

A Brief(er) History of the Snezek Institute -- Or, A Few Personal Reflections about the Snezek Library Leadership Institute (What is that?)
Dan Bowell - January 2019

Finding its identity and way

Unlike the original "Proposal for an Institute for Leadership in Christian Academic Libraries" (2003) that ran to seven plus pages, my intention here is to stick to the adjective that the title of this reflection suggests. While some of that original proposal was too grandiose for its own good, counsel, experience, and reflection reshaped those original intentions into what has emerged over fifteen years as a regularized gathering called the Snezek Library Leadership Institute, or "Snezek" to many of us. The first of that original Proposal's purposes still largely describes what Snezek aims to accomplish:

To provide a forum for current and prospective Council of Christian Colleges and Universities library administrators which will afford intentional, informed discussion, dialogue, and mutual learning about key issues in library and information services within a common foundation of Christian faith and experience....

Early thinking envisioned that 25% of the attendees would be non-directors/deans as a venue for encouraging and cultivating leadership. After a bit of experience that didn't come to fruition though I think the challenge to nurture future leadership remains. Fairly early on it was decided that it should be limited to those presently in library leadership roles. (Some Snezek wag in fact coined the now regular mantra "what's said at Snezek stays at Snezek.") In truth, the candor and commiserating that mark one element of Snezek, though not its primary thrust or experience, might deter rather than encourage potential leadership!

I've said on multiple occasions that despite the more reasoned rationale and framework for Snezek, my fundamental impetus was to motivate myself to read and reflect upon useful professional and extra-professional literature. That reflection upon issues, especially the complex, difficult ones happens best in the company of other minds, and especially with those of like mind and heart. The notion that we think, discuss, and critique from a "common foundation of Christian faith and experience" is one that hopefully, and I think actually, has marked the Snezek experience. Most often we come away with more questions than answers but with the rich experience of wrestling those dragons together -- in spirit and in *the* Spirit. From its outset, each day commences with a devotional period but with variety in how these are conducted. The intention has been

to remind us of a common faith and of God's presence with us throughout the successes and failures of our work. Most of us at one time or another have felt that leadership even in the company of valued colleagues can be a lonely spot. Snezek has frequently provided folks a few hours of respite in the company of fellow, often weary, travelers who impart empathy and encouragement to one another within a shared hope in Christ.

To be honest, Snezek can sometimes be a bit discouraging, too, but in a way that can lead to personal and leadership improvements. I've often learned of creative ideas and programs that peers have implemented and wondered why I didn't think of that or something like it. I've been left wondering if I'm investing my comparatively meagre ideas and energies in the wrong ways. Or, maybe I'm too stuck in old ways, old thinking. Yet, the collegiality and encouragement among Snezek folks helps to diminish such pessimism and in fact overall to encourage new ventures, maybe even some risk!

There were a number of persons in the early years of Snezek Institutes who especially provided support and leadership: Merrill Johnson (George Fox), Susan Watkins (Eastern Nazarene), John Murray (Westmont), Tad Mindeman (Covenant), Jonathan Lauer (Messiah), Steve Baker (Palm Beach Atlantic), Ted Goshulak (Trinity Western), Mary Habermas (John Brown), Ed Walton (Southwest Baptist), Sheryl Taylor (Dordt), Mary Jean Johnson (Bluffton), Myron Sutter-Sutton (Gordon), Rodney Vliet (Biola), Sharon Bull (Northwest Nazarene), Gayle Gunderson (Colorado Christian), Floyd Votaw (Corban), Mark Tucker (Abilene Christian) and Bryce Nelson (Seattle Pacific). (My apologies to anyone this aged mind has failed to recollect!) These colleagues were instrumental in helping to shape, plan, host, conduct, promote, and perpetuate Snezek.

One of the intentions early on was to move Snezek's location around the country thus visiting other campuses and libraries. That has been a rewarding aspect -- from coast to coast and in between. Visiting others libraries inevitably gives an opportunity to learn from others and to assess our own operations and facilities. Staying in campus housing isn't for everyone but most of us are inclined to frugality when using funds for our own professional development and it also spurs social interaction. Snezek has continued to be affordable while also frequently enjoying notable "extracurricular" but enriching social and cultural activities.

A review of attendance rosters reveals approximately 125 different persons who have participated in Snezek over its fifteen years of existence. There have been several folks who participated perennially though we're close now to "then there was none." To that

extent Snezek has had some breadth of impact, hopefully constructive, upon library leadership across Christian higher education.

What it isn't and what it is... or tries to be

From the outset Snezek sought to be a different sort of professional gathering. Not a conference or a workshop but more akin to a seminar, with advance readings, topical introductions prompting questions and conversations, sessions that focus more on a dynamic interchange of ideas and experiences and less on formal sorts of presentations. Responses to more formal presentations have generally been (but with exceptions) somewhat less enthusiastic than to those that introduce a topic and then solicit discussion based upon prior readings and/or questions.

Several years into Snezek the Wednesday evening opening session became a keynote address -- sometimes quite like that, other years less formally so. In more recent Snezeks at least one session has been a presentation that seeks to set context for other sessions striking a thematic chord. It would be too much to claim that in its early years integration of Snezek sessions was that well-conceived.

One claim that I believe can be substantiated is that Snezek has prompted most participants into reading more professionally or practice-related literature than might otherwise have been the case -- even though some of those readings get read in airports or on planes in route! More reasonableness, realism and selectivity have shaped the quantity and choice of readings after the first few years. (The first meeting in 2004 entailed about 300 pages of articles!) The readings have sometimes been addressed directly, even in some detail; other times they just provide background for a session. Along the way a few session-specific white papers and case studies have emerged.

What will it become?

For several years I have thought and stated that the Snezek Institute is likely to morph or even cease in the future. As with most any endeavor, efforts shouldn't be expended to keep alive something when it ceases to be effective. It's conceivable that the Snezek Institute could evolve into something else or simply cease as it has been known. I can imagine and even expect that some new structure may emerge as the profession witnesses increasing change, as venues for learning and collaboration become more virtualized, and as other forums provide more effective results. I do hope that elements of Snezek -- its distinctive professional exchange about pertinent, common issues and interpersonal enrichment -- will continue to find expression.

I do appreciate the fresh vision and energies expressed in recent years to continue Snezek. A more structured cycle of leadership ostensibly appears to be working -- Chair-elect, Chair, and Past-Chair. The quality of programming has been especially strong of late and reflects the benefit of multiple minds and energies engaging in leadership, planning, programming, and execution.

I hope that future leadership will refashion Snezek (or its successor) in ways that best serve library leadership across Christian higher education. I do think that God has blessed what were initially truly feeble efforts into a vehicle that, if even in small ways, has enhanced professional leadership, promoted collegiality and interpersonal exchange, and fostered positive developments in library services and resources.

Conversations and a few sessions along the way have explored how Snezek might contribute to increased collaboration among CCCU libraries. Owing in part to existing organizational consortial connections, nothing of scale has emerged but that also owes to Snezek's focus on professional development and its light organization. It doesn't rule out some new focused project or resource collaborations transpiring in the future.

From about 2007 conversations were held with CCCU representatives to get Snezek officially associated. While this took several years and some change in CCCU affiliate designations to systematize, by 2010 a more formal relationship ensued. This has helped to promote Snezek with consistency, lend it more authentication with a CCCU identify, and assist with registration and fiscal logistics.

But why the name? What or who is *Snezek*? P. Paul Snezek was the long-time director of the library at Wheaton College (IL). To several of the early Snezek participants, Paul had been a mentor or at least an encourager. He was also a catalyst for some meetings of CCCU directors between 1997 and 2001. (Happily, Paul was able to visit the Institute in 2014 when it was held at Judson College, Elgin, IL.) The Institute needed a name less pedantic than its original, first year name, so the P. Paul Snezek Library Leadership Institute emerged, shortened over time by practice and practicality to dismiss the "P. Paul." At the least, it's a unique name!

May God continue to use the Snezek Institute for continuing professional development and mutual, collective edification among library leaders in Christian higher education -- until new venues or opportunities for the same preclude its particular expression -- and name!