

# NORTH HARRIS COUNTY COLLEGE UNITED FACULTY

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THE ADVOCATE

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Edited by Steve Davis

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## I WILL BE HEARD

"I love this union cause! I hold it more dear than my family or my life. I am willing to devote to it all that I am or hope for in this world."

William H. Sylvis  
National Labor Union, 1866

Okay, let's talk. This essay is in the nature of an open letter to Sandra Lloyd of Tomball College and to any other interested party. It has evolved from the fall 1991 exchange of letters, discussing the faculty-staff union, between Sandy and myself. I will, in particular, be referring to and quoting from her note dated November 25, 1991.

I am especially interested in Sandy's stated perception of me as being among the "reasonable, rational educators" and the "open, tolerant and rational" people generally; and her contrasting perception of the faculty-staff union, for which I am treasurer, as "overly emotional and unnecessarily defensive and acrimonious," with a resulting effect "that alienates so many other possible supporters." Her question in this regard--which I will take as my point of departure, or theme--was thus stated: "What is the key to this apparent dichotomy?"

My general answer is this: I hope I am not less than Sandy's perception, but I know the union is so much more. Therefore, there is no dichotomy.

The faculty-staff union has attracted members from North Harris College, Kingwood College, and the District Office. Its faculty members range the spectrum from the Social and Behavioral Sciences to the Natural Sciences; from Fine Arts and Communications/Language to Business Education and Applied Technology; from HPE to Counseling and Developmental Studies. Its staff members include notable representatives from custodial, police, food service, secretarial, and print areas. Among our numbers are current or former division heads,

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teacher excellence award winners, writing award winners, and staff excellence award winners. In short, here is outstanding variety and quality. Consequently, I would argue that ours is an overall membership portfolio of proven educational dedication and achievement rather than one of alleged "overly emotional, defensive, acrimonious, and/or alienating" character.

Furthermore, overall faculty-staff union activities have reflected the same variety and quality as the membership. Without rehashing all previously reported examples of union work, I will briefly refer to some that should stand out: teaching and job protection seminars for faculty; awards ceremonies for state educational leaders, most recently State Senator Carl Parker; private consultations for aggrieved faculty and staff; meetings with campus presidents, both Chancellors (former and current), and even College Board members (former and current) regarding compensation and other issues; garage sales for organizational projects; and involvement in College Board election campaigns, most recently on behalf of Mrs. Margaret Cox, a former North Harris College student and honors graduate. Walter Reuther, one of the principal founders of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in 1935, reportedly emphasized "the concept that labor must go forward with the community and not at the expense of the community." We have done that as a matter of record. Such reasoning and working together towards commendable goals, I suggest, do not reasonably equate with "overly emotional, defensive, acrimonious, and/or alienating" conduct. (Please understand also that we have been severely criticized by some colleagues for acting like reactionaries and wimps or, in other words, for not being "emotional, defensive, acrimonious, and/or alienating" enough! Damned if you do; damned if you don't!)

Overall faculty-staff union rhetoric has been no less responsible than union activities. Union members have respectfully and matter-of-factly expressed their concerns in various forums--administrative offices, faculty and College Board meetings, and this union newsletter. Here is free speech responsibly exercised--when allowed. You do remember how often in the past this most basic freedom has been brought into apparent question within the College District? A federal court case and a grievance hearing before the College Board are testimony to a free speech problem at the highest levels. To this day, neither the Chancellor nor the College Board will officially recognize or listen to this union as a "legitimate faculty and/or staff organization." And you do remember the anti-union "brouhaha" generated at Tomball College last fall? Especially symptomatic were the censorship talk directed at this newsletter and an anti-union epistle in which the writer humbled us all by citing, as a source, that entity of existential eloquence called Reader's Digest! Worse yet were the rumors, largely untrue and unrepresentative I hope, of verbal and even physical intimidation promised for anyone who dared show up, in person, to proselytize the cause of unionism at Tomball College. Free speech should be a two-way street. They want it; you want it--and we want it, too. I submit that those who challenge this basic truth--whether non-union faculty colleagues of union members or our administrators--are the ones clearly and consistently demonstrating "overly emotional, defensive, acrimonious, and/or alienating" tendencies.

Now, as regards the frequently critical and occasionally sarcastic tone of the union newsletter, some observations are in order. Funda-

mentally, this approach is covered by the free speech doctrine, which, by its fullest implications, would allow for a wide variety of views but also for a wide variety of ways of expressing those views. As I see it, the specific tactic of criticism, mainly applied to administration, is deemed appropriate by the union based on two major criteria. First is the assumption that authority figures are not immune to criticism. My perception is that the union does not subscribe to a "divine right" doctrine for administrators or to a semi-fascist attitude represented in such slogans as "My Administration--Right or Wrong!" and "NHMCCD--Love It or Leave It!" The simple reality of life is that administrators are not always right and the union is not always wrong. Second is the conviction that criticism is not automatically destructive and disrespectful. It can, and should, be constructive and respectful. The real art, then, is not in the mere expressing of criticism, however reasonably justified and necessary, but in making it efficacious. That art is our goal. We may not always hit the mark, but we deserve credit for the conscious attempt. And we most certainly merit recognition and credit for those occasions when union praise, gratitude, and cooperation have been accorded to administration.

The tactic of sarcasm is best justified by the agitator's rationale. While I will not express a personal preference for the agitator's mode, I do admit to using it infrequently, and I do claim at least a minimum understanding of it. Hey, I can be as sarcastic and hostile as the next person; just ask Theresa Phillips and Paul Beran, the most recent victims of the infamous Vogt "Memo Wars." For any real understanding or explaining of agitation, however, one must go to the "real thing"--for example, to that antebellum American hero, that great agitator and abolitionist himself, William Lloyd Garrison. In his initial Liberator editorial in 1831, Garrison wrote, "I am in earnest--I will not equivocate--I will not excuse--I will not retreat a single inch--AND I WILL BE HEARD." He was! On another occasion, he exclaimed, "My language is exactly such as suits me; it will displease many, I know--TO DISPLEASE THEM IS MY INTENTION." He did! At the very least, these two Garrison quotes reveal the essence of his reasoned philosophy of agitation: that complacency and/or accommodationism are usually inappropriate and people therefore need to be "stirred up;" and that this is best accomplished by telling people what they may not want to hear in ways they may not want to hear it. And all to make people THINK. What is wrong with that? What is "overly emotional, defensive, acrimonious, and/or alienating" to one can, within reason, be thought-provoking and efficacious to another.

In any case, for those particularly sensitive to excessive emotion and acrimony, here follows a brief sampling of our contentious labor-management past. A labor paper in 1866 lamented "the stranglehold of capital," while a labor convention in Baltimore declared it would "free the labor of this country from capitalistic slavery." Local 144 of the Cigarmakers' International employed the following rhetoric in 1875: "We recognize the solidarity of the whole working class to work harmoniously against their common enemy--the capitalists....United we are a power to be respected; divided we are the slaves of the capitalists." A Knights of Labor organizer declared "no mutuality of interests...[between] capital and labor," and a Nebraska paper even more emphatically referred to an "irrepressible conflict" being upon us. Bombastic were Kansan Mary E. Lease's bitter denunciation of



"government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street" and her blatant warning that "the blood-hounds of money" should "beware." Not ominous enough? Then consider these final bits of Sturm und Drang newspaper commentary: "The lover of his country will not yield sway to an arrogant, selfish, wealth-besotted oligarchy just because opposition or resistance may engender bitterness, strife, or even war." We "are approaching the temper of revolution."

None of these citations, incidentally, are from socialist, communist, or anarchist sources. The comments came from clearly frustrated and angry people who were, nevertheless, participants in the moderate, mainstream labor movement. Heck, even a Republican like Theodore Roosevelt could fluster about "predatory wealth" and "certain malefactors of great wealth" which could conceivably make a revolution "absolutely necessary." Enough already--I am sure you get the point. So get mellow and appreciate this "mild-mannered" union newsletter.

In conclusion, I sincerely state my belief that, when one surveys the totality of NHMCCD faculty-staff union membership activities and rhetoric, one finds a record of commendable unionism. This is no small achievement in an era when the shortsighted and the callous dismiss modern unionism as irrelevant and self-serving. Those who naively believe that today's hard-won benefits can be taken for granted had best wake up and take serious note of cost-cutting, union-busting tactics in business and education. Some battles are never over; some ideas are never out of date. American workers still need labor unions, and a March 1990 Time/CNN poll showed that 73% of Americans still recognize that. Speaking years ago about the eternal virtue of unionism, AFL founder Samuel Gompers was right on the money: "There is not a dollar which the working man or woman pays into a labor organization which does not come back a hundredfold."

I personally challenge all non-union faculty and staff in the District seriously to consider the cause of unionism and commit to our group--the NHMCCD faculty-staff union. Are salary, workload, evaluation, and other concerns going to go away magically? Is Solidarity good only for Poland? What in all good conscience are you waiting for? Join me. This is a good union, and I am proud and grateful to be a member. There is no dichotomy!

Allen Vogt  
Instructor of History  
North Harris College

### THOUGHTS ON STUDENT RETENTION

Before we charge forward with programs to reduce attrition, we need to ask, and answer, a number of questions if we are to proceed in a rational and effective way.

First, is attrition a problem at NHMCCD? Is our attrition rate normal for our type of school?

A. To answer these questions, we need data on the attrition rate at our school and on the attrition rates at other colleges and universities around the state and the country. Such data needs to

be widely shared, and individual teachers need to be able to compare their own attrition rates to those of their department, other departments, and other schools.

- B. As far as I know, data on the attrition rate at North Harris College is not currently available. Several of us in the English Department have conducted a study of the grades and attrition rates in our department. To do the study we had to spend a lot of time merely gathering the raw data from grade sheets in the Dean's office before beginning to analyze it because no analytical breakdown was available.
- C. Good data on attrition rates at other colleges and universities, is, as far as I know, scarce. In 1985-86 I was on a committee that did a study of the drop date. As part of that study, I was asked to search the ERIC files for any information on attrition. I found very little pertinent data, but one study published in 1982 implied that a 20-30% drop-out rate was normal at urban community colleges. (See "A Brief Outline..." attached). As part of our current study of attrition rates in the English Department we found almost no usable data in the ERIC files.

As a result of the work done by the "W" Committee in 1985-86 the drop date was changed from two weeks to four weeks before the end of the semester. At the time the Chancellor asked Dr. Mike Green to do a follow-up study to determine the effect of the change in the drop date on attrition at North Harris College. As far as I know, such a report has never been done.

Second, after sufficient data on attrition has been collected, one must next ask, what are the causes of attrition?

- A. In talking to students and other faculty members, one finds a number of reasons given for students dropping classes: family problems, health, work conflicts, moving out of the area, financial emergencies, and class overloads (to name a few) as well as doing poorly in the class in question.
- B. Since students drop classes for a variety of reasons, we need to know those reasons and the percentage of our attrition rate that we at NHMCCD have no control over. Again, as far as I know, we do not have this information. We might find that students drop classes equally because of problems at home or work, or because of institutional policy (such as allowing students to take too many hours), or because of failure to master the material in class.
- C. Thus it would seem to me to be very difficult for us to reduce attrition caused by the first two categories listed above.
- D. Next, if a certain percentage of drops is caused by institutional policies, then we need to determine which policies should be changed.

Finally, once we have determined the percentage of our attrition rate caused by the student's own failure to perform well in class, then we must ask, what are the causes of that failure?

- A. Students themselves give a number of reasons for their failure to do well in a specific class. For example, I have students who have admitted that they
1. Lack the requisite skills in reading and writing to be able to cope with the class work (usually blamed on their high-school background).
  2. Were not prepared for the amount of work expected of them on the college level.
  3. Have poor study habits.
  4. Do not function well in early morning classes.
- B. Faculty members also give numerous reasons for their students' poor performance in class. For example,
1. Not coming to class regularly.
  2. Not bringing required texts to class.
  3. Not reading required material.
  4. Not following directions.
  5. Not turning in work on time.
  6. Not taking notes.

Only after we determine specific reasons for students' failure to do well in classes can we begin to search for answers.

In the English Department we continually try to work on the curriculum and search for more effective ways to teach students the skills of reading, writing, research, and critical thinking. Individual teachers are always refining their classroom strategies. For example, I am currently experimenting with an incentive program to encourage students to come to class, read their assignments, and turn papers in on time.

There are some things we can do to try to lower our attrition rate, but I am not sure that teachers, individually, can have a major effect on the attrition and failure rates of their students without systemic changes in the attitudes and processes of public education in this country.

If "outcome-based" education is to be the shibboleth of the nineties, we need to determine what outcomes we are looking for. We can push for retaining as many students as possible regardless of their ability to do the work required of them. In English we would, thus, "pass" many students who cannot competently read, write, or think, thereby becoming part of the problem that has affected general public education in this country, and destroying in the process the reputation for excellence that this district has achieved.

We can, on the other hand, define "outcome-based" education by the number of our students we pass on who are competent and do well at senior colleges and universities and on the job. Again, as far as I know, we have very little hard data on how our students do after they leave us; we must rely on anecdotal and personal evidence.

One final observation: Given the general failure of public education in this country (the articles and reports are too numerous to detail), our attrition rate can be seen in a positive light. We do not simply "pass on" students who have not learned the knowledge and skills they should have; we do not add to the large number of prospective employees who are passed over for jobs because, in the words of one employer, "they



are simply not ready to work"; we do not add to the continued decline in American competitiveness. What we do is to give students the chance, and repeated chances, to develop the integrity, knowledge, and skills they will need to lead successful and fulfilling lives in the twenty-first century.

Robert Miller  
Instructor of English  
North Harris College

### NOTES ON L.A.--AND RELATED THINGS

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore--  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over--  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

"Harlem"  
Langston Hughes

And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars....For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the sufferings....[M]any will fall away, and betray one another, and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold.

Matthew 24: 6-8, 10-12 (RSV)

they have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger they are rich they hire and fire the politicians the newspapereditors the old judges the small men with reputations the collegepresidents the wardheelers (listen businessmen collegepresidents judges America will not forget her betrayers) they hire the men with the guns the uniforms the policecars the patrolwagons

America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have turned our language inside out who have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul

their hired men sit on the judge's bench they sit back with their feet on the tables under the dome of the State House they are ignorant of our beliefs they have the dollars the guns the armed forces the power plants

all right we are two nations

John Dos Passos  
The Big Money

"President Bush will attend Kingwood golf tournament"

Humble Observer headline  
May 6, 1992

GOOD NEWS FROM TOMBALL

The Houston Chronicle reports dramatic union gains in its May 9 edition. Organizer Orell Fitzsimmons relates that the Texas United School Employees (TUSE) has recruited 3300 members in its first eight months of existence. The NHMCCD service area has been touched by this development as a recruiting breakthrough has occurred in the Tomball ISD. Let's pick up the Chronicle story from there:

Connie Barrett, 42, of Hockley, a Tomball district bus driver for eight years, was an instigator behind the union's presence at her district. When she and other workers "began to hear talk about privatization," she said, they looked for a union to represent them. Barrett and two friends formed their union Feb. 1 and within 10 days had 100 members. A month later, the board voted down privatization. "The school board says no, but I believe privatization would have come through if it had not been for the union. We shook the district up," she said.

Barrett's mother was a member of a railway clerk's union. "Because of the union, my mother made the same salary as the men who sat there in the office with her," she said. "That's why I believe in unions."

People like Orell Fitzsimmons and Connie Barrett are the heart and soul of the American labor movement. Their brothers and sisters in the AFT applaud their achievements. Together we will advance labor's agenda-- justice for the working people of this nation. If you share our perspective, then join our organization. Contact Alan Hall (443-5544, 353-8634), Greg Mitchell (359-1698, 592-1660), or any of the other usual suspects (Cher Brock, Steve Davis, Robert Emerson, Bob Locander, Mel McFadden, Allen Vogt) on the union executive committee.