

Honors Day May 2009

Mission and Meaning

When Henry Solomon Lehr spoke about the purposes of this University, his vision encompassed more than the programs students would follow at the Northwestern Ohio Normal School (later Ohio Normal University and then Ohio Northern University). Although Lehr's primary concern and that of those who followed him was to graduate students "accomplished in scholastic achievement" and "prepared for a useful life and meaningful career", ONU's statement of ethical and religious concerns was also summed up by the concept that students'/graduates' education and practice should "contribute to the good of mankind."

It is this global vision and purpose of education that led to the University as we know it today: five colleges, commitment to liberal and professional education, a learning methodology of theory with practice and a focus on ethical and community obligations.

The need for this vision and purpose is painfully obvious to all of us in 2009. Excessive greed and self interest, failure to act for the common good, lack of respect for life and our neighbor have led to the perfect storm: major destabilization of world-wide economies, unemployment and growth of homelessness and poverty on all continents, spread of major life-threatening diseases and internal and external armed conflicts affecting every continent.

That is why at this point in ONU's evolution into Lehr's promise of prominence as a U.S. university it has been important to focus again on these essential learning goals for our students. During the past two years two faculty committees and faculty throughout the colleges have discussed ONU's stated mission in relation to our general education outcomes and to the overall program outcomes of our degrees. ONU is not, however, looking at learning outcomes in isolation. Harvard and many other leading universities, committees of the American Association of Colleges and Universities and numerous scholarly groups have all focussed on outcomes of liberal learning and the need for knowledge to progress to ethical civic action.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities in particular has convened study groups and task forces from across the academic community to examine these issues several times in the past thirty years. One of its most recent studies, "Liberal Education and America's Promise," seems particularly linked to ONU's mission statement and to the report of our 4-college General Education Implementation Committee, which defined anew learning outcomes for both general education and the overall academic programs of students: Effective communication, critical and creative thinking, scientific and quantitative literacy, an understanding of diverse cultures and their effects on human interaction, integration of concepts across disciplines, informed and ethical responses to personal, civic and global needs and informed responses to aesthetics in art or nature. All of the four college faculties

approved these outcomes in their respective faculty meeting votes this academic year following review by their curriculum committees.

ONU's seven learning outcomes are philosophically linked to the AACU LEAP report which uses slightly different language to summarize ONU's seven outcomes into four main learning outcomes: knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility and integrative learning. The LEAP report does outline areas of study (science and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, arts), but what the report emphasizes is the need to engage students in their first year of study in what they call the "big" questions of both contemporary life and the past. They leave that definition of "big" to the universities who will define these questions across disciplines. The report envisions students being presented with increasingly and progressively challenging problems, projects and standards for excellence during their studies. It anticipates that courses will require students to think (inquiry, analysis, critical & creative thinking) from the first day of college courses. It further anticipates that students will develop written and oral communication skills, quantitative literacy, informational (IT) literacy, teamwork practice and emphasis on problem solving. The goal is to join civic knowledge (local and global) to action, to help students be at home in a multicultural globe and society, to provide the foundation for lifelong learning and to learn habits of reflection on ethical and moral components of studies and to transform these into action.

Today's Honors Convocation is the right place to talk about all this because knowledge and informed action are the bases of our celebrations today. It is true that we are celebrating high scholarship, but scholarship is measured by more than grades and grade point. A major point of the day is to link scholarly preparation and accomplishment with reasoned action and commitment to the benefit of our communities, states and countries.

This is something Henry Solomon Lehr truly understood. As a young man at Mount Union Seminary (that was before the Division III football dynasty), Lehr was a pro-slavery Democrat. During a debate he attended at a literary society he was convinced that anti-slavery Republicanism was correct. Now he didn't just accept the arguments he heard, he tells us he went back to his rooms and spent the night checking the facts. His earlier convictions were changed by knowledge, argument and study. That mind change of his turned into action when he volunteered three times for the Union Army during the Civil War where he finally did service.

For Lehr, learning in itself was pleasure and he was willing to work as a farmhand to get funds to be able to go to school. But for Lehr, learning also brought the obligation to use it for good. He started his normal school to improve teaching in the schools. He added other professional schools to provide educated individuals to fill professions in state and country. He developed the military companies to teach team work and discipline. He began the literary societies to teach competition and performance. He empowered his students because to him they were adults. His courses combined theory and practice. In his Business School of the 1890s retail practice was combined with accounting, marketing and management. Lehr would love the entrepreneurship focus established through our current

business and engineering programs and penetrating many disciplines. He was an entrepreneur himself and ONU is the product.

Honors Day celebrates students' achievements: the national competitions, the competitive projects, the successes of student professional societies, the papers presented at regional and national meetings, the poster presentations, the art works shown in regional galleries, the national fellowships awarded, the grants obtained for research, regional and international music and theatre performances. All of these are student achievements in learning. Honors Day also celebrates entry into profession demonstrated by the White Coat Ceremony in Pharmacy and the Ring Ceremony in Engineering. Finally Honors Day celebrates students' service: tutoring, teaching, saving the environment (Year of the Polar Bear, recycling, alternative energy research), building homes and assisting others.

Honors Day reaffirms the University's mission to graduate students "accomplished in scholastic achievement, and prepared for a useful life and meaningful career who will contribute to the good of mankind." Lehr linked theory with practice to assist students to achieve that goal. Our students honored here today are "la creme de la creme", some of our most gifted students at the University. The challenge to all of you students and to all the rest of us today, is to link ever deepening knowledge to effective and ethical action in our world community.

Anne Lippert