

PRESIDENT'S OCCASIONAL CAMPUS COMMUNIQUÉ

January 20, 2011

The President's Perspective – A Brief Essay

The fourth of North Park's seven educational ideals commits us to providing an education that "affirms learning in all its forms—in the classroom and beyond—as a gift, a joy, and a sacred obligation."

Learning is life-long. We begin to learn at the moment of birth, when we fill our lungs with that first breath of air, open our eyes to the world around us, taste the sweetness of nourishment, hear the sounds of life, and sense the fragrance of living. Learning ends only at the moment of death, when breathing stops, our eyes are closed, the need to sup is satisfied, the clatter of life is silenced, and the enjoyment of living has passed.

Learning is life-embracing. We learn through every experience, every moment of breath, sight, taste, sound, and smell. Learning is shaped by the place into which we are born, the choices we make each day from the rising to the setting of the sun and beyond. Consequently, learning is individual and intensely personal. No two people learn the same things, nor do we learn at the same pace, in the same place, or in the same ways.

Like life itself, much of learning is chaotic. Both formal learning in a classroom and informal learning in all parts of life take on the unpredictable nature of a tee-ball game. The players are strategically located across the ball field, each with a glove too big for the hand. The batter, gripping a bat and trying to balance a helmet, stands at the plate. The first swing connects only with the air. The second swing is a solid hit, but the batter has struck the tee rather than the ball. On the third swing, the batter tops the ball and it rolls four feet in front of home plate. The play is on; the action starts. The batter looks at the coach for instruction on what to do next and the coach explains again that it is now time to run to first base. The infield players awaken. Neither the pitcher nor the catcher are certain whose responsibility it is to retrieve a ball that rests motionless on the ground between them. The player positioned at third base takes charge, runs for the ball, and mistakenly throws it toward second base. As the ball now bounces past the second baseman into the outfield the runner advances. . . . And soon, before our very eyes, a topped ball becomes a home run.

Learning is the game of life. It's exhilarating when all goes well, a bit depressing when it does not. The innings roll on, errors turn into runs, occasionally a victory is won, and we celebrate, sometimes! Regardless of the win-loss record, players at the end of the season are more skilled, understand the game better, and know more of what it means to play on a team, than was the case some weeks earlier.

Though experienced uniquely by each individual, learning takes place best in the company of others. Sometimes by purpose, at other times by accident, in each moment of life we join our neighbors—at home, at school, at work, on the subway, in the gym, walking down the sidewalk—to form discourse communities. As we speak to one another, as we listen to those in our company, we collaborate in learning. We learn by telling our life-stories and hearing the stories of others. Part of what my neighbor has becomes mine, just as I share with others from what I have. Learning in the company of others is a gift exchange.

The privilege of learning—of gift exchange—requires something of us; learning mandates an obligation—a sacred obligation—to serve others. To learn is noble, but learning is most noble when used to benefit others. Whatever we are privileged to learn is not meant to be hoarded, to be kept to ourselves in isolation from all others. Whatever we learn must soon be shared, it must become a gift to others. A gift which helps others learn. A gift which shapes the world around us for the better. A gift which lifts others even as we have been lifted by the gifts of others.

Life's journey is long; we travel together exchanging gifts, learning.

Gathering Day 2.0

During the past few days I've been reading a recent book by N.T. Wright titled *Simply Christian*. He asserts that being a faith community (a church) is both simple and complex. And he identifies five ways we can celebrate and honor this simplicity and complexity: tell stories, act out rituals, create beauty, work in community, and think out beliefs.

The same can be said of an educational community (a university). Our life together is both simple and complex, and we understand this life, we get a picture of it, as we tell stories (on the web home page, for example), observe certain rituals (such as commencement), create beauty (in recitals, in laboratories, and on athletic fields), work together (in classrooms and offices, and on each sidewalk), and think out beliefs (through academic papers, in chapel, and on service trips) . . . to mention only a few examples.

One place where these five “acts” come together in a single event at North Park is Gathering Day. Traditionally we've hosted Gathering Day at the start of the academic year as the fall semester begins. This year we've chosen to expand our traditional practice (our ritual) and gather again at the beginning of the spring semester. In this ritual gathering next week we'll hear stories (from several of our colleagues), create beauty (with the Gospel Choir's traveling ensemble), celebrate our work together (by introducing new colleagues), and think out beliefs (in worship). We'll also eat together, which is story, ritual, beauty, work, and belief combined as one!

Here are the details:

Gathering Day 2.0
Monday, January 24
10:30 a.m. in Anderson Chapel
Lunch follows in Hamming Hall

One additional aspect of GD-2.0 this year is a brief update for the campus community on the fund raising campaign we introduced on a “quiet” basis some months ago. You won’t want to miss a short video we’ll preview and the summary status report we’ll present.

I look forward to our gathering together.

Winter Board Meeting

Our Board of Trustees will convene as is their custom in early February for this group’s winter meeting. The dates are Friday and Saturday, February 11 and 12, and the meeting will take place on campus.

As is my custom, soon after this meeting I will prepare a summary of the meeting and distribute this to faculty and staff. With this summary I will also include a copy of my written report to the Board. I’m always happy to discuss these items with you as you have interest.

New Students in January

When our classrooms (whether face-to-face or online) opened earlier this week with the return of students following the holiday break we welcomed to North Park a group of students new to the University. This group includes a cohort of undergraduate students who began their studies at another school and have now transferred their work to North Park. Additionally, new students are included in the School of Adult Learning, each of our graduate programs, and the seminary.

The successful completion of their studies—for each new student—begins early, as early as their first contact with North Park. One very significant aspect of this early contact comes in the first weeks of the semester. As you meet one or more of these new students—when they enroll in your class, come by your office, send you an email message, take a job in your work unit, and in so many other ways—greet them with a strong Viking spirit. Make sure they know you’re glad to see them here and build their confidence of success by knowing we’ll walk alongside them during their days with us.

Learning Exchange – China and North Park

Later this week President Hu Jintao of China will visit Chicago, the only stop outside of Washington, D.C. in his trip to the United States. I'm especially interested in this because I traveled to China, with a small delegation from North Park, during the winter break. Our goal was to establish opportunities and expand resources for collaborative cross-cultural learning and research for undergraduate and graduate students and faculty through formal relationships with a small number of universities in China. The initial parameters of the relationships have been established through a Memo of Understanding signed with each university during the trip.

The initiative for this trip has been building over a couple of years. Dr. Timothy Lin (biology) who came to work at North Park in 2007 has been instrumental in initiating contact with several Chinese schools. Additionally, a number of exchange opportunities have been introduced and/or completed in recent months, especially for faculty, including the following:

- In summer 2010 a group of 18 faculty members from Leshan Normal University enrolled in NPU's summer ESL Program directed by Dennis Bricault.
- In summer 2010 Dr. Wesley Lindahl (SBNM) served for four weeks as a visiting faculty member at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.
- In fall 2010 Dr. Ruth Sun, a biologist from Beijing Union University, was a visiting professor with NPU's department of biology.
- During the spring 2011 Dr. Becky Nelson (education) will visit Leshan Normal University, Jianwen College of Yantai University, and the Tian Rong Charity, each of which has established Early Childhood Learning Centers in the Guangdong Province.
- In spring 2011 two faculty members from Anhui University of Finance and Economics will be hosted as visiting faculty at NPU with SBNM.
- In summer 2011 Dr. Al Kamienski (SBNM) will be a visiting faculty member at Anhui University of Finance and Economics.
- Dr. Jeff Nelson (biology) has been invited to provide a series of lectures at Leshan Normal University in summer 2012.

Each of these represents an active contact between our schools, and each offers exceptionally rich learning opportunities for both the individual faculty members and the many students they teach.

Initially I was quite skeptical about an initiative which linked NPU with schools in China. But my skepticism was deeply misinformed—I've been asleep for the past 30 years when it comes to China. This is now the second of the world's largest economies and the country's universities have developed just as fast as its economic, financial, and corporate sectors. English is studied by every student beginning in kindergarten and continuing for many years through university study. Increasingly Chinese students study on a short-term basis in the United States (including 81,000 this year).

And American students are beginning to reciprocate. Chinese is now the second most popular language for study in middle schools, high schools, and colleges across America. And China is the 5th most popular country for American students abroad, with 11,000 U.S. university students studying there this year.

Beyond this, our location in Chicago is a great resource for us to draw on. During our visit Provost Jones and I had opportunity to give lectures to nearly 1,000 undergraduates. Following each lecture many students drew close to us for additional conversation, very impressed that in the past two years Foreign Policy Magazine has placed Chicago as number 6 in a ranking of “global cities” and number 2 in a ranking of the best cities worldwide in which to earn a college degree. We can host students and faculty from China because our home is in Chicago!

Just this week the Wall Street Journal reported that demand in U.S. businesses for employees who speak foreign languages—especially Spanish and Chinese—will increase over the next decade. The article indicated that “42% of employers expect business proficiency in Chinese to be in moderate or high demand in a decade” with employers placing “a premium on bilingual job candidates.” Perhaps it’s time for us to introduce courses in Chinese language at North Park.

Additionally, NPU has a good tradition in ESL instruction and we can build on this. Professor Linda Parkyn met with the English language faculty at each of the universities we visited and witnessed a substantial interest in hosting our students as well as coming to North Park for summer-session faculty development opportunities.

There’s much more to report, and for this reason Provost Jones and I have prepared a full report on our visit and on this NPU initiative. We’ll distribute the report to the campus community very soon so all will have a chance to be informed about this work. We’ll also have opportunity to discuss the report and the initiative in a number of campus forums, including the University Council and the Faculty Senate.

When Barack Obama was elected as president of the United States Chinese President Hu Jintao greeted him with these words:

China and the United States share broad common interests and important responsibilities on a wide range of issues concerning the well-being of humanity.

In the new historic era, I look forward to working with you to continuously strengthen dialogue and exchanges between our two countries and enhance mutual trust and cooperation with a view to taking our relationship to a new high and bringing greater benefits to the people of our two countries and the rest of the world.

Within this international political and economic climate, and with the resources available through our faculty and the city of Chicago, North Park is strategically positioned to feature programs of study in collaboration with Chinese universities. Such programs will enhance the learning opportunities available to our students and prepare these graduates for a world in which dialogue and exchange are required and valued ideals.