A Message from the President:

Making a Transition and Coming Out Stronger —by Marvin Beatty

We are in transition. Our name is now PLATO—a program of OLLI. New initiatives are underway—free access to UW and State Historical Society Libraries for all members, more discussion groups, more bus trips, more lectures. We are planning systematically for growth in membership. We operate in much closer communication and collaboration with the UW Division of Continuing Studies than we ever have before. In late September PLATO and the UW Division of Continuing Studies signed a two-year agreement that defines our respective roles in a working partnership.

But transitions can bring a sense of unease and, sometimes, a sense of loss. More of us are participating in PLATO offerings and some sessions are crowded. With larger numbers in a discussion group it’s harder to carry on a good discussion. Parking is harder to find.

These two sides of our ongoing transition illustrate why you and other PLATO members may feel uneasy. What we do in this time of transition will have a strong effect on what PLATO becomes in the future.

Your Board of Directors has decided that this is the optimum time to look systematically at where PLATO is now and decide what kind of an organization we want it to be five years down the road.

With growing numbers of potential members as Baby Boomers retire, and with increased support from the UW Division of Continuing Studies via OLLI we have both a much larger potential membership base and stronger institutional support by our side.

A former PLATO President and long-time discussion group leader, George Rueckert heads a committee that is organizing and leading this long-range look at our future as an organization. Members of PLATO’s four standing committees—Curriculum and Facilities, Outreach, Special Events and University Relations—are playing key roles in this planning effort by identifying the issues, opportunities and barriers PLATO will encounter in the years ahead. Be sure to let George Rueckert or any member of the four committees know of your thoughts or concerns when you receive this newsletter. In April 2010, we will hold a two-day gathering to develop a plan for how we can evolve to serve more members with a wider array of lifelong learning opportunities during the next decade of the 21st century, along with strengthening the core aspects of what we are as a self-directed and participatory organization.

We expect to report on our strategic planning at PLATO’s next Annual Luncheon on May 24 at the Marriott West. Please come and get up to date on what PLATO sees in our collective future as lifelong learners.

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Spring Preview

February 17, 2010

Note the date! The 2010 PLATO Spring Preview will be held Wednesday, February 17, 1:30-3:30 pm at the downtown Madison Senior Center, 330 West Mifflin St. You’ll hear a short summary of what’s in store for each class in our Spring class line-up. You’ll also have a chance to sign up for those classes you’re interested in. Discussion groups are the heartbeat of PLATO. If you can’t make the Preview, you can call or e-mail the class coordinator to sign up, or simply show up at class. Please note that our International Films class has a size limit and that class will fill up during sign up at the Preview. No class walk-in spaces will be available. The membership committee will be on hand at the Preview to accept new memberships. A social hour is included. Join us for this opportunity to see your PLATO friends and colleagues.

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New Memberships

New members who join between December 1 and February 28 will be charged $25.00 for a half year membership.
PLATO class: MUSEUMS

MUSEUMS, coordinated by Helen Aarli, has completed a very successful first semester. Helen planned the course with the help of Sheri Castelnuovo, education curator at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (MMoCA) and Anne Lambert, education curator of the Chazen Museum. During the course of the semester, docent led classes visited exhibits at the Chazen and the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art. The course material was excellent. Class members were enthusiastic and people rarely missed.

Based on her experience during the first semester, Helen saw an opportunity to expand the participatory nature of this learning experience for PLATO members. During the next semester, the focus will be Apple Pie: Symbols of Americana found in MMoCA’s Permanent Collection and on George Segal’s sculptural commission, Depression Bread Line. Discussions led by Museum staff and other content experts will be included in the series. They will discuss Myths and Realities of the Wild West, the dichotomy of rural and urban life and how Segal’s passion for social justice is reflected in his life and work. Incorporated into the class discussion will be information about selected artists and art work.

There will be eight (8) sessions, all held at the MMIoCA. Two to three sessions will be spent on George Segal’s work, particularly Depression Bread Line and on Myths and Realities of the Wild West. Class size again will be limited to fourteen (14). Interested people should call or e-mail Helen (244-0787; h.aarli@earthlink.net) as soon as possible, as the course may fill before Preview on February 17.

PLATO Annual Meeting and OLLI/PLATO Annual Luncheon

EARLY ALERT: The next PLATO Annual Meeting will be held on May 24, 2010 at the Marriott West. This is a change from PLATO’s long time use of facilities at the Memorial Union.

This change in location was made for several reasons:

For many years PLATO held the Annual Meeting in Tripp Commons at the Union. Because of the growth in PLATO membership this room was no longer large enough to accommodate the Annual Meeting which includes a sit-down lunch. In May 2009 the meeting including the luncheon was moved to Great Hall.

Then problems with Great Hall as a location for a PLATO event became very apparent. There were multiple complaints about difficulty of physical access to the floor of Great Hall and to the bathrooms.

In addition, for years members have found parking for events at the Union difficult. The nearest reliably available spots are in the city ramps on Frances St. or Lake St.

Generally parking spaces were available at the ramps but both have several floors and neither had elevators. Both the distance from the ramps to the Union and the lack of elevators were a problem for many members.

In response to the multiple complaints, the Special Events Committee—led by Jean Blake and JoAnn Savoy—took action. The Committee decided to look for a new location for the Annual Meeting. The standards for selection of a new site included complete physical accessibility of the meeting room/luncheon room and bathrooms, overall cost, and adequate, easily accessible, nearby parking. Following these criteria, Marriott West was selected for the event. The room selected for our use is large enough to meet our needs and there are over 1000 free parking spaces.

Congratulations to the Special Events Committee for their responsiveness to members’ concerns. We hope to see you on May 24th.

Strategic Planning Conference — by George Rueckert

In past Persimmon articles, as well as this issue, you have read of the profound changes that PLATO has undergone in the past several years, especially in its relationship with the University and OLLI. PLATO has come out of these changes stronger and more vital than ever, with a streamlined organization, firmer legal status and an unaltered commitment to its independent management, finances and curriculum.

But new challenges lay ahead. Our membership now has passed the 800 mark and continues to grow at a healthy rate with the “Baby Boomers” certain to add an additional surge. Managing this change will not be easy. It will require a clear picture of what lays ahead and thoughtful and creative ideas on how to proceed.

With this in mind, PLATO’s Board of Directors has set up a subcommittee charged with preparing a Strategic Planning Conference to try to isolate key issues likely to arise in the next five years and possible PLATO approaches. The conference, currently set for April 2010, will bring together representatives from those elements most involved with PLATO operations for two days of assessment and brainstorming. Details currently are being worked out and should be available to members later in the Spring.
Where are We Going? (and) How are We Going to Get There?

PLATO is a wonderful organization. I believe this, and it is apparent that many other people do also. Just look at our rate of growth!

But planning for 850 members today or for 1000 members tomorrow is very different from planning for 350 yesterday. The logistics are a real challenge, as is our ability to maintain the spirit of PLATO under these conditions.

Most PLATO members participate via our Discussion Groups or “classes.” We go to classes, lead classes, discuss in classes, and so on. This is the fundamental characteristic of PLATO. But as our organization has grown our classes have become larger, and in this circumstance discussion can be difficult. Indeed, some groups have split, and perhaps more will do so. Other groups have a core membership that has been together for many years. In this circumstance it can be hard for a new person to feel part of the group. It is important that newcomers feel welcome, which may call for extra effort on the part of the coordinator. It is of vital importance to maintain dialogue that is respectful of all opinions, for in this way we can foster the participatory nature of PLATO that is so important to all of us.

But organizations like PLATO do not run themselves; they require constant nurturing. Members can participate in the required care and feeding in very important ways. We are responsible for the structural management, course planning, budgeting, and setting of new directions through policy formation. It is of vital importance that the opportunities for members to participate be expanded by welcoming new people to the management activities of PLATO. New people can bring the new ideas essential to maintaining the life of an organization.

PLATO’s Board and the different Standing Committees are looking for ways to manage our organization’s growth, both operationally and in terms of policy. President Beatty in his report entitled “Making a Transition and Coming Out Stronger” tells of a meeting to be held next spring. He invites members to take an active part in the planning for the meeting by identifying areas of concern as well as strengths. Please help meet the challenges before us by taking this opportunity to participate. Share with us your ideas and concerns for the future of PLATO.

OLLI Update: 2009 OLLI National Conference

Several months into the signed Memorandum of Agreement between PLATO and the UW Division of Continuing Studies, the new relationship between OLLI and PLATO continues to evolve. There have been frequent occasions for learning together as administrative processes have been reviewed, and opportunities for collaboration have been explored.

A significant learning opportunity occurred this past October, when Marv Beatty, PLATO President, and Sarah Schutt, UW OLLI Director, together attended the annual Osher Lifelong Learning Institute National Conference in Park City, Utah. More than 250 directors and volunteers were in attendance, representing 124 Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes from all 50 states.

The two-day conference, which was offered break-out sessions on a variety of topics related to managing, growing and sustaining a lifelong learning membership organization. In the course of conversation with representatives from other OLLIs, it was found that quite a few across the country were experiencing, or recently have gone through a transition much like OLLI and PLATO have when two learning organizations come together under one umbrella. It was helpful to learn from others, and to share insights about the process.

There are currently more than 86,000 active members of OLLIs and their affiliated programs across the country. The courses, events, social activities and membership benefits available in each OLLI uniquely reflect local character and learner needs of the area. Peer-led discussion groups, bus tours, lectures, and courses are fairly common across all of the OLLIs. However, by the end of the conference, it became clear that the depth of content, the breadth of learner choices, the contributions of the volunteers, and the level of institutional support in our own OLLI/PLATO collaboration was unmatched. It was agreed that the conference was an excellent experience.

This was the fourth OLLI National Conference where UW-Madison senior learning was represented in some capacity, and it was the second time a PLATO president attended. Conferences occur every 12 to 18 months, and each OLLI may send two representatives (an administrator and a volunteer). Katy Duren from Continuing Studies and Judy King from PLATO attended the last conference in the spring of 2008.
Record Numbers Audit Classes in Fall 2009

The PLATO Special Events Committee sponsored a special informational session in early August to raise awareness about the opportunity for OLLI/PLATO members to audit UW-Madison courses for free. Martin Rouse from Continuing Studies described the Senior Guest Auditing program and application process to a standing room-only crowd of 97 members. Auditors sit in on lecture courses and learn from top UW faculty without the obligations of tests, papers, homework, or class participation. It is not necessary to have completed any formal education or attained any degrees to participate. One only needs to be a verifiable Wisconsin Resident, age 60 or older, to take advantage of this resource.

Applying for admission as a Senior Guest Auditor is essential to being able to participate in the program. Once admitted and enrolled, Senior Guest Auditors are considered full-fledged UW-Madison students, with a UW ID card and access to a variety of campus facilities and resources, including campus libraries and computer labs.

There were more than 330 Senior Guest Auditors enrolled at UW-Madison during the Fall, 2009 semester. According to enrollment records, that number exceeded the Fall, 2008 by at least 120 people. Nearly 90 OLLI/PLATO members audited courses, 70% of them for the first time. The attendance at the first information session, and the number who ended up enrolling indicates that the Special Events Committee experienced success with this endeavor.

Similar information sessions will be held for members before each fall and spring term. Those interested can also contact the Adult and Student Services Center in Continuing Studies by calling 608-263-6960 or visiting www.dcs.wisc.edu.

Challenges/Opportunities Facing PLATO Due to Increasing Membership

Earlier this fall Marv Beatty, current PLATO President, appointed an ad-hoc committee to explore the issues and opportunities confronting PLATO due to the continuing growth of PLATO membership, and to report back to the Board with recommended strategies. PLATO has had a naturally occurring increase in membership of about 100 per year with no active membership recruitment. However, there is a significant financial incentive to increase PLATO membership to at least 1,000. (The University is eligible to receive a $1,000,000 endowment from the Osher Foundation to support Senior Learning Activities when this benchmark is achieved.) The Board has decided that it is in PLATO’s interest to help achieve this goal by the fall of 2010.

The committee has a draft set of recommendations for short-term recruitment strategies that the Board will be considering over the next few months. However, the committee in its deliberations became acutely aware that there are a number of larger issues/challenges that OLLI/PLATO will need to address as the membership continues to grow beyond the short term goal of having 1,000 members.

Some of these are listed below.

• The organization is at a point in terms of maturity and growth that it is important to clarify who we want to be. There is a need to maintain our mission and vision, while at the same time acknowledging that we are changing.

• It is expected that membership will continue to grow because of historical trends and changing demographics. The over-65 population in Dane County is expected to increase from 50,000 to over 80,000 in the next decade. This raises, among other issues, the question of “How big is too big?” Do we need to begin actively managing the rate of growth?

• The pressure on class sizes and the need for new classes clearly makes the work of the Curriculum Committee more complex. Maintaining quality programs and preserving the participatory nature of discussion groups is a crucial consideration.

• Diversifying membership is important to encourage a broad range of ideas. While race and ethnicity are very important dimensions of diversity, it also includes geographic representation, income level, education, political views, religious views, etc. All of this raises the question about how we welcome and value difference in our membership.

• All ideas and solutions that we implement will have significant implications for the standing committees (Curriculum, Special Events, Outreach, and University Relations). Managing the workload of these committees and promoting member involvement in them will be crucial.

• A great strength of PLATO has always been the willingness of members to involve themselves in all aspects of keeping the organization strong. This will be crucial as membership increases.
Members Now have Access to UW Libraries

Within the past several months, OLLI/PLATO members have learned the details of a recent agreement with UW Libraries enabling us to acquire library Courtesy Cards. With these cards, we have access to—and borrowing privileges from—all 27 UW libraries.

Undoubtedly many members already have library cards from one source or another, but for those who do not, and indeed for some who do, this is an exceptional opportunity. If you are one of those who has been paying $15 annually for a “fee” library card, your membership now gives you essentially the same library access. That is, you can now save $15/year and still receive most of the same library privileges.

To date only a handful of Platonites have taken advantage of this new membership benefit, perhaps because it appears at first blush to be potentially daunting. But it is not. A separate page in a recent mailing outlined not only the benefits of a Courtesy Card but the straightforward steps to acquire one. If, oh most terrible of shames, that page has disappeared into your circular file, it is now posted on PLATO’s Web site.

Although the Courtesy Card provides access to all of the University’s libraries—business, engineering, agriculture, music and so on—the Memorial Library itself will likely be for most members the crown jewel. Beyond the mere utility of this library’s vast collection, there is the satisfaction, indeed the wonder, of exploring, of “shopping in,” or just wandering through those seemingly endless rows of filed and stacked books. On a recent visit to Memorial Library I was seeking a book or books on a particular aspect of Irish history. What to my wondering eyes should appear were not just the particular books I sought, but over 200 feet of shelf space devoted to books on Irish history. Oh most marvelous of treasures!

Taking advantage of Memorial Library does in fact require a bit of navigational assistance. One needs to know, physically, where things are—the Information Desk, the circulation counters, etc. One also needs to be able to use the electronic card file (which is really quite intuitive, and can be accessed from your personal computer). And of course the stacks are labyrinthine, but they are also well-organized and logical. All in all, the library IS quite doable. And for those who feel the need for some coaching, if there appears to be sufficient interest within PLATO’s membership, we’ll schedule this spring a special “navigate-your-library” session.

Without question, access to UW libraries is a significant boon to members. The libraries’ resources are waiting for us to exploit, the library staff encourages us to do just that, and, doing so, we are rewarded with unparalleled opportunities to continue lifelong learning.

New Curriculum Committee Chairs

Jessie Gwynne and Judy King have replaced Judy Sadowsky as co-chairs of the Curriculum Committee.

Many thanks to Judy Sadowsky for her many years of excellent service on this committee. Judy is turning in her Curriculum Committee Chairperson hat so she can take on the role of PLATO President later this spring.

Welcome New Members

PLATO extends a warm welcome to all our new members. We’re glad to have you aboard and look forward to your presence and participation in our discussion groups. We hope you enjoy your classes!

In Memory of Ivar Lohman

Ivar Lohman, age 92, a charter member of PLATO and an indefatigable leader and participant in Discussion Groups for over twenty years, passed away on September 26, 2009.

Ivar was one of the 39 artisans who laid PLATO’s foundation, and from that point on he continuously helped construct an edifice on that foundation. We who today occupy this edifice are the beneficiaries of his labors. He was a fixture in many PLATO activities over the years, particularly classes in literature, philosophy and religion, and his enthusiasm for the PLATO learning and teaching model never flagged. His zest for life, his continuing quest for understanding, and his willingness to challenge and be challenged in the sometimes give-and-take discussions that are the heart and soul of PLATO, were an inspiration to those of us fortunate enough to have been part of those sessions.

Ivar was also an inspiration outside PLATO’s classrooms, for his life and retirement years were anything but one dimensional. He was as active physically as mentally. He hiked, canoed, danced, bicycled and played the bassoon with the same zeal we witnessed in PLATO’s classes. Indeed, until almost the very end, no matter that the weather might be cold and blustery, he cheerfully pedaled his bicycle to attend the classes that were so important to him.

To know Ivar was to know an unassuming, unpretentious, and unfailingly courteous man. Using lines from one of his favorite poems, many of us had the opportunity to understand first hand what Wordsworth meant when he wrote of “that best portion of a good man’s life, his little, nameless, unremembered, acts of kindness and of love.”

In his passing we have lost a good man and an untiring champion for our organization. Rest in peace, Ivar.
SPECIAL EVENTS/LECTURES for Spring 2010

We want to make you aware of the following events and lecture opportunities available to you. Mark your calendars now!

Spring Preview
February 17, 2010, Madison Senior Center, 330 W. Mifflin St., 1:30-3:30 pm
Come hear all about the fall line-up of PLATO discussion groups, which feature several new offerings. After a brief summary of each, you will be able to ask questions of discussion leaders and sign up for the groups of your choice. No registration necessary.

Lecture: Wisconsin Maritime History and Underwater Archeology
March 24, 2010, Capitol Lakes Retirement Center, Lecture Hall, 333 West Main St., 1:00-2:30 pm
Keith Meverden, Wisconsin Historical Society, will provide an overview of Wisconsin Maritime history and then will discuss his work as an underwater archeologist documenting Great Lakes shipwrecks. He will talk about how they go about documenting wrecks and will provide a Powerpoint video of Great Lakes shipwrecks that have been found, including the famous Christmas tree ship. As an underwater archeologist with the Wisconsin Historical Society, Keith has worked on projects throughout the US Virgin Islands, Wisconsin and North Carolina, including the USS Monitor with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). He is an author and lecturer on varied Great Lakes topics, his primary interests include small Great Lakes sailing craft and the use of closed-circuit rebreathers in Great Lakes shipwreck exploration. His professional experience includes serving as a First Mate aboard the US Army’s landing craft in the Persian Gulf, a charter captain with a Master license and a commissioned officer in the US Coast Guard Reserve. His professional experience includes serving as a First Mate aboard the US Army’s landing craft in the Persian Gulf, a charter captain with a Master license and a commissioned officer in the US Coast Guard Reserve.

Lecture: Wisconsin’s Endangered Songbirds and Habitat Restoration Efforts in Costa Rica
April 23, 2010 (Earth Day). Presented by Craig Thompson, Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources. McKay Visitor’s Center, UW Arboretum, 1-2 pm.
Craig Thompson will provide an overview of Wisconsin’s songbirds that are facing stress and possible extinction because of the loss of winter habitat in developing Central and South American countries. This will be followed by a description of work by the Natural Resources Foundation to preserve and develop winter habitat for these birds. Registration deadline is April 20. Limited to 100 participants. No charge. Call 262-5823 or e-mail: wkerr@dcs.wisc.edu to sign up.

Bird Watching Event
May 19, 2010. Craig Thompson and several other songbird specialists will guide groups of 10-12 individuals on an early morning guided walk through the Arboretum to meet some of the birds he described during his lecture in April. Cost of this accompanied walk is $7.00 per person. (All proceeds will be donated to the Natural Resources Foundation to support the development of songbird habitat.) This walk will be limited to the first 50 people who register. Send your check (payable to UW OLLI) and the registration form enclosed in this Persimmon to Wendy Kerr at the OLLI-PLATO Office, 21 N. Park St., 7th Fl., Madison, WI 53715. More details coming. To learn more about the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, see www.nrfwis.org/

Annual Member Luncheon
May 24, 2010. Marriott Madison West, 13 John Q. Hammons Dr., (Middleton), 11:30 am-1:30 pm.
An invitation and RSVP form will be mailed later this spring.

Global Hot Spots Lecture Series
This series features talks by expert UW faculty on current international issues, highlighting the role of UW-Madison in a global society. It is co-sponsored by UW OLLI, PLATO, a program of OLLI, the Wisconsin Alumni Association and the Division of International Studies.
• Friday, Jan. 29
• Friday, Feb. 19
• Friday, Mar. 12
• Thursday, Apr. 22
1:30-2:30 pm, The Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., UW-Madison campus. For subject of lecture go to: www.uwalumni.com/global_hotspots.aspx No charge. Call 262-5823 to register.

CALS Lecture Series: Wisconsin’s Best
Alumni, faculty, staff, students and friends of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences are encouraged to participate in this series, which will focus on Wisconsin food products that are industry leaders in research or production. University and industry experts will provide an insider’s look into various aspects of the development, cultivation, processing and marketing of these food staples. For more information, contact Jeremy Traska at 608-890-2549, jtraska@cals.wisc.edu; or see www.cals.wisc.edu/wibest/

Eloquence and Eminence: Emeritus Lecture Series
The Division of Continuing Studies, the Institute on Aging, and the Anonymous Committee are proud to sponsor the 16th annual award-winning series of Sunday Afternoon Lectures by retired UW faculty known for their teaching excellence and scholarship. Refreshments are served following each talk. Sun., Mar. 21: “All You Ever Wanted to Know about American Indians but Were Afraid to Ask” Ada Deer, Dept. of Social Work & American Indian Studies. Sun., Apr. 25: “Something of the Eternal: The Art of Vincent Van Gogh” Michael Hinden, Dept. of English and International Studies. 2-3 pm, The Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., UW-Madison campus. Free, no registration required.