

# Feature Introduction from the Tau Beta Pi Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee

BY CHRIS C. McCOMB, PH.D., CALIFORNIA RHO '12

Tau Beta Pi was founded with the goal “to mark in a fitting manner those who have conferred honor upon their Alma Mater by distinguished scholarship and exemplary character.” Historically, this effort has centered around college campuses where chapters focus their operations to fulfill our founding goal. We boast over 629,000 total members, 255 chapters, and 49 active alumni chapters, but focusing only on these numbers isn’t enough.

**We know more now than we did in 1885**, when our Association was founded. We understand more about the mechanics of systemic bias, power imbalance, and systems of oppression. And it is time for us to grapple with the bias in our own history. As far as we know, the first Black member of Tau Beta Pi was initiated in 1916 (Lewis King Downing, *MI F 1921*); the first woman was initiated in 1969 (Lynne Marie Bergbreiter, *MI A 1970*); and yet, Black and women engineers are still far underrepresented in the profession compared to their white male counterparts. While we are happy to celebrate the accomplishments of those who succeed with less privilege, we shoulder no accountability, and pursue no justice.

**Talent is evenly distributed, but opportunity is not.** Although that may overly simplify the issue, it is fundamentally true that opportunity variability is the dominant factor in who succeeds and who falls behind in life, while talent alone is less impactful. This means that those who rise to the top of honor roles and valedictorian lists are often those who have had more doors opened for them.

**I am inspired by the efforts of so many in our Association** to remedy inequities in our Association and profession. I walk in the footsteps of Tonya Whitehead, Stephan King-Monroe, Menna Youssef, and so many others who are already working on this effort. I was honored to work with the DEI Committee at the 2022 Convention and saw the energy of this generation. I am sure that there are many other efforts across chapters, working towards the same goal.

**It is time for us to do better.** I call on every member of Tau Beta Pi to join in using our privilege to grow an equitable abundance of opportunity in all of the facets of engineering. I call on alumni and student chapters to not only grow their initiation pool, but to lengthen and broaden the pathways to membership. Let ours be no stationary goal. Rather than being content to mark in a *fitting manner those who have conferred honor upon their Alma Mater*, let us instead ensure that all who may *one day* confer honor on their alma mater have the opportunity to do so. We must do better in offering visionary leadership to the profession.

**The following article, co-authored by one of our own alumni**, offers concrete recommendations and highlights considerations that are vital for us to address as we move forward. Reflect on the words, take a deep breath, and then join us in the work.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Chris McComb is an associate professor of mechanical engineering and Director, Human+AI Design Initiative at Carnegie Mellon University. He serves TBPI as a District 3 Director, an advisor to the Pennsylvania Beta Chapter, and by serving on the DEI Committee.

**“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you can, do better.”**

— Maya Angelou



Lewis King Downing, Ph.D.



Lynne Marie Bergbreiter



Chris McComb, Ph.D.