

Town Hall Meeting, 31 March 2015

Don Draper, the quintessential Madison Avenue advertising executive in the TV series *Madmen*, has a line that ends up in all of the lists of top Don Draper quotes: “Change is neither good nor bad, it simply is.” He goes on, “It can be greeted with terror or joy. A tantrum that says, ‘I want it the way it was,’ or a dance that says, ‘Look. It’s something new.’” For Draper, change is a “blank slate.” For people living through change (and for people who don’t drink old-fashioned before 10 am), it is much harder to take that philosophical view. This has been a year of profound change here at OLLI. We have all had moments of terror, of wanting things the way they have always been, but I hope will take these inevitable opportunities to greet change with high hopes and expectations. The change that hits closest is Susan Poole’s retirement. This is Susan’s last day as the director for the College for Seniors. Let’s give Susan a round of applause as we welcome her to her new role as an OLLI participant. We certainly know that we will not replace Susan, but we are looking earnestly for someone who brings the same warmth and pride to the role and for someone who can help us discover what we need to do next to nurture the program’s success. I will be joined on the search committee by Maryann Jones, Judy LaMee, Jim Lenburg, Debra Liles, and Luis Uranga. The university has had many qualified applicants for recent postings, and we know that someone out there will want to be part of this very special program and will bring a new set of talents and perspectives to the work we do.

Kali Lightfoot retired as director for the OLLI National Resource Center; while that may not have touched the daily life of OLLI at UNC Asheville, it certainly led to possible new directions for the national organization as a whole, a different way for organizations like ours to share resources and learn from one another. Kali has visited us twice in the past couple of years, first to help us celebrate our 25th anniversary as a program and our 10th year in this building and then in her last appearance as “OLLI Mama” to participate in the 2014 Southern Regional Lifelong Learning Meeting. Sometimes that meeting at the end of July seems a very long time ago, and because of the pace of work around here, we had a lovely party to celebrate and moved along. But to host 150 people and coordinate 24 talks, while highlighting Asheville’s food trucks, moonshine, and bluegrass music, is no mean feat. I was particularly proud to have had so many OLLI staff and members collaborating to give talks about the programs that make us unique, including “Men’s Wisdom Works” and Appalachian Studies, life transitions, and civic engagement, and to highlight our pursuit of best practices in diversity and inclusion, assistive listening technology, faculty support, finance, curriculum development, branding, strategic and annual planning, curriculum development and the use of Google docs, faculty support, finance, and strategic and annual planning. The meeting gave us the opportunity to shine and for us and others to recognize that we are a truly extraordinary place. The National Resource Center has moved from the University of Southern Maine to Northwestern University in Chicago, an institution that is financially stable and centrally located. The new director, Steve Thaxton, will bring a new perspective to the work. And it is telling that, with the guidance of our friends at the Osher Foundation, he has made OLLI at UNC Asheville one of his first stops as he

visits around the country. He will be coming to visit us in a couple of weeks (and I am pretty sure it is not just because I promised him lunch at 12 Bones).

Chancellor Anne Ponder retired; her connection to our organization was clear and deep. We look forward to welcoming Chancellor Mary Grant and her husband Jim Canavan when their schedules permit. And I hope we will all send condolences to Chancellor Grant who lost her mother last week. These kinds of life events that we must all face help to put into perspective our organizational changes, and I hope remind us that attendance here at OLLI, where we share so richly in what makes us human, is a privilege and a lifeline.

We live in a time of great change for higher education, and particularly for the funding of higher education in North Carolina. Between now and the end of the fiscal year on June 30, all state agencies must cope with a 1 ½% “recission” of funds as the result of a shortfall in state tax revenues. UNC Asheville has already undergone cut after cut, a process that hurts particularly at a small institution where we have already eliminated any “unnecessary” positions and where faculty are already teaching four courses every term. When I arrived, about 30% of the NC Center for Creative Retirement’s budget came from the state. Before I arrived there was funding for a director and an assistant director, along with an IT staff person and someone to run retiree services for the university. We are now down to funding for one salary, mine. For the first time this year we will pay an “auxiliary administration fee” of 7% of our expenses. In our case that will amount to about \$36,000 for 2015-16. We are confident that this decision was not taken

lightly, and we were involved in respectful conversations, but we recognize that the university has to make hard decisions about where to cut and where to raise funds and fees. We have also heard that the university has been asked to reassess capacity in a variety of areas, including parking. We may be required to raise our parking fees to bring them more in line with the fees paid by other users on campus. We don't have definitive numbers on this, but we will advocate forcefully for the needs of our members. And my conversations with John Pierce, the university CFO has led me to think that we may have plenty of room for negotiation. While we may be asked to contribute to the campus in new ways, we must remember that we derive great benefits from being part of UNC Asheville. We continue to receive utilities, housekeeping, security, and IT support at no additional cost to us. Moreover, because we have always been good planners, people who recognize the inevitability of change, a subcommittee of the OLLI finance committee has been thinking and planning for self-sufficiency for the organization in the event that we have to cover all of our expenses.

While the university has suffered financial cutbacks, we feel more closely aligned than ever with our colleagues on the main campus, and we have been working very hard to contribute to the life of the campus. For years Howard Jaslow has created the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math lecture series that brings together UNC Asheville faculty members and students, OLLI members, and community experts to share information and ideas about new developments in these fields. Just today I was in a meeting with someone from the Health and Wellness department on campus who noted this as one of many great learning opportunities on campus. Howard has also been our

liaison with the Undergraduate Research program and at the end of every term organizes OLLI members to be moderators for undergraduate research presentations. Jim Lenburg and Dick Murray have worked tenaciously to forge a connection with the Career Center to connect our members to students who are beginning their search for meaningful and sustaining work. We have also forged a relationship with the athletics department to connect OLLI members with student athletes who can benefit from wise guidance through a time of transition from college to graduate school or career. Just last Friday, Bill O'Connell from our Health Education Series committee made it possible for students working with UNC Asheville psychology professor Patrick Foo to talk about their undergraduate research. As a result, in the atrium there was a kind of buzz and glow that comes from students sharing their work with OLLI members who are genuinely interested. In more practical terms, we continue to receive the support of the UNC Asheville facilities and maintenance crews for everything from routine housekeeping to extraordinary services like the recent replacement of all lighting or upgrades to our wireless network, to advice on projects like new door openers or solar shades.

Finally, as we develop our own Annual Campaign in a more systematic way and begin to consider other fund-raising strategies, we have been honored to work with Julie Heinitsh and many other talented people from the Advancement Office to learn best practices in advancement while we put our own stamp on everything we do. Julie is here today with some information about planned giving. Also, we will begin our spring annual fund campaign around the third week in April. Chuck Fink and Cindy Berryman-

Fink have written a gracious letter talking about why they donate to OLLI, and I thank them and everyone who makes contributions of time, talent, and treasure to OLLI. The cost of doing business on campus continues to grow, and it will continue to grow for us as well, but we have firm and respectful relationships with the rest of the campus, and those will stand us in good stead. Just as an aside, I had the opportunity to attend the reception for Emmanuel Ax that Chancellor Grant hosted as one of the first of her public events at the Pisgah House. Chancellor Grant had very clear evidence of the ways that OLLI ties the community to great organizations like the Asheville Symphony Orchestra. And I was only slightly surprised that I never even got to see Emmanuel Ax as so many OLLI members stopped me to talk about registration.

We indeed undertook a change in our registration system this winter in response to anticipated bad weather. We had over 1030 people sign up to have their names placed in a random registration. We devised our system rather quickly and I want to offer special thanks to staff for rising to the challenge of the “make it work moment.” We assigned random numbers to each form and then processed them in that numeric order. In the end only 20 people did not get anything they wanted. We have had 70 people drop, with about 60% of those people dropping because they did not get their desired courses or the number of courses they desired. The rest dropped because they found they could not attend for a variety of reasons. We still have seats in 60% of the courses we run. This distribution is about what we find for any term. Moreover, despite all of those drops, we still have 1010 participants registered for courses, in contrast to XXX last year.

Ann Cadle and Jessika Bond were challenged because we had not had time to train our volunteers taking forms. We found more errors than usual that had to be managed before we began data entry. We had about three courses that had very long waiting lists and a number of smaller courses with limited enrollments that also had significant wait lists. A number of courses that had to be canceled because of a challenge faced by the instructors. Ann and Jessika managed all of these with good humor and good grace and the help of lots of volunteers. We find these kinds of patterns in any term, and the courses that “went big” were the courses we anticipated would do so before the beginning of the term. I had a number of people who thanked me for conducting the random registration. I had more than one person who said she wouldn’t come otherwise because standing in line, especially with people who might have more than one form was “not fair.” I had a number of people who urged a more sophisticated approach to randomization, allowing for everyone to have a first choice. We simply did not have the time to do more than we did. I suspect that I heard less from the people who were unhappy about not having control by standing in line because they saw clearly that the icy weather on February 24 would have led to a very dangerous set of circumstances if people have chosen to brave the weather.

We are honing in on the final decision for an online registration system. It has been challenging in part because there is no one system that seems to “do it all” and no one system that current users recommend without reservations. Let me say that I see my biggest challenge as managing expectations. This system will not create one more seat

in *Appalachian Sampler* or *The Meaning of Life*. Someone will be disadvantaged, whether we use the option of going first-come, first-served (and the servers these days do not easily crash, although they do) which will allow participants to know more or less right away whether they are in a course or out or whether we use a random distribution system which might allow us to do sophisticated things like allow priority registration. We will craft ways for working with people who are not comfortable with computers, but we will certainly have people who will be challenged by a system that is not as hands-on as our current system. We are only seriously considering systems that will allow us to run a random (and therefore delayed) registration and a first-come, first served registration so that we will have options. We are told that we will have the option to pull some courses for randomization (those we anticipate would be “best sellers”). We will be moving to online not because it offers everyone what they want when they want it (it won't) but because it will free us from the labor of processing forms and refund checks. Members will be responsible for those tasks themselves. It will allow instructors to have access to their class lists in real time. It will allow people to enroll themselves on wait lists and to monitor where they are on the wait list. It will allow you to stay at home and participate at whatever hour we set as the opening bell. It will free our staff to be more innovative and to spend more time on bigger picture issues and problem solving in a collaborative environment that gets everyone to the table as decisions are being made.

While we look to internal changes, we are also looking at new ways to change our relationship to the rest of the community of Asheville. Our inclusion committee has

become a standing committee here at OLLI and after less than a year in operation, as you heard earlier, they have managed to make meaningful relationships in the community and also to offer learning opportunities for OLLI members. This is a case where the change to an OLLI that pursues opportunities to reach out to and learn from the many communities in western North Carolina is definitely a change that makes me want to dance with joy and say “Hey, this is something new.”

Finally, every Town Hall introduces us to a changing of the guard, new leadership at the helm of OLLI. Jim Lenburg will be rotating off the steering council, but I want him to know that his number is still on my speed dial, and I hope he will continue to be a willing ear and a calming voice. Jim, my friend, it has been a great honor and pleasure to work with someone who reminded us that we should always have fun in what we do. Round of applause for Jim. And thanks so much to Judy LaMee for her incredible dedication as steering council chair. She has taken a lead in important events like our 25th Anniversary celebration and in our Southern Regional Lifelong Learning meeting and has been a leader in the task force on giving. But above everything, Judy has been a champion for our being a welcoming community with a strong sense of core values. She was the advocate for our recent “Envision OLLI” retreat which allowed us to dream big about the OLLI of 2025, and we are stronger for it. I would like to offer a round of applause for Judy. And I look forward to working with Patrick Chitwood who brings his expertise from the world of business and the perspective of a psychologist and I also learned recently is a lover of Herman Melville and Cormac McCarthy. Patrick, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Don Draper says “Change is neither good or bad. It simply is.” And I think that we should dance in celebration of change even when it means uncertainty and the loss of what has been. We are a lifelong learning organization and great organizations are organizations that learn as the result of change. The many changes we are undergoing are times to mourn what has been but to re-think why things are the way they are and to assess whether or not our practice fits our current reality. In the same conversation, Don advises “If you don’t like what’s being said, change the conversation.” I think that what do here every day through lifelong learning, life transitions and civic engagement programs is to change the conversation about aging and about what is possible in life’s second half. So, let’s dance to what’s new.