

Honor Societies & Social Responsibility

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This is an opportune time to think about the role of college honor societies in American life. I say this not just because so many societies – like so many other voluntary organizations – are seeing sharp drops in membership. I say it because of the role honor societies can play in the general discourse on social responsibility and, by extension, on democratic accountability.

It is no startling revelation that core American institutions are experiencing a collective and fundamental crisis of legitimacy. A troubling percentage of citizens now regard their social, religious, political, and economic institutions as unaccountable, unrepresentative, and, worst, undemocratic.

In part this crisis is the result of a long erosion in the nation's social capital – a thesis put forth forcefully by Robert Putnam in his magisterial study, *Bowling Alone* – as Americans increasingly turned away from active participation in voluntary organizations, in the process weakening the bonds that connect individuals to a greater good. We point to an array of factors to explain these trends: greater mobility and loosened social ties stemming from post-WWII migration and suburbanization; the migration of women into the workplace, leaving fewer available to work for and operate civic groups; the isolating impacts of television and, today, the internet.

Whatever the cause, the effect is that too many Americans have become passive bystanders in the everyday maintenance of civic life. In the process, they have lost touch with the institutions at the core of civil society.

Not that these institutions haven't earned their loss of status. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church cannot be surprised if the faithful fall away upon absorbing the impact of decades of collusion in covering up the crimes of predatory priests. Nor can we be shocked if the collapse of business titans like Enron, AIG, and Merrill Lynch undermines citizens' belief in the fairness of the nation's economic system. The bankruptcies of GM and Chrysler are especially damaging to the psyche of America's industrial middle class, in many ways signaling the end of a contract between workers and employees that younger generations won't believe ever existed.

Even more harmful are the widespread perceptions that our governing institutions failed in their fundamental duties to protect the public good in any of these instances. Where, citizens ask, was the Securities and Exchange Commission when Wall Street firms devised ever riskier and opaque investment? Where was the Federal Reserve when banks began to fail? Where was Congress?

Their failures lead to ever more prevalent beliefs that governing institutions and leaders are simply agents of the affluent and powerful. Skepticism (bordering on paranoia) about governing institutions is a longstanding meme on the margins of American political culture, but recently it has become a common refrain, with increasingly ugly overtones.

Left unaddressed, such beliefs are dangerous to the continued maintenance of democracy. If the framers of the Constitution fretted about the "mischiefs of faction," to use James Madison's

elegant turn of phrase, they worried even more about the need for governing institutions to maintain accountability, responsibility, and legitimacy in the eyes of citizens.

Seen in this light, drops in honor society membership are not mere reflections of economic bad times. Rather, they are indicators of this broader erosion in legitimacy. Or, to put it bluntly, honor societies are suffering from an absence of perceived relevance. Students are searching for greater social meaning. They want more than a notch on the resume.

What to do?

In the broader scheme of things, we as citizens need to be more active participants in a more meaningful civil society. We need to reweave frayed social ties, rebuild institutions, and reconnect ourselves to each other and to the broader community.

Without meaning to, honor societies feed into a simplistic portrayal of the individual as the sole determiner of his or her fate. That portrayal is false – Who of us has ever succeeded without help? More important, it is unappealing to a current generation of students seeking stronger social connections and deeper meaning.

So honor societies can play a useful role in promoting the notion that with privilege comes duty. That is, while continuing to recognize individual merit, honor societies can and should reinforce the value that *with honor comes responsibility*.

This is an ancient value. And, by reviving an ethos of merit *and* responsibility, honor societies can help to reconnect individual honors to a broader social meaning. Any talk about “social responsibility” that fails to make such a connection will be seen for what it is, empty rhetoric.

In the end, then, it is not about the resume. This generation of students, already seared by economic uncertainty and searching for stronger and more tangible social connections, wants to know that there is deeper meaning in their associations. They will join your society if they see some socially useful reason to do so.

So give them a reason. They will benefit. So will you. And so will the nation.