

Honors Day 2005
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Anne Lippert

Excellence: Tradition and Transformation

In previous years when my assignment at this convocation was to give a one minute orientation to the purpose of Honors Day (a much easier assignment), I've noted the hope and expectation of the faculty that you students will exceed our knowledge, our effectiveness and our contributions to scholarship and community.

That wish or hope is not a meaningless statement. The history of knowledge has demonstrated this evolution, building on previous knowledge and surpassing it. Plato was a great teacher, but Aristotle, his student, built beyond what Plato taught and opened up the scientific method.

This hope for and expectation of ONU's students is a core value and an underlying strategy in Henry Solomon Lehr's vision for his school. Today in academia we talk about the importance of critical thinking, of communication skills to be developed in speech and writing. To Lehr, ONU's first president, student intellectual growth and student empowerment in that process were primary goals; critical thinking and communication skills were the bases of the students' growth and this empowerment. Just after he had established his "select school," a private school he taught after hours in the village school prior to the founding of the Normal School, Lehr inaugurated the Ciceronian Literary Society, a debating/performing/discussion society where members learned to or practiced the formulation and expression of their ideas.*

On August 16, 1871, at the very start of the ONU Normal School, Lehr called a meeting of all normal school students and described his plan to disband the Ciceronian Society and to form two literary societies from the entire student body of the normal school. These societies would provide competition for their members and enhance their studies and learning processes. At the meeting the students worked out with him a method for selecting (that is, dividing up) membership. Lehr called the student roll and alternately students became members of one of the two societies. Their thought was that new students to the school would be selected in the same manner, but after four weeks the societies could recruit them to their cause/membership. Alternate selection died out early and recruitment of new members by the two societies began as new students embarked at the Ada Railroad Depot to start classes at the Normal.

Lehr gave to those two societies all rights and privileges respecting student activities which were not reserved to the faculty. One society chose the name "Franklin"; the other became the Philomathean, names shortened to "Franks" and "Philos." President Lehr lent his own personal library to the two societies to help the members write their constitutions. The Philos got his catalogue from the Mt. Union literary society (the school where Lehr had been a student) and the Franks got his copy of "The American Debater." Determined and as hard-working as their mentor, the societies wrote their constitutions, developed their mottos "Labore et Auxilio Dei Prosperamus" (by labor and the help of God we prosper) and "Labor Omnia Vincit" (labor conquers all things) and together the students studied, read, wrote and orated. Lehr divided his own private library between the two literary groups. It was this nucleus of books along with books purchased by the societies themselves that became the first ONU "library."

Lehr's egalitarianism had brought him to the conviction that education ought to be for all students regardless of social background or gender. His idea of learning by doing (theory with practice) brought him to engage the students in planning and executing their own development. The programs for the societies' meetings were lengthy. There

were choir performances, incidental music, debates, orations, delivery of papers, critical book reports, essays. For the normal school students, most of whom lived in boarding houses in the village, these were two intellectual and social centers to which they all belonged. And talk went on among these men and women (dutifully chaperoned by faculty) until the early hours of the morning. Each society sought to outshine the other. It was no coincidence that three U.S. senators-to-be were members of these groups.

These societies, however, are not just a part of ONU's cultural history. They are the origins of the ONU tradition of students empowered and active in their own learning.

This involvement of students in their learning is epitomized by many of you in this room and by many others who throughout the years have accomplished the difficult, the seemingly impossible, the fully creative. I've seen this demonstrated in the student basketball player, who, embarrassed by his failure to make shots, retreated to the gym to shoot, shoot, shoot again until his shots were automatic and accurate. I've seen it in the clarity and critical expression of student papers presented at national and regional professional meetings by ONU student writers and researchers in pharmacy, in engineering, in business, in the sciences, in the humanities and social sciences. I've seen it in the success of art students entering and winning places in juried shows and competitions within and outside ONU. I've seen it in the yearly successes of technology students' robotics competitions, in the concrete canoe and weightless competitions of students in engineering. Over the years I've seen students develop computer programs and help install the internet at ONU. I've witnessed the statistical expertise of a student statistician in my office who "owns" some of our studies. I've seen it in the skilled performances of ONU student musicians, performers and dancers at and beyond ONU (in the U.S. and abroad). It's been evidenced in the development of "Delirium," the student-on-line journal and other student publications and in student performances in mock trial and Model U.N. I've seen students help visiting performers at ONU whether it's providing the foil for a "Groucho Marx," taking a part with "Moliere," or providing stage crew back-up. The list can go on forever. These are only a few examples among

a host of celebratory student performances, demonstrations, evidences of learning and scholarship.

ONU's mission of student achievement identifies goals for student excellence in terms of future outcomes: a useful life, a meaningful career, contributions to the good of humankind. These accomplishments, too, have been a hallmark of ONU grads among whom are the founder of the Cleveland clinic, Peace Corps volunteers, state and local legislators, judges, teachers, pharmacists, U.S. senators, engineers, scholars, founders of professional publications, writers, librarians, social workers and managers, politicians and clergy, men and women who have established homes and families and contributed to their local communities. Henry Solomon Lehr was not just intent on making sure that every frog in the ONU frog pond became a great croaker. He expected his sons and daughters to develop a moral backbone that would put them outside the selfishness and greed we've seen in recent history like the Enron and WorldCom scandals. For Lehr, education went beyond the knowledge students developed. He was interested in what they would do with this development. In his own career he modeled development of the intellectual virtues: humility, integrity, honesty of motive, understanding, tolerance, appreciation, forgiveness, generosity.

For those of us who have lived a while (some of us (like me) a bit longer than others), we recognize that despite the very real problems and issues of our day, there has been some progress as individuals and groups have made steady contributions to our societies and world. I was born just as social safety nets were provided as an answer to the hopelessness of the "Great Depression" and long before the Civil Rights movement exploded. In my youth, the continent of Africa was claimed and governed by European powers who used its resources for their own benefit. At the time I was born and for years after there was no such thing as Amnesty International; Habitat for Humanity did not exist. For many years of my life the diversity of background we see today in entertainment and sports and politics was impossible and Title IX was not even an idea.

We continue, of course, to have huge problems in the environment, in wars that devastate populations, in continued genocides and new diseases, in natural disasters, in instances of greed and self-interest that cause devastation to large populations, in continued violence. Lehr's challenge to us still exists.

Today is a day to celebrate your successes and your accomplishments so far at ONU. It is also a day to commit to building your families, communities, towns, states, nations, world. The future is you. Transform it.

* The information on the Ciceronian Society, the Franklin and Philomathonean (sometimes Philmathean) Societies is from the remembrances of Sarah Lehr Kennedy, published in her book, **H.S. Lehr and His School**, the Ada Herald, 1938, pp. 91-101. Read this account for further information.