park student relations with those who work here are very positive and reflect well on our learning environment. But our student responses on this survey told a different story. Our student responses, which measured the quality of their relationships with us as faculty and staff, indicate a “below average” level of effectiveness when compared with our peer colleges and universities. Put more simply, from our students’ perspectives relationships between students and faculty/staff at North Park aren’t as positive and supportive as we have claimed them to be.

Here’s the second story. Each spring we measure fall-to-spring retention. That is, what is the percentage of the eligible students who return from one semester to the next? Two years ago we returned 92% of our students. That’s a good story. But this year, when we directed a lot of our efforts during the fall semester to assuring healthy spring retention, only 84% of our eligible students returned. This is a not-so-good story.

How should we respond? The start of a good response might come through the small things we do in the normal course of our workday.

When someone asks you what you do at North Park (as that student asked me) here’s what I hope you say: “I walk alongside our students.” It’s a simple answer; yet it is a profound answer. And if we put it into practice, in the small parts of our work-day, it will have impressive results.

How might we walk alongside our students? Start by calling them by their name. Tell them about yourself. Stay on campus 30 minutes longer than usual one day and attend one inning of a baseball or softball game. Attend this semester’s student theater

production (staged at the Neo-Futurarium beginning on April 9). Or attend one of the many other concerts, recitals, art exhibits, and honors presentations scheduled throughout the month. Drop in on Java House some night and “roc tha mic.” Or on a sunny afternoon leave your workplace and ask a student on the campus green to teach you to throw a frisbee.

Each of these small things, done in the routine of our workday, will impact a student. And each individual small touch point may be exactly what is needed to encourage that student to return to school next year.

Last night I read a brief article in the *Christian Century*, written by one of my favorite contemporary authors on matters of faith and life, Barbara Brown Taylor. I’m glad I stayed with her to the end of the article because she concluded with this great sentence:

What . . . matters . . . are the everyday ways we rise to our work, serving one another with gladness and singleness of heart, so that the life we share goes on working, not for any of us alone but for all of us together.

It’s the small things that count; the small touch points in a student’s relationship with us that can lead to staying at North Park. Walk alongside a student . . . and prepare them for a life of significance and service.

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## **DON’T MISS THESE SPECIAL EVENTS**

There are a number of special events on campus scheduled in the weeks ahead which offer exceptional opportunities for learning. Each represents a place for us to gain some new insight and have our minds stretched; each also represents an opportunity to invite one or more students to attend with us.

Reload – Sponsored by the Center for Youth Ministries this one-day program, on Saturday, April 10, brings to campus urban youth workers from churches and social agencies across Chicago and beyond. The program includes two general sessions and three workshop periods, all held right here on our campus.

4days4justice – Here’s how the organizers describe this event: “Through lectures, discussions, worship, workshops, and training sessions, 4days4justice is an opportunity to engage in a dialogue on the theory and the practice of justice with professors, pastors, and practitioners. If you are or want to become an agent for justice in this world, then this is a gathering you need to be part of.” The conference is scheduled over four days (naturally!) from April 14 to 17.

ReCentering: Collaborating for Peace – Now in its third year, the ReCentering conference provided local peacemakers with opportunities for training and skill building.

This year's program features a commitment to ending violence in the city of Chicago. If you have a heart for building a peaceful community in your neighborhood, then you'll want to attend this conference on April 24.

11<sup>th</sup> Annual Axelson Center Symposium – This day-long event for nonprofit professionals and volunteers, held this year on May 13, is the signature event of its type in Chicago. Over 45 speakers are scheduled in both plenary and breakout sessions. By attending you'll learn of ways to volunteer more effectively in your church or in one of the city's many nonprofit organizations. This also is an excellent opportunity to invite a friend to a program on North Park's campus.

## **COMMENCEMENT HONOREES**

When North Park gathers this year for our various commencement programs we'll recognize the life work of two individuals. Honorary doctorates will be presented to Dr. Kevin Lemman and Rev. Glenn Palmberg.

Dr. Lemman studied at North Park early in his undergraduate years, is a well-regarded author (especially on birth order, marriage, and parenting) and a highly engaging speaker. Rev. Palmberg holds both undergraduate and seminary degrees from North Park and most recently served as President of the Evangelical Covenant Church. Dr. Lemman's degree presentation will be part of the undergraduate commencement program and Rev. Palmberg will be recognized in the seminary commencement.

## **EASTER MONDAY**

It's an annual tradition at North Park. Faculty and staff gather on the Monday following Easter (April 5 this year) for a time of professional development. This year's program includes an opening address and workshop by Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil in which she will help us reflect on our life together as a learning community, what it means to "walk along side our students," and how best to transform our work at North Park into a vocation of service. Workshops scheduled throughout the day, by both on- and off-campus presenters, offer elective opportunities according to our individual interests. The day begins in Hamming Hall with a continental breakfast with sessions extending into the early afternoon.

## **NEW AT NORTH PARK**

We're delighted when people choose to join the North Park community, and in recent weeks we've welcomed several individuals to new employment at North Park. The people identified below have started to work at North Park since January 1<sup>st</sup>. Let's extend a special welcome to each of them!

- Admissions Office
  - Viviana Belisle, assistant director of admissions (for the School of Nursing)
- Athletics
  - Andy Hoffman, assistant football coach
  - Ericka Hopper, director of recreation and wellness
- Development and Alumni Relations Office
  - Kelly McCollum, development services manager
  - Cindy Pethel, development services assistant
- Physical Plant
  - Albert Riebock, custodian
- Residence Life
  - Sara Dickey, director of housing and residence life

## **SPIRITUAL JOURNIES**

The observance of Lent is past, and we journey now through Holy Week to the celebration of Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday. This is a special and sacred time of year. May we each find in the steps of this week's journey a special note of grace in the suffering of Christ on the cross and in the glory of his resurrection.

And may we with renewed confidence embrace the mystery of faith:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.