

## Honors as Validation

DAN R. JONES, PRESIDENT

Texas A&M University – Commerce

HONORS DEAN: RAYMOND J. GREEN

Ever since I was inducted into the Junior National Honor Society in middle school, I have been engaged in honor societies and honors programs. I have experienced firsthand the profound impact such distinctions can have on students' personal and intellectual development as well as their positive effects on the academic character of institutions.

As a student, my induction into an honor society stirred feelings of pride, authenticity, and determination. Academically high-achieving students often find themselves marginalized from other forms of recognition such as those associated with athletic excellence and leadership in student organizations. For these students, the recognition of excellence in academic achievement can be an important affirmation of their discipline, hard work, and intellectual gifts.

Later, in high school, I received an award from the National Council of Teachers of English. Although I hardly knew it at the time, I now realize that this award was a turning point in my life. It provided external validation of a gift for writing and story-telling I possessed, but of which I was only dimly aware.

For me, the award was far more than a pat on the back for a job well done; it guided me in the choice of a college major and, ultimately, of a profession. On display in my office are a number of diplomas and other impressive-looking awards I have received over the last forty years. None means more to me than the modest framed certificate for “excellence in high school English” that is prominently positioned in their midst.

As an undergraduate, I was inducted into Phi Kappa Phi and Phi Beta Kappa, and I participated as well in the honors program in English at my university. At the time, I viewed these recognitions as résumé builders and listed them conspicuously on job applications in hopes that a prospective employer would be impressed. Their real value, though, lay in the way they helped me develop the intellectual self-confidence I would need to be successful in the competitive world of higher education.

My association with honor societies and programs did not end with graduation. As a faculty member and administrator, I have come to appreciate even more the value that these affiliations bring to institutions. After my initial induction into Phi Kappa Phi as an undergraduate, I am proud to have played a role in chartering three new PKP chapters: Chapter 265 at the University of Houston-Downtown, Chapter 296 at Texas A&M International University, and most recently Chapter 322 at Texas A&M University – Commerce. I have fond memories of the chartering ceremonies at each of these universities, especially the look of pride on the faces of inductees and family members in attendance. For some, the recognition may be remembered, if at all, simply as a passing event; however, I am certain that for others, the bestowal of honors will have the same profound and lasting impact that it has had for me.

The presence of honor societies and programs on a university campus is an important component of its reputation for excellence. We in higher education spend a great deal of time talking about the academic reputation of our institutions, as do our prospective students and their families; witness the much-pilloried but nonetheless widely read annual rankings published by *U.S. News & World Report*. While we may quibble with the methodologies employed by this or that ranking, reputation is one of the key drivers of choice when students and their families are making that all-important decision about which university to attend. Honor societies and honors programs can be an important factor in that decision and thereby bolster high-quality enrollment growth.

The institution at which I serve as president, Texas A&M University – Commerce, is a case in point. Nine years ago, my predecessor made a far-

sighted decision to establish an honors college. The college consists of two hundred high-achieving students, fifty in each class, each of whom receives a four-year, full-ride scholarship inclusive of tuition, fees, books, and room and board.

In its initial year, the honors college attracted some very well-qualified students. Applicants were, for the most part, in the top ten percent of their graduating class, with enviable scores on their ACTs and SATs, and with extensive records of leadership and extracurricular involvement at their high schools. As its reputation grew, the quality of applicants steadily improved. Members of the current freshman class are, on average, from the top 4.56 percent of their graduating class; other indicators of academic achievement have risen as well.

Several years ago, we were attracting so many highly qualified applicants that we created a spillover scholarship program that we named Regents Scholars. The benefits, while less generous, are still very attractive. The impact that these highly qualified students have had on the academic character of our university has been substantial. I seldom hear faculty complaints about unprepared students; now, faculty members clamor to teach honors sections. Because honors students have other honors students as friends, the number of high-achieving students who choose our university continues to increase, with a corresponding rise in the performance indicators we use to track the quality of our incoming students: ACT/SAT scores, high school GPAs, class rank, and so forth. As a result, we have been able to raise admission standards while sustaining robust growth. This year, our year-to-year growth is approaching ten percent. Most of that growth is in new students who were drawn here because of our academic reputation.

Honors programs have real and measurable value for students and institutions alike. As a student, I personally experienced how receiving distinction for honors can change the course of a life. As a professional educator, I have seen how institutions that find a prominent place for honor societies and programs thrive. The formal pursuit and recognition of academic honor does indeed create lasting value.

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President Jones may be contacted at  
[dan.jones@tamuc.edu](mailto:dan.jones@tamuc.edu).