Enough For Tau Beta Pi?

Student chapters work hard on their campuses to promote the Association, gain new members, and have a "successful" year... How do we define "success"? When have they done enough?

f OR MOST of you reading this article, May 1 is just another day—the first one of the fifth month. It's a Wednesday in 2013. For me, May 1 is the deadline for this article. In my "work" life, May 1 is smack in the middle of the most chaotic week of the year: Spring Final Exams. The entire academic year builds up to this moment, the end of a long marathon. After a short (summer) recovery period, we start the race again.

This is also the time of transition for most Tau Beta Pi collegiate chapters. Old officers are graduating; new officers are curious and excited. It is a time to reflect back on the past year, and look forward to the next one. What does this transition look like? I thought it might be helpful to provide a glimpse into the chapter for which I am Chief Advisor—SC Alpha at Clemson University.

How Much Is Enough?

The number of projects completed by a chapter has risen dramatically. In 1976, they averaged three activities a year; in 1985, nine a year. In 2012, chapters winning Chapter Project Awards for outstanding project activity averaged 27 projects, while the overall Association averaged 12 per chapter.

As we fill out the required Chapter Survey and Chapter Project Reports, we find ourselves asking if we have done enough to continue to win an award. For those unfamiliar with this process, a note of explanation:

The Chapter Survey is a required report, asking the chapters to summarize everything from initiation data to chapter practices to use of marketing materials. They must indicate the number of projects completed. Then, for each project, a Project Report must be completed. These reports are read by Headquarters and judged for quality, quantity, percentage of membership participation, and breadth of projects. Rankings are compiled, and the top 20 or so schools receive a Chapter Project Award at Convention. The rankings also determine who makes the "short list" to be considered for awards like the R.C. Matthews or R.H. Nagel. If a chapter wins a Chapter Project Award three years in a row, it receives a $500 scholarship every year, as long as the chapter continues to win the award.

Our Chapter has been fortunate—we have won this award for the past four years. This is a blessing, but a bit of a curse. Each spring, we reflect back and debate if we have done enough to win another award, but there is no firm measure for comparison. Some sample projects we have conducted this year include:

• A student organization fair to introduce freshmen

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to the various engineering organizations they can join;
• Two *Mix and Mingle with Your Major* nights for freshmen, one each semester. Freshmen can meet upperclassmen, alumni and faculty to help choose a major;
• Two K-12 outreach programs, one in February for elementary students and one in April for middle/high school students;
•Initiation of an Eminent Engineer, who spoke at the fall initiation about leadership and the new Leadership Program in Engineering at Clemson {thanks Bob Hambright!};
• On the social side...a movie night and a trivia/ice cream night each semester;
• Helped with the Habitat for Humanity house build during homecoming week;
• T-Shirt sales to prospective students, 20 Friday afternoons, as a fundraiser. A portion of the proceeds benefit the Emerson Rose Heart Foundation;
• Operated a continuous canned food drive for Clemson Community Care;
• Oh, and two initiation cycles that require multiple meetings and the ceremony...and multiple Bent polishing days...and a breakfast officers meeting every three weeks...and two members attended the national Convention...and five members attended the district conference...and...

I need to pause and admit that SC Alpha has an amazing team of advisors, which I am privileged to be a part of—I don't want you thinking I helped the chapter with all these activities by myself!

I could go on, but you get the idea. We have had, by all accounts, a very busy, productive year. But we still find ourselves asking if we have done enough. I find myself lacking an answer for my students. It sounds hollow to say, "We tried our best" and, "You did a great job even if we don't win an award."

How Many Is Enough?

One of the factors that create the internal doubt is lack of membership. As a reminder from my previous article:

In Spring 2012, only 24% of the eligible candidates nationwide were elected, and less than 14% of the candidates nationwide were actually initiated. In 2011, there were 102,102 juniors and 144,683 seniors enrolled in engineering programs. If the top 1/8 of the juniors and top 1/5 of the seniors were eligible and everyone accepted, this would put membership at 41,700...not the 14,600 current undergraduate members.

Here at SC Alpha, we had a good year in terms of membership. In the fall, out of 251 prospective members,

we initiated 35; translation: 14%, the national average. In the spring, the chapter made it a priority to try and get new members. Students valiantly attempted to hand out personal invitations for membership to the 290 eligible students to supplement the usual email notification. We were on track to initiate 102 new members, but in the end wound up with only 69 completing the ceremony. While this is a superb 24% and the highest ratio we have had in several years, it just doesn't seem like enough. We failed to "close the deal" on 33 prospective members who showed an interest in the organization. Perhaps more alarming, we failed to even get a response from most of the 193 other eligible students.

How Do We Achieve "Enough"?

I sat down with the outgoing president (Jackson) and the incoming president (Sergey) and we discussed our membership "problem." Here is part of our conversation:

What is the biggest challenge to SC Alpha membership?

Jackson: It is recognition across campus. We have our Bent in front of one of the main engineering buildings and people walk by it, and they don't know what it is. It would be great if we got more support from the administration and the faculty in the different departments.

Sergey: We have taken the secrecy portion and not that we tried to apply it, but we stayed secret to the point that even members don't know [much] about it. Exposure is the major issue.

Do you think students are just too busy with other things? Do we have too many requirements for membership? (SC A requires three events per semester.)

Jackson: I think people don't see the benefits of joining. That is where the challenge lies—how to more attractive, more compelling to become involved. For example, yes, there are scholarships, and yes, real people do win them! TBΠ prides itself on being able to give many scholarships and fellowships to members, and if you can say your chapter is competitive at the national level for these awards, more students will want to try to attain that same level.

Sergey: We need to make each event interesting for them to want to take time away from studying to attend, to enjoy the event. For service, you need to (personalize) who you are helping. If you collect canned food, but don't take it to the shelter to see the faces light up of the individuals thanking you, you never see the reactions to your effort.

Jackson: There is a good cohort of eligible students who… chose their organizations as freshman and have stuck with them through the years. By the time they are juniors or seniors, they are leaders of these organizations and highly involved. That is why you need to show why TBΠ is different to their departmental organizations.

So what would you tell them – why should they join us?

Jackson: TBΠ presents a unique opportunity to interact with engineers from other disciplines, which you don't get when you surround yourself with people from your department. This mimics the workforce. Being able to foster those relationships with people in other departments—I think TBΠ represents a great opportunity to do that. Again, scholarships and fellowships are a huge benefit.

Sergey: Other student groups do not have as strong a state, district, or national organization. We are able to consistently interact with other members not just in our chapter but all across the nation.

So what do we need to do? What are our action items?

Jackson: We need to showcase national activities our chapter is involved in. Use a PowerPoint photo montage to highlight "This is convention, this is my committee, this is what we did…"; words can only convey so much. This would show the external structure of TBΠ that most members do not know exists.

Sergey: We need to hear more from alumni. When I was a prospective member, we saw a video where they had members and alumni explaining why they joined TBΠ and what the Society means to them. When you can see a student you know, a professor, and then alumni expressing how important TBΠ is, it ties it all together.

How do you even get people to the meeting? You can show all this great stuff…but how do you get them in the door? Why do over 75% of eligible students not even respond?

Jackson: Probably because they think TBΠ is just another honor society to pour their money into and not get anything in return aside from the name. As a freshman, you join XXX, YYY, ZZZ—which acknowledge academic achievement. So students toss TBΠ off as another one of "those"; another line on your resume that you paid for. They don't really understand it. Getting current members to invite prospective members, like we did this semester, is important to put a face to TBΠ.

Sergey: We need to step up our game on more modern communication. I'm not sure what that path would incorporate, but not necessarily paper invitations. Some more modern way to get that message across is key.

How Much Is Enough?

At the national convention, and sometimes at district conferences, we run a program called ICE—Interactive Chapter Exchange—as a way to help chapters discuss problems they are having and come up with solutions. This is often the most popular, giving students a chance to voice to frustrations and a take away of action items.

In the evolution of the program, we have found the same issues arising every year. We now cut to the chase, and provide a list of problems to kickstart discussion. I feel like I am caught in the same situation when dealing with my chapter. Every year, we begin with the same problems:

We need more exposure on campus, more alumni involvement, and more university support.

It is clear we are reaching the point where we need to push not only student members but also our alumni to stand up and say we matter. This is clearly a problem our student officers cannot solve alone. We need to find a way to reward all students and chapters for their time and effort, even if they don't win a national award or increase their membership, even if they don't meet the mark to win that scholarship again. We need to bring meaning to their undergraduate experience, allowing them to carry that record of accomplishment forward, so when they look back they can say Tau Beta Pi matters.