

Why Tau Beta Pi?

One! I'm surprised he started with just one. I've often wondered where we would be today if he had said no...What if Irving Andrew Heikes had refused the invitation to join Tau Beta Pi extended by Professor Williams due to lack of interest?

aS A DISTRICT Director and Chief Advisor, I am often asked by students "Why should I join Tau Beta Pi?" When I started this position in 1996, I felt better equipped to answer the question than I do today. I often find myself trying to sell students on the merits of membership, and it is often not an easy sell. I hope through this series of articles to help readers understand the difficulties facing today's chapters with regards to membership; what has changed from 20–30 years ago; why do students choose membership, and why do they decline; why do some alumni choose to stay active; and finally highlight some chapters who are making a difference in their membership process.

I hope that by starting a dialogue about membership, current members will gain insight into the answer to the "Why" and be able to help grow our membership. Before we get to a solution, however, we must first examine the problem. Several years ago, the Association began encouraging chapters to "Initiate One More!", a program to encourage chapters to grow their membership by "one more" initiate each year.

The results from the 2011–2012 academic year show 110 chapters met this goal...but 120 chapters did not. Only eight chapters initiated all candidates. New member totals continue to cycle; while up from the recent low of 7,028 for 2000–2001, the number has yet to return to its peak of 13,254 in 1983–84.

The good news is that while engineering bachelor degrees have climbed 13% between 2007–2011, TBI realized a 16% increase in membership over the same period. However, the overall picture is still bleak. 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.

Students on college campuses today make up the last part of the Millennial Generation. While exact generational dates vary, Millennials are typically defined as students who were born between 1977 and 1992. This generation is very different in some respects from the previous generations of Baby Boomers or Gen Xers. Each year I enjoy reading the *Mindset List*, published by Nief and McBride from Beloit College, started in 1998 as a way for faculty to understand the frame of reference of incoming college students. For

example, did you know that this year's first time freshman students were born in 1994 and...



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- They have never seen an airline "ticket"
- They can't picture people actually carrying luggage through airports rather than rolling it
- Women have always piloted war planes and space shuttles
- Star Wars* has always been just a film, not a defense strategy
- Astronauts have always spent well over a year on a single space flight
- Amazon has never been just a river in South America
- Electric cars have always been humming in relative silence on the road
- They have never had to "shake down" an oral thermometer
- Women have always outnumbered men in college
- There have always been flat screen televisions
- The Hubble Space Telescope has always been eavesdropping on the heavens

The competition to be admitted to a top university is intense. Students enrolled today began planning their college experience in seventh grade. From honors classes, to

Advanced Placement classes, to extracurricular activities, they are busier than ever. There are 34 Advanced Placement courses offered today and in 2011 over 540,000 high school graduates received a score of 3 or higher on at least one exam, giving them college credit for their classes. Many students enter college today classified as second-semester freshman or sophomores due to Advanced Placement credits.

What If He Had Said No?

Today's youth have been raised on the concept of "well-rounded", and many participate in multiple extracurricular activities. According to one report, 80% of Millennial high school students participate in community service, up from 27% twenty years ago. Once they come to college, this flurry of activity continues.

The choices for participation in honor societies begin as early as the second semester of their freshman year. Students today are overwhelmed with invitations to join honor societies. When Professor Williams began TBI, there was only one other honor society—Phi Beta Kappa. Today, there are 67 honor societies recognized by the Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS), and a quick Wikipedia search yields a list of over 150 collegiate honor societies.

Another trait of Millennial college students today is instant gratification. Top students are accustomed to being

recognized frequently for being a top student. They require regular feedback to know how they are progressing. Admission into honor societies early in their academic career provides the reinforcement they are seeking. Many of these freshman and sophomore societies have lower academic requirements than TBPI. Originally, The Association had a membership requirement of the top 25% of the senior class; this policy was changed to the top 20% in 1941. Today, this is one of the strictest membership policies for all honor societies. Since the individual discipline societies have junior standing membership requirements of the top 20-33% of the class, many students join their departmental societies before they are even offered membership in Tau Beta Pi.

What If He Had Said No?

In addition to our scholastic requirement, students must also prove their character, typically by completing a set of tasks that now include service and social events. The number and scope of these events has risen over the years. In 1976, chapters averaged three activities a year; in 1985 nine a year. This year the chapters winning Chapter Project Awards for outstanding project activity averaged 27 projects, while overall they averaged 12 projects per chapter. To be considered for this award, chapters must complete activities in five of six categories: chapter/social, university/college, profession/engineering, community/liberal culture, education/professional development, and K-12/MindSET.

With all the requirements to join, many students refuse membership due to time restrictions, or they simply do not respond to the invitation. Typical responses I hear as a Chief Advisor are:

- Unfortunately I'm already a member of a few organizations on campus, and so I currently barely have time for all of them.
- I am already short on time this semester. In addition to school I have a part time internship, a part time job as a fitness instructor, and am vice president of XXXX. Since XXXX is the YY honor society, I am already a member of an engineering honors society.

Even if a student considers membership, adding to the confusion is the lack of differentiation among the societies. Can you match the society with the correct mission statement?

1. Golden Key
2. Lambda Sigma
3. Mortar Board
4. National Society of Collegiate Scholars
5. Sigma Gamma Tau
6. Tau Beta Pi

A. An honors organization that recognizes and elevates high achievers; provides career and graduate school connections, leadership and service experiences ... nearly half a million dollars in scholarships annually. Members are deeply committed to service, integrity and scholarship and, as a result, are impacting their campus and local communities every day.

B. To facilitate cooperation among honor societies, to contribute to the self-awareness of our members, to promote equal opportunities among all peoples, to emphasize the advancement of the status of women, to support the ideals of the university, to advance a spirit of scholarship, to recognize and encourage leadership, to provide service, and to establish the opportunity for a meaningful exchange of ideas as individuals and as a group.

C. To promote leadership, scholarship, fellowship, and service among students. Members and active participants serve and promote the interests of their institutions and communities.

D. The mission is to enable members to realize their potential. Our core values include integrity, collaboration, innovation, respect, diversity, excellence, and engagement.

E. To mark in a fitting manner those who have conferred honor upon their alma mater by distinguished scholarship and exemplary character and to foster a spirit of liberal culture.

F. To recognize and honor those individuals who have, through scholarship, integrity, and outstanding achievement, been a credit to their profession. The society seeks to foster a high standard of ethics and professional practice and create a spirit of loyalty and fellowship.

As a reader of THE BENT, I have confidence you could tell the statement for TBPI. But consider reading this list as a college student—or a parent—unfamiliar with any of these societies. Which one would you choose to join? (The answers are at the end of this article.)

What If He Had Said No?

Students and parents today rely on a strong web presence to see information about the societies. The website College Parents of America encourages obtaining information from the ACHS to seek proof the society is not a scam, and to find information about it. The ACHS was founded by six charter members in 1925:

- Alpha Omega Alpha [medical]
- Order of the Coif [law]
- Phi Beta Kappa [liberal arts]
- Phi Kappa Phi [all fields]
- Sigma Xi [scientific research]
- Tau Beta Pi [engineering]

Sigma Xi and Phi Beta Kappa withdrew in the 1930s. In addition, three of the engineering major specific societies (Alpha Eta Mu Beta, Eta Kappa Nu, and Sigma Gamma Tau) are not ACHS members. These societies are well known and reputable, yet do not belong to this group. It is easy to understand how students can become confused in trying to determine if honor society participation is worthwhile.

How can chapters overcome the confusion, time constraints, and required commitments to increase membership? Well folks, the answers to those questions must wait until next time.

• *Answers:* A = 4; B = 3; C = 2; D = 1; E = 6; F = 5