



CHI SIGMA IOTA
Counseling Academic and
Professional Honor Society
International

**The Pursuit of Personal Excellence:
A CSI Quest Shared and Supported**

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Introduction

Last year, we were pleased to share a new publication, the [Principles and Practices of Leadership Excellence](#) (1999) that was developed in conjunction with our Academy of Leaders. While a modest first effort, it represented the best thinking of some of the profession's top leaders. Today, we are taking another step in the direction of creating resources useful to both the present and future members of the profession. Once again the Academy members will be invited to share their experience and insights. In this case, however, we hope to benefit early on in the process from your experiences and recommendations as well.

One of our hopes for this workshop is the beginning of a more focused, deliberate effort to call attention to the quest for personal excellence. Dr. Herr has provided us with a conceptual framework from which to proceed. My part in this process is to help us begin creating tools useful for chapters, counselor education programs, and individual members to use in learning about and experiencing the benefits of this personal quest. As a consequence, I will provide you with a brief introductory overview to this topic from my perspective as founding President and Executive Director of the Society.

In addition to Dr. Herr's paper, I wish to help begin the development of what may become useful for future workshops and class supplemental materials. As a consequence, I will touch on a few topics for your consideration this morning. First, I will provide a definition for what is meant by the pursuit of personal excellence. Next, I think it will be helpful to address the personal habits of those who pursue this goal as well as benefits to self and others for those who earnestly seek it. Finally, with help from Dr. Herr's first thoughts about the topic in our personal correspondence, I will conclude by speaking to CSI's commitment to personal excellence.

Overview

What is the purpose and value of affiliation with an "academic honor society?" There are many countries throughout the world where an "honor" society is considered superfluous at best and potentially arrogant at its worst. For one to achieve academic recognition through advanced degrees and certificates is honor enough. Such individuals may be expected to bring honor to their vocation, institution of origin, or country through the application of personal attributes and knowledge to the betterment of all of society. In short, it is the "honorable" way to behave.

What we propose is a "raison'd etre" that transcends what some consider to be "American" values of rugged individualism, self-aggrandizement, and pursuit of interests for personal benefit alone. Alfred Adler (1954/1927), whose theory of human behavior preceded the major approaches to counseling currently considered most relevant (Sweeney, 1998), believed that human beings naturally moved toward interaction and, hence, a "place" of social significance in relation to others. He also noted that we humans are motivated (or thwarted) in this movement toward a sense of community or social interest which he called in German, *gemeinschaftsgefühl*. Like many words in other languages far more expressive than English, there is no adequate direct translation for his term within our language. He and his followers referred to it as "social interest" but they are quick to note that these terms hardly do justice to Adler's intentions.

Many cultures around the world, including our own Native American cultures, agree with Adler in terms of the importance of family and community, as well as the central role of all life and nature in the development of the "individual." Whether we personally embrace such a view or philosophy, I believe that its existence in the minds and practices of others impinges upon us just as surely as gravity. Whether we acknowledge it or not, *gemeinschaftsgefühl* is at work

Within CSI, there is an opportunity to maximize one's personal growth while benefiting others as fully as possible in the pursuit of personal excellence. We hold as our responsibility to encourage, foster, and recognize your efforts to be the best that you can be, now and in the future. In partnership with its members, CSI strives to create a synergism that results in the "whole being greater than the sum of its parts" in service to the profession and those whom our members serve.

Definition

The pursuit of personal excellence is a matter of values put into action for the benefit of both self and others. As a consequence, it involves beliefs and attitudes arrived at by conscious decision making, deliberate choice, and followed by resolute behavior. More than a "*modus operandi*" (a way of behaving), it is a "*modus vivendi*" (a way of living or being).

As Dr. Herr notes (2000), personal excellence is not a singular trait. It is comprised of elements that give it substance. Among the elements are self-discipline, integrity, compassion, loyalty, and perseverance. Personal excellence and its ingredients are traits of character as well as commitments to be strengthened. They are not simply characteristics to be possessed, but necessary parts of human nature to be practiced by those who are to counsel and provide support to others

Habits of those who pursue personal excellence

While committed to achieving excellence in ways that are observable to others, those who achieve the greatest mastery in the art of living are masters of their own destiny through what is not overtly visible. Mind, body, and spiritual beliefs are a part of who and what these persons are in almost imperceptible practices. These practices help them to transcend many of life's most troubling experiences while also enabling them to celebrate its most rewarding moments. They aspire not to impress others but to serve. They are motivated primarily by intrinsic joys related to learning, mastery, and competence in service to others. As a consequence, they seek opportunities to learn, to accept challenges that stretch their capabilities, and seek a balance in all that they do to preserve their talents, resources, and well being.

Benefits to self and others for those who pursue personal excellence

Kushner (1986), in his book, *When all you ever wanted isn't enough*, speaks about the Yiddish word, *mensch*. As a term, *mensch* is untranslatable in English but describes a person of integrity. It also can be used to describe a person committed to personal excellence, i.e., "...someone who is honest, reliable, wise enough to be no longer naïve but yet not cynical, a person you can trust to give you advice for your benefit rather than his or her own. A *mensch* acts not out of fear or out of desire to make a good impression but out of a strong inner conviction of who he or she is and what he or she stands for... I have known people of integrity, and the impression is memorable. There is a quiet confidence to them, a sense of tranquility that comes at the end of figuring out who you are and what you stand for". (p. 135)

For such persons, the journey through life is objectively no easier than for others. How they respond to life, however, is qualitatively different in a very positive way. They live life fully, each moment, each day, with courage in the conviction that regardless of circumstances, what is essential about who they are and what they stand for will be unchanged. Others see them as steady in times of turbulence, generous when there is a need of any kind, and compassionate in all ways related to life's adversity. But perhaps most of all, they have learned how to laugh at life's predicaments, to celebrate its gifts, and to enjoy its pleasures. They are approachable people, by no means "average", but authentic or as some would say, "real".

For those who live and work with individuals who strive for personal excellence, there is a sense that regardless of what else may be unknown, their partner, friend, or colleague can be counted on in moments of need or celebration. They are the proverbial "rocks" in the midst of turmoil or the "cheer leaders" in times of triumph. They are not perfect but they are steadfast in their loyalty and support. They may not be the most knowledgeable or educated persons but they are wise in matters of the heart.

As St. Exupery shares in the *Little Prince*, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." (p.87) For such individuals, they see the best in others even when finding fault would not be hard. This may be true in part because they have learned to acknowledge and forgive their own shortcomings while still striving to overcome those that hurt self and others.

Those who succeed in pursuing personal excellence are *not* driven but *drawn* to the intrinsic reality of personal worth through human development on all levels, physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual. They are models for those whose lives they touch.

Chi Sigma Iota's commitment to excellence

Since its inception, Chi Sigma Iota has had but one mission, to promote excellence in counseling. We have defined this to include the promotion of excellence in both preparation and practice. More specifically, we are committed to the members of the counseling profession and the life long career that they have chosen in service to others. Chi Sigma Iota's commitment is to *all* members of the counseling profession as well as the profession itself. As a review of its first fifteen year history of [Activities and Accomplishments](#) (csi-net.org) will reveal, CSI has collaborated, initiated, and cooperated in a number ways with virtually every other agency and organization within the counseling profession.

Organizational and Personal Excellence Interrelate

Intrinsic to these activities is Chi Sigma Iota's pursuit of organizational and personal excellence.

These two characteristics are interactive. It is not possible to have organizational excellence at any level--family, school, community, nation, or honor society--without also having individual personal excellence. As Dr. Herr presented so eloquently, in many ways, personal excellence is an ideal, an aspiration, rather than a constant achievement. It is at a minimum, an internal compass pointing each of us toward that which is worth pursuing and being.

In his book, On Leadership (1990), John Gardner notes that: "The future is shaped by people who believe in the future- and in themselves" (p. 195). He goes on to describe a conversation that he had with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at a seminar on education. During the proceedings the first speaker, an African American educator, titled her speech, "First, Teach Them to Read." Dr. King leaned over to Dr. Gardner and said, "First, teach them to believe in themselves." As a Society dedicated to helping nurture and encourage leaders for the future, we, too, must help our members to develop that belief in themselves as followers as well leaders.

Chi Sigma Iota, as an academic and professional honor society, is committed to anchoring the pursuit of personal excellence as a fundamental element in the culture of counseling. In such a context, the traditions and history of counseling as well as its ethics, values, and aspirations are essential elements to be preserved in those who represent it as counselors. Whether a beginning counselor or one who has been in the field for many years, the pursuit of personal excellence gives credence to the ideals which counselors share across settings and across generations.

On the other hand, as we all know, there has been and continues to be a need for the reexamination of our values and aspirations in light of new knowledge or enlightenment on matters of diversity, social equality, and human dignity. Gardner also called attention in his book to the role that leadership and excellence play in bringing about change. He noted that Jesus came not only to comfort the afflicted but to afflict the comfortable! Sometimes we must change in order to help bring about change in organizations as well as others. Violence, substance abuse, poverty, and social injustice in our society are symptoms of a bankruptcy in our respect and concern for all people. The personal quest for excellence will challenge the seeker to account by both words and action as a member of both the professional and larger community in all matters of human encounter.

Change, however, is difficult unless there is intrinsic satisfaction in the process of discovery and growth. The quest for personal excellence is such a process. As Rabbi Kushner (1986) stated so well when he described people of integrity, "Unlike anxious religious people who are consumed by fear that they may have broken some rule and offended God, men and women of integrity are concerned with living up to their own high standards, not with offending or pleasing God. Yet in their presence, one feels that God has reason to be pleased." (p. 135) The quest has its own rewards and peace of mind seems to be one of them.

An Invitation

One of CSI's challenges is to help its members and others whom they influence to meet their need for frequent renewal to the commitments that personal excellence requires. This workshop and the activities that follow long after it is over are a part of an ongoing effort to meet this challenge.

We now invite the panelists and members of the audience to help us expand upon the work begun and to help us influence every member of the counseling profession now and in the future to embrace the quest for personal excellence as a life long goal. As participants in this process of definition and elaboration, you are being invited by us to discuss, question, recommend, and help design what we hope will be relevant, useful resources for our chapters, members, and counselor education programs.

Both Dr. Herr's and my remarks will be made available to you this morning. At the end of my handout, you will find extra space to offer suggested readings and activities suitable for educating and encouraging self and others in this quest. I hope each of you will consider submitting your suggestions and rationale for readings, activities, and methods that we could incorporate into future materials on this topic. You may share them with me this morning or send them to me at any time in the future.

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