

Report on Big Ten Retirees Association Conference
University of Nebraska –Lincoln
August 5-7, 2016

The weekend began with a delicious dinner at the new Van Brunt Visitors Center, gateway to the downtown campus. Following dinner, UNL Chancellor **Ronnie Green** reviewed several university programs and the contributions of the university to the state and nation. An accomplished singer, he closed his remarks with a special treat as he and his daughter, a UNL student, entertained the group with *There is no place like Nebraska*, a traditional school song heard at athletic and other special events.

The remainder of the evening was a presentation by **Richard Dienstbier**, UNL Emeritus Professor of Psychology, entitled “Building Resistance to Stress and Aging: The Toughness Model” based on his recently published book. Themes developed by Dienstbier would be featured in sessions throughout the weekend.

The core of his argument is:

- Stress and aging degrade the brain and mental capacity.
- Activities that check mental decline are mental enrichment, physical exercise, meditation, and giving and receiving affection.
- Such activities build brain structures by turning genes on and off, sometimes temporary but sometimes for a lifetime.
- Mental and psychological toughness is the result.

According to Dienstbier “toughness” comes from cognitive enrichment. To bolster it, he suggested conference representatives might push some of the following activities among their retiree organizations.

1. Lectures on both familiar and not so familiar topics.
2. Courses and workshops offered by educational institutions and organizations such as OLLI.
3. Discussion, reading, and library groups.
4. Group activities: stretching, walking, and hiking.
5. Second language study groups
6. Mindful meditation and stress reduction activities such as Tai Chi.

Some retiree organization are currently offering such programs

Saturday morning was giving over to three presentations.

Kim Barrett, Assistant Director of Wellness Services and Fitness Programs at UNL, shared first, stressing the importance of exercise and offering the following exercise program:

- Thirty minutes per day of moderate exercise and/or 150 minutes per week.
- Thirty minutes per week for weight maintenance or loss
- Muscular strengthening two times per week
- Stress exercises for balance, flexibility, mobility, and relaxation several times a week.

Kim put the group through its paces with some chair and balance exercises.

At a second session, **Julie Boron, Associate Professor of Gerontology at the University of Nebraska at Omaha**, prescribed the following for successful aging.

- 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.

She observed that a variety of different mental activities are necessary to stimulate the brain. Repeating the same activity, such as doing crossword puzzles everyday, may not be very helpful.

A third session by **Jane Williams** dealt with mindfulness. She began by asking each participant to take a chocolate candy from the table and eat half of it. She then instructed all to eat the rest, letting it melt in their mouths, and finally swallowing it.

This kind of activity that focuses one's attention has positive health consequences like lowering blood pressure, increasing oxygen intake, decreasing inflammation and stress.

On the way to lunch at Memorial Stadium, a location that becomes the third largest population concentration, behind Lincoln and Omaha, on selected Saturdays in the fall, the group visited the Adele Coryell Hall Learning Commons in UNL's main library on the downtown campus. Lunch was in the Skyline Center on the top floor overlooking the football field below. Gorgeous view and all that red.

After lunch, the group had an opportunity to see other campus sites including the recently renovated Innovation Food Processing Center, the Greenhouse Innovation Center, and the State Museum of Natural History with prehistoric skeletal remains found in all but three counties in Nebraska.

Dinner was in the upstairs lobby of the International Quilt Center. The Center houses 4,000 quilts from all over the world. A tour of the Center and presentations by Director of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Dean of the College of Health and Human Sciences at UNL shared some of what is happening on campus preceded dinner. Following the group treated to operatic performances by three students in the Glenn Korff School, part of College of Performing Arts at UNL.

Sunday morning provided an opportunity for the representatives from each university to share information and happenings on their campuses.

The conference adjourned at noon.