

NSU's culture of excellence enables long list of student achievements

It is easy for the most enthusiastic advocate to lose perspective of real goals and real achievements within an organization. A recent trip to our nation's capital revitalized my appreciation of Northern State as a community of scholars characterized by a culture of excellence.

As was reported in the Aberdeen American News, a statue of Sara Winnemucca was commissioned by the state of Nevada. The figure was the most recent of those accepted to a position of honor under the rotunda of the Capitol building. It now stands tall with works created by the best figure artists in the nation's history.

The statue was remarkable in several ways. First, it was one of only six portraying historical female figures. Second, it portrayed a distinguished advocate for minority rights. Third, it was crafted by the youngest artist ever to place a sculpture in statuary hall. Finally, and most importantly, it was the work of Northern State University graduate and artist in residence, Benjamin Victor.

The magnitude of the achievement was confirmed in dedication speeches by the U.S. Speaker of the House J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.); Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, (R-Tenn.); House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.); Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Nevada Gov. Kenny C. Guinn.

A standing ovation followed every reference to the artist, Benjamin Victor. He and his family deflected the acclamation by highlighting the community of scholars that laid the foundation for his success. Victor was effusive in praise for Dean Alan LaFave who introduced him to Northern State and gave thoughtful recognition of his mentors Professor Ruth McKinney and Professor Joel McKinney.

Victor did not enroll in college to become a world-class sculptor. He did, however, transfer to Northern State to receive a world-class education. His potential was recognized early and our faculty was quick to embrace and nurture his talents.

While we celebrate one of the most remarkable achievements in the history of South Dakota higher education, we also recognize the long list of student accomplishments that have been enabled by our culture of excellence.

Within the same week as the dedication, Coach Don Meyer's basketball team won the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference basketball tournament and Matt Hammer was

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selected as the 2004-05 NSIC Men's Basketball Player of the Year. Coach Pat Timm's wrestling squad progressed to the NCAA Division II National Tournament where Cory Wellnitz won All-American honors. Jordan Palmer was one of 20 students in the nation to be selected to participate in a prestigious program at Georgetown University. The achievements in the performing arts are well chronicled, and the South Dakota Legislature continues to praise our faculty's work in the delivery of electronic courses.

Our commitment to future students does not allow for complacency. We continue to engage in a comprehensive planning process appropriately labeled the "Margin of Excellence." Victor, Hammer, Wellnitz, Palmer and others are quick to recognize Northern State as a culture of excellence. The breadth of their achievements, however, must extend outside of our traditional class structure.

I am optimistic that the faculty, staff, students and community leaders participating in the planning effort, will describe initiatives that extend Northern State and the community of Aberdeen to a substantially broader range of individuals. It must be clear that the achievements chronicled here are only a few examples of the value of this community of scholars.

Northern State is fully committed to extending its reach through the unfolding "Margin of Excellence" planning process. In the meantime, I must express my gratitude to Benjamin Victor for helping me to regain perspective on the real goals and real achievements that are today's Northern State.

(Readers React appears occasionally on this page. It is designed to provide a forum for readers to express their views on matters in the news. Questions may be sent to Readers React, American News, P.O. Box 4430, Aberdeen, S.D., or e-mailed to americannews@aberneenews.com. Please include a daytime telephone number.)