Transforming Minds, Landscapes, and Communities

The essay that appeared as the Spring 2010 “Prelude” was edited and reduced due to space limitations in the printed magazine. Professor Husic’s complete essay appears here.

Do you have a story that you’d like to share about what Moravian means to you? Please send your story (750 words or less) to vbingham@moravian.edu; essays may be used in future issues of the magazine and/or the InCommon newsletter.

By Diane Husic, chair and professor of biological sciences and president of the Council on Undergraduate Research

For the past several months, the Moravian College community has been challenged by President Thomforde to envision the future of the College. As an institution, we want to remain viable and relevant in an environment now characterized by changing demographics and economic uncertainty. As the dialogue has us looking to the future, I began to reflect on what I find unique and exciting about the College—the strong foundation upon which the institution’s future can be built.

I came to Moravian in 2004 after many years at another institution, and immediately found it to be a welcoming and supportive community that has allowed me to experiment in my teaching and take new directions in my scholarship. I have also had the opportunity to participate in various national projects in which I interact with faculty and administrators from many other institutions and routinely share ideas and models. Many of these colleagues have commented on the wonderful things that are happening at Moravian and the rich set of resources and opportunities that they see at our doorstep. Below are some of my reflections.

The roots of the College go back to 1742. Not many colleges can claim that depth of history and the associated traditions. Stop to think for a moment about all that has happened in the building of this nation since that time.

Our College website reflects on this historical foundation: The College traces its founding to 1742 by followers of John Amos Comenius, the seventeenth-century Moravian bishop whose humanistic ideals helped to shape modern education. Those ideals—that learning should be
available to all, that teaching should be in accord with human nature, and that education should be applied to practical uses—are much in evidence at Moravian.

New curricular directions in peace and justice, our humanist emphasis in our health profession programs, and a strong track record of community service are just a few of modern expressions of this ideal that has been the College vision for almost 270 years. But I also see among our students and faculty members a growing sense of caring, not just for humans, but for the larger ecological community of which we are a part. A part of the Moravian Mission Statement says “this education prepares men and women for advanced study and continuous learning, individual achievement, and leadership and service for the common good.”

I see a growing belief that stewardship of our natural resources and our environment is important for the common good both now and for future generations.

Besides having this unique history, are there ways that we continue to demonstrate our uniqueness, our fulfillment of the mission, and innovations in education? Most likely because of my role as president of the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR), one of the first things that come to my mind is our strong programs of undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative activity. Moravian has run an Honors Program for fifty years! We celebrate student work in poster sessions for the Honors Program, at student Scholars’ Day, and at student recitals and art shows. These programs and events are not necessarily unique, but the nature of our student work and its quality is something to note.

Our students are being invited to present their work at the capitols in Harrisburg and Washington, D.C. Their proposals are accepted for presentation at regional and national conferences. We have a $1.5 million endowment to support this enterprise—something that my colleagues at other institutions envy. We host the only undergraduate conference on medieval studies in the country, a concept dreamed up by two of our faculty members, Professors John Black and Sandy Bardsley. This event has grown in size and recognition in a very short time and Moravian faculty members will share this model at CUR’s national conference in June.

This past year, Cecilia Fox, associate professor of biology and director of the Moravian neuroscience program, proposed a chapter of the Society for Neuroscience in the Lehigh Valley; it was approved. This is the only chapter in the country to focus on undergraduate research. An annual undergraduate conference in philosophy also was launched at Moravian this spring. And,
of course, the scholarship and creativity of our students is showcased each year during the beautiful Vespers services. The list of examples that I could highlight is much longer, but I think you get the point.

Worth mentioning (given our mission to serve the common good) is just how much of this undergraduate research has strong community relevance and value. There are many examples from our psychology and education departments in which students analyze situations in regional schools and provide valuable recommendations for improvement to educational programs and educators. Through Moravian’s Student Affairs and Leadership Center, countless ongoing service-learning projects and community-based research projects not only provide high-impact experiential learning opportunities for our students, but also important outcomes for the larger community. I am most familiar with the examples from the natural science divisions, in which students work with non-profits to study the impact of watershed restoration initiatives, research information about the Mid-Atlantic Highlands Critical Treasures, or try to identify why asthma rates in some local school districts are many times those of the national average. Having students engaged in such community-based projects is becoming commonplace at many institutions, but the specific projects that Moravian students are engaged with are important to this region and help to develop a strong sense of place and appreciation for our local social environment.

One of the projects with which we are deeply involved is particularly unique. As of 2009, 1,596 sites have been placed on the National Priorities List under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (the Superfund sites); of them, only 322 have been cleaned up and de-listed. However, only one site has been converted to a wildlife refuge and nature center and deeply involves undergraduates and faculty from a small private liberal arts college in the restoration and conservation research. This is the Lehigh Gap Nature Center (LGNC, see www.lgnc.org) project involving the Palmerton Zinc Superfund site, which you probably have read about in other College publications. The efforts at this site, including ones involving Moravian students, have received state and national attention. I was recently asked to write a case study about the partnership between the College and LGNC for a forthcoming national publication on research that can be truly transformational.
It may seem a bit zappy to some, but I find it quite fitting that members of the Moravian College community are once again trekking along the Lehigh River up to the gap to engage in projects of significant value. Some of the earliest Moravian missionaries went through the same gap in the 1740s, and their travels and experiences are documented in the Moravian Archives. And by coincidence, some of the leading scientists who study the detrimental impacts of zinc on plants are at the Comenius University in Slovakia! The collaboration between the College and the Lehigh Gap Nature Center was destined to happen.

The connections between the College, the Moravian community, and history of the region are many—from the newest collaborative HILL project, to our rich music traditions, to the deep value we place on a sense of community. The College and Reeves library are sponsors of the Bethlehem Digital History Project, which I recently learned was honored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) as one of the “best online resources for education in the humanities.”

Frank Kuserk, professor of biological sciences and director of environmental studies, can tell you much about important individuals, many of them scientists, who had ties to Moravian College or Seminary either as students or as faculty members. He often relays stories of Lewis David de Schweinitz [b. 1780], a great botanist and considered by some the Father of North American Mycology, whose collections are now housed in the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. Another de Schweinitz, Karl, received an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from Moravian College, was an advocate for public welfare, and worked for the development of standards for administration of social work programs. There are many other stories linking our current academic programs to historical figures that went on to great prominence.

The College campus is located not only in historic Bethlehem, but also in the heart of the region that was the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution in this country. The coal that first floated down the Lehigh River and its canals was then shipped by rail to fuel the steel mills and the industrial revolution. Zinc headed up to Palmerton from the Hellertown region to be smelted. Only remnants of the canals, rail lines, smelters, and steel mills remain, but the river directly

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1 See the Bethlehem Digital History Project homepage: [http://bdhp.moravian.edu/about/about.html](http://bdhp.moravian.edu/about/about.html); accessed 10/3/09/

connects us to this history. Instead of simply using texts to tell the story, we can take our classes outdoors or on a short drive to see these places.

The world now realizes that there were unintended consequences of the Industrial Revolution. We know, for instance, that not only did that revolution lead to this country’s rise to power internationally, but also caused much landscape disturbance and pollution. The discovery of coal in this region in the mid-1800s marks the beginning of our country’s contribution of fossil fuel, and is the reason that Pennsylvania is one of the world’s largest contributors of greenhouse gases.

But how is this connected to Moravian College? Our faculty members and students are involved in revitalization of some of the disturbed landscapes, as noted above. As the College develops a sense of increased sustainability, we are taking lessons learned and adjusting how we think and operate to become better stewards of our natural resources. In Moravian educational tradition, can we not put the lessons of the liberal arts to practice in working to address the regional and national issues of this new era? Might we play a part in the development of some new revolution that will replace the Industrial Revolution era and help determine the future of the planet?

This past October, Moravian College was selected to be an official civil society observer for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. We were one of only six private, liberal arts or predominantly undergraduate institutions included from this country (along with the College of the Atlantic, Hobart and William Smith, Ithaca College, Lewis and Clark, and Pomona). We quickly assembled a delegation of faculty members, students, alumni and friends of the college (21 in all) to attend the COP 15 event in Copenhagen in December. We witnessed international negotiations between 185 member nations; heard loud and clear the messages of the growing climate justice movement; met Nobel Prize (peace and science) winners; and saw countless examples of extremely moving artists’ responses to concerns about a changing environment and climate. This was a liberal arts education at its best!

In February, a standing-room-only crowd in Foy Auditorium had the opportunity to experience an incredible mixed media presentation by Grammy Award-winner Kathy Mattea. Her Coal Project focuses on the social justice issues associated with coal mining in the Appalachian Mountains. Every once in awhile a special event happens that can be inspirational
or even life-changing for our students and the larger community. Kathy’s messages about nonviolent communication (giving a voice to those who aren’t often heard), passion for the mountains and the people who live there, and her voice touched a lot of people.

All of these examples help illustrate what makes Moravian College unique. At a time when many public schools are measured by productivity (i.e., how many students one faculty member can teach, regardless of the quality of that teaching), Moravian College has focused on the value of faculty member-student interactions that lead to deep, engaged learning—avoiding, at least for now, the bean counting that pits departments against each other and diminishes the educational quality offered to students. We are experimenting with team-teaching and innovative course themes for our Learning-in-Common curriculum. We speak with pride about the humanistic approach to learning that characterizes programs for our pre-med students, continuing in the Comenian tradition. Our nursing faculty members excel in innovation, exposing students to a humanistic and global approach to learning through a unique curriculum and collaborative partnerships in Central America and Africa. The list goes on and on.

The Comenius Medal, one of UNESCO’s (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) most prestigious awards is “designed to reward outstanding achievements in the fields of educational research and innovation and exceptional examples of personal devotion to education and the ideals of UNESCO demonstrated throughout an important part of one’s life.”3 If UNESCO knew about what was happening at Moravian College, we surely would be a contender for its Comenius Medal.

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