



EDITORIAL

Social Responsibility

We represented Tau Beta Pi a few weeks ago in Boston, MA, at the annual meeting of the Association of College Honor Societies. Professor and Associate Dean Christopher J. Bosso of the school of public policy and urban affairs, Northeastern University, presented his thoughts on honor societies and social responsibility, which provide the foundation for this article. His remarks were based on the book *Bowling Alone*, by Dr. Robert D. Putnam in 2000 that described the changing behavior of Americans during the previous quarter century. Putnam identified and wrote of the reasons for the decline of *joining* in the United States. During that same period and beyond, Tau Beta Pi watched the gradual, steady decline of interest by engineering students in Society membership.

Dr. Bosso believes that Americans in recent years have lost their faith in the “legitimacy” of institutions in general because of well-publicized major breaches of trust. These include leadership failures in large national charities, ethical and criminal failures in international corporations, errant clergy, preachers, and teachers in churches and schools, cheating athletes in many sports who use steroids and human-growth hormones, non-objective scientists, and the U.S. government seemingly at the beck and call of the rich and powerful. The decline in joining and the loss of faith combine to form the “heart of a big problem.”

What can be done? Dr. Bosso believes that “citizens need to stop dropping out and have got to force government to change. Government must fix itself.” There can be no democracy in this nation without active participating citizens. There is a real need to promote the general welfare. We the people must encourage ourselves and our associates to join worthwhile institutions to help us replenish our social contacts.

What can Tau Beta Pi and our sister societies do? We know that honor societies recognize “individual merits.” However, this intense focus on the individual can have a down side in promoting the general societal welfare. The formal language of “heroic individualism” ignores the fact that each one of us has arrived where we are with the help of many others. During the last decade or so, engineering education has increased its emphasis on teamwork. Although individual accomplishments are often recognized, most of our work projects and successes in general are achieved through group effort.

Tau Beta Pi membership is based upon individual merit, but “responsibility” comes with merit. *Noblesse oblige* is a concept that Tau Bates have understood for 125 years. Our Association and its leaders have promoted social responsibility and encouraged “giving back,” and many members and chapters comply despite their busy schedules.



With 5,000 new initiates already on the books (vs. 4,400 typical) this academic year, we note that chapters seem to be following our emphasis and encouragement to “initiate one more electee” at each ceremony. Membership is climbing at a three percent annual rate for the third consecutive year. Students are seeking “greater values.” Joining Tau Beta Pi allows them to become part of a greater organization that multiplies the muscle of its members and achieves noteworthy national results.

As we congratulate our chapters that conduct worthwhile projects to benefit others, each of us needs to promote the message of the importance of social responsibility.

J.D.F.

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