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By Charlie McCormick | Schreiner University President | Special to The Times | Saturday March 10, 2018

I am honored and delighted to join other Schreiner faculty and staff and our extraordinary community members in the

Dynamic Learning Institute's promotion of lifelong learning in the Hill Country. My upcoming presentation, based on my training and experience as an anthropologist and folklorist, titled "More Than a Race of Spectators," will take place at a luncheon on

McCormick: "Committed to lifelong learning"

Schreiner's Campus Activity Center in April 24. I hope you will plan to join us for the luncheon.

We also welcome you to visit Schreiner University for any of the other lectures, book discussions, music and theater performances and athletic events that occur on campus throughout the year.

My delight in participating in the programming of the Dynamic Learning Institute is that it reflects one of the cornerstones of the Schreiner educational experience: a commitment to lifelong learning. We want all of our graduates to understand intellectually the relevance and importance of lifelong learning, and we want them to practice

the art of curiosity throughout their lives.

At Schreiner, we believe educating students about the importance of lifelong learning makes practical sense, given the rapidly changing world in which graduates will be living and working. Today's students, research tells us, will be part of the first generation of employees that not only have multiple jobs throughout their working lives, but also multiple careers. The scary thing about multiple careers? Most of these careers have not even been invented yet, so we cannot design majors that help prepare students for this future. In order to thrive in their second or third careers, our graduates will need to be enthusiastic and competent lifelong learners.

We also are committed to lifelong learning because we believe to be true the admonition of Matthew Arnold, the 19th century poet and cultural critic, who wrote, "The world is forwarded by having our attention fixed on the best things."

We want our students to learn throughout their lives because it will benefit them as individuals, but we believe this learning benefits society, too. Reading the best literature that humans have written, listening to the most insightful talks and music that the best among us have produced, identifying beautiful artistic creations around the world — our commitment to pursuing these things will keep the collective human experience from stagnating and growing stale.

Schreiner's emphasis on encouraging learning throughout life no doubt results from our church-relatedness, too. Schreiner has a covenant relationship with the Presbyterian Church (USA) through the Synod of the Sun. The Presbyterian Church has long held that education is a pillar of its faith.

If I understand my 18th century history correctly, Scotland had, at that time, perhaps the highest literacy rate in the world. The faith of the Scots assumed that the more people who could read Holy Scripture,

the better. In practice, this manifested itself as a commitment to establishing schools and colleges. Today, more than 50 colleges are affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. The passionate pursuit of educating men and women throughout their lives continues to be a primary way for Schreiner University to express its church-relatedness.

Finally, Schreiner teaches its students to be lifelong learners so that their critical capacities, as well as their abilities to act in and on the world, are never taken from them. Every day, it seems, new and more sophisticated deployment of fake news, scams and phishing emails are unleashed on the world. We expect our graduates to be continual learners so that they have the ability to discriminate between fact and fiction, opinion and evidence, and truth and untruth. To the extent our graduates achieve this capacity, they have control over their lives and their emotions by understanding

how to cut through the noise of the modern world and understand what really matters.

Folklore intersects with lifelong learning

And how does folklore intersect with this focus on lifelong learning? In ways that are subtle but profound. We are cultural creatures, and this means we have wisely developed conventions to govern any number of our everyday practices. For example — though we rarely reflect on such a common practice — our greetings with each other are so pleasant because we understand the culturally appropriate ways to extend a hand for a handshake and the culturally appropriate words to speak as we meet.

Without these traditions, we would have to make up the practice of greeting each other anew each time we met someone. That would be a huge waste of time and, perhaps, result in regular brawls over unexpected ways of interacting. Our everyday traditions make it much, much

easier to live our everyday lives, and they give us the opportunity to advance human knowledge and artistry to an extent we otherwise

could not achieve if we were always trying to figure out how to greet each other every time we met.

Still, the very traditions that make our lives more predictable are also always stripping us of our capacity for individual decision-making and self-determination. We too often begin to think of these everyday traditions as “rules” for living. They come to be seen as natural (or at least “second nature”) or common sense, and we correct or punish people who do not or cannot follow them. We forget that these “rules” have been constructed through the interactions and informal negotiations of individual humans across time and space.

Folklorists make visible these otherwise invisible rules. In doing so, we encourage people to recognize the contingent nature of everyday

life and the subsequent opportunity to live a fuller life free of the burden of everything that is taken as a given.

Though these “rules” of everyday life prohibit ways in which to live life, humans have a great capacity to subvert and undermine these rules through traditional culture. For example, modern American society generally discourages youth from focusing on death. We tend to make death invisible, because it is unseemly and inappropriate to talk about, except in rare situations. How do youth respond who have a legitimate interest in death and dying? By developing a robust set of jokes (everything from knock-knock jokes to “what’s red and white and black all over” jokes) that allow them to explore — in the only socially accepted format available to them — the reality of death.

Folklorists explore the human capacity to continually learn new things through their ability to subvert and undermine the status quo.

As a folklorist, I believe that much of the world is invisible to us: both those forces that constrain us, as well as those powers that liberate us. By making visible what is otherwise invisible, folklorists give individuals the opportunity to never be duped by the world in which they live, and perhaps be empowered to live the life most important to them. We will explore these ideas and many more at the Dynamic Learning Institute talk on April 24.

A commitment to lifelong learning appears to be optional; I hope that, increasingly, we recognize it as an individual and cultural imperative. Identifying multiple pathways for this learning to occur — through the Dynamic Learning Institute, Schreiner University, Club Ed or any of the other thousand ways it can happen — provide all of us a method for meeting this imperative and living intentional lives.

Dynamic Learning Institute

DLI is a Kerrville community partnership between the Dietert Center's Club Ed, Schreiner University, SERV Kerrville and the Dynamic Learning Institute Board of Directors.

Dynamic Learning aims to provide the Kerrville area with fun, interactive and stimulating learning experiences.

The DLI board hopes many community residents will join it in discovering the joy of learning from dynamic instructors with a lifetime of subject experiences to share.

There are no tests, no grades and no papers — just the opportunity to explore interesting topics and develop new interests.

Charlie McCormick is president of Schreiner University. He joined Schreiner in 2009 as provost. McCormick received his bachelor's degree in English from Abilene Christian University, his M.A. in anthropology from Texas A&M University and his Ph.D. in folklore and folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. He holds the distinction of being America's only university president with a Ph.D. in folklore/folklife.