

Report on Big Ten Retirees Association Conference

University of Nebraska, August 5-7, 2016

Submitted by Patricia Butler

The weekend began with a delicious dinner at the new Van Brunt Visitors Center. After dinner the Chancellor, Ronnie Green spoke about UNL and its many programs and the value of UNL to the state and nation. He and his daughter sang the UNL school song.

After the Chancellor's song, the actual program began with a presentation by UNL Professor Emeritus Richard A. Dienstbier-: Part I or "Building Resistance to Stress and Aging: The Toughness Model." Prof. Dienstbier (Dick) recently completed a book of the same title. His presentation was Friday evening, and he continued it at the program on Saturday morning.

His beginning summary was:

- Stress and aging degrade our brains and rob us of mental capacities.
- Activities that toughen us are mental enrichment, physical exercise, meditation, and giving and receiving affection.
- Toughening activities enhance brain neurochemistry and build brain structures by turning genes on and off, sometimes the effect is temporary but sometimes it lasts for a lifetime.
- Mental/psychological toughness results.

He discussed what is happening in the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex and neurotransmitters and neurotrophins. With high levels of stress, either acute or chronic, cortisol is elevated and it will affect the neurotrophin and result in the shrinking of the hippocampi and prefrontal cortex and shrink our ability to remember and think.

Interestingly he reiterated Victor Strecher's (Professor – at UM, who spoke with Big Ten retirees here at UM when we hosted the conference in 2013) concept that "to have a long and dementia-free life, having a real purpose in our retirement years leads to " better lifestyle choices". He listed Strecher's five "choices":

- Sleep
- Cultivate presence or mindfulness
- Be physically active
- Cultivate creativity
- Eat well (e.g., Mediterranean diet)

Part of “toughness” comes from cognitive enrichment. Dr. Dienstbier suggested that “Big Ten Cognitive Enrichment activities could be:

1. A lecture: local expert on enrichment and mental maintenance or on brain function.
2. Notices and partnerships: OLLI’s meetings, availability of free courses at universities, workshops and courses elsewhere.
3. Coffees, groups and workshops
4. Lobbying – to make university courses freely available.

Research on cognitive enrichment has demonstrated that learning a second language is the most effective way to keep the brain functioning at a very high level.

Another part of “toughness” is exercise: He proposed that Big Ten Exercise promotion might be:

1. Lecture from a local expert
2. Announcements: a library of opportunities in the community and notification to members
3. Groups: walking, etc
4. Lobbying: free access to exercise facilities including pools, notification to members.

The third part of “toughness” is Mindful Meditation. Tai chi has been demonstrated to actually stimulate the growth of gray and white matter in the brain and enhance cognitive performance. Meditation caused genetic activation or deactivation and spawns physiological toughness. Dick’s Big Ten Meditation promotion includes:

- Lecture on why it is useful (motivation)
- Sessions with local meditation leaders
- Stress reduction workshops that include meditation
- Stimulating meditation interest groups
- Developing a course (OLLI) or comparable.

His summary was -

- We get smarter from mental enrichment, from physical exercise, from meditation and from giving and receiving affection.
- All those toughening activities enhance our neurotransmitters and the neurotrophins that cause our brains to grow – especially the hippocampi and the prefrontal cortex.

Kim Barrett presented a lecture on Exercise after a short break at which huge, icing encrusted cinnamon rolls were available. Interestingly nothing was presented about eating

and the foods that should be eaten for brain health. The sugar and taste sure made me feel good!

Her exercise prescription was:

- 30 min/day of moderate exercise and or 150 min per week for health
- 30 min/week for weight loss or maintenance
- Muscular strengthening 2 times/week
- Stress exercises for balance, flexibility, mobility and relaxation.

The group did chair exercises and balance exercises during the session. Kim also mentioned the National Senior Fitness Programs and Silver Sneakers.

Purdue has the Silver Sneakers exercise program and retirees can go to the wellness and fitness centers and Curves for a reduced price.

OSU has a wellness group and a walking group.

The Cognitive Enrichment presentation was by Julie Boron. She mentioned the research on learning a second language. The act of repeating the same activity, such as doing crossword puzzles daily, does not appear to be very helpful for enrichment. One needs a variety in the activities that stimulate the brain. Her prescription for successful aging is:

- Relationships are everything
- Keep learning
- Focus on the process
- Be resilient and engage in life
- Face pressure head-on
- Be a problem solver
- Reinvent yourself regularly
- Exercise matters
- Be positive
- Never underestimate yourself.

Slides for her presentation are available on the U Nebraska website.

The last presentation was by Jane Williams on Mindfulness. She started with an exercise of asking attendees to take a bite of half a piece of chocolate candy (on the table). Then she

had us take a small bite of what was left and to let it melt in our mouths, move it with our tongue, savor it, smell it, and eventually swallow it. That got our attention.

Mindfulness lowers blood pressure, increases oxygen intake, increases carbon dioxide exhalation, decreases inflammation and decreases stress, among other things. She had us belly breath, do a walking exercise, discuss eating mindfully and paying attention to activities throughout the day. Her last exercise was to give us a page from the new coloring books and a Ziploc of crayons. It was a very mindful session.

Before lunch we had a nice walk across campus, through the Adele Coryell Hall Learning Commons (Library) to the newly renovated UNL stadium. After a tour by a very enthusiastic former UNL linebacker, we had lunch in the Skyline Center on the top floor over the box seats at the end zone. Beautiful stadium with all that RED! Great lunch (did I mention that we were well fed), brownie for dessert!

We were whisked by bus to the recently renovated Innovation Food Processing center. It was an interesting tour with a knowledgeable speaker. They help people and companies convert recipes from small batches to large batches, have food processing for new products and most interestingly have a hiperbaric (HPP) machine. Google's definition:

High Pressure Processing is a nonthermal, cold processing technique in which the food in its final flexible packaging is subjected to high levels of hydrostatic pressure, inactivating its microorganisms, extending the shelf life and guaranteeing the food safety of the product.

We learned that all packaged Hormel products use this process.

Then on to the Greenhouse Innovation Center where we heard an interesting talk, the work done there which tests plants and nutrients. The center was very automated and computerized for their research.

Next we made a short visit to the UNL State Museum and saw a fantastic display of the skeletons of elephants and mastodons. They have found mastodon bones in all but three counties in Nebraska.

After a short tour of Lincoln, NE, we stopped at the hotel to change and then we were off to dinner. Dinner was in the upstairs lobby of the International Quilt Center. A donation of 1,000 quilts was made along with part of the money for the Center. UNL provided most of the rest of the money. The Center has since had an addition to house the now 4,000 quilts from all over the world. We were able to tour the museum before another delicious meal in the "eye of the needle" shaped lobby. Prior to dinner we heard presentations from two

Interim Senior Vice Chancellor's – one from Academic Affairs and the other from the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. The latter was most interesting in his discussion of the Ogallala Aquifer that is underneath most of Nebraska and underlies parts of eight states. After dinner we were serenaded by UNL Opera & Music Theatre Students.

Sunday we heard institutional reports from each university. Nebraska distributed a short survey which attendees completed, and it was helpful on specific points. Following is a short summary of survey responses from representatives in attendance:

Illinois: Dues \$41 and spouse pays additional \$41 (2010 paying) – part of dues goes to state. 5 interest groups with communications, legislative and benefits most active. Has an OLLI group but no joint programs. 100 active members. 2 meetings/yr.

Indiana: Dues \$15, couple \$20 (350 paying). Retirees assisted with United Way and donations total of \$176,333. Have 2 lunches/ -1 dinner and 8 newsletters, and 8 meetings/yr. They got their bylaws to one page. 1st newsletter goes to everyone. They are unable to contact people before they retire.

Iowa: 1st year free, then \$10 per person/\$25 for 3 years;(259 households, 607). 4 interest groups. Active senior college so OLLI is gone. Created a student scholarship, got \$5,000, which board matched, and now have a \$10,000 challenge. Tours (one of athletic complex with free lunch – 150 attended). Photo contest yearly. Can opt out of receiving 10 newsletters via email, (only about 25 get printed newsletters).

MSU: No dues; 5,000 members, 250 active. 9 meetings, 7 newsletters – to 900 retirees. 19 interest groups, US military history, book club, history book club and quilting and knitting groups. They have ad information in newsletter. Created an endowed scholarship for descendents of retirees \$2,500 – worked with admissions office, got 30 applicants, worked down to 5, then selected. **They get a monthly download of retirees and send out a letter and their brochure each year.**

Minnesota: Dues, 1st year \$10, then \$25/\$35 for couples. 258 singles, 193 couples. 451 households for 644 total; active 200. 8 newsletters sent via mail and electronic. 2 interest groups - photo and book club. May gala and meetings 11:30 – 1:00 and then workshops 1:30-2:30. Decided they want to stay the same size. They are working on relationship with university. All volunteer, no U personnel. U put in \$40,000 for grants for retiree faculty. There is a group that offers support when someone dies, support new widow/widower, needs and changes in housing and coaching. Have an operating manual online.

Nebraska: Emeriti organization only. 1st year free; \$10 per year, 3 years \$25 and \$200 life – being phased out (636), active 200. 2 newsletters/ year, electronic. 6 meetings per year. Interest groups, international affairs and politics

Northwestern: Emeriti only. No dues; 150members, 9 meetings with 40 held at lunch or dinner for \$15. Arts group theater/oral history and writing group. They are in transition, mainly social, cultural – retiring faculty – how are you going to do in retirement in 10 years?

OSU: \$20, life \$230, considering \$25 and \$500; dues paying 3,369. Dues will become donations when under alumni. 12 mailed newsletters and on website. 11 interest groups. 48 page operating manual.

Penn State: \$15/3 years; dues paying 900, active 250. 6 meetings per year; **PSU has a new retiree lunch 1 X per year and they go there to actively recruit.** Assistance fund for retiree having trouble with health insurance, they will pay up to \$2,000 to be paid back.

Purdue: No dues, 4900 members, 450 active. 12 newsletters/ year, mainly email. 12 meetings /year, lunch. 10 committees. Purposeful Living in Retirement Conference (175). Letter re: how Medicare handles hospital costs for observation vs admission – high bills if observation. **University provides an annual retirement luncheon, they are there and pass out postcards. Have access to emails and communicate – help with United Way!**

Rutgers: No dues – they are still organizing. They have an ex officio representative from the Alumni Association and the Foundation and HR on their executive committee. The Rutgers representative had to fly out and we could not get too much information.

Wisconsin: dues \$20 or 6 years for \$100, lifetime \$300, out of area membership at half price. Dues paying 1,131, 500 active. 10 newsletter/year, 1/2 mailed, ½ electronically. 4 meetings, 9 interest groups.