

# The Role and Value of Honor Today: A Roundtable

By Mary Todd

As one who has worked in honors education on several college campuses, I've spent a fair amount of time thinking about honor — the word holds different meanings in different contexts: "I'm honored to be here ...," the Queen bestowing birthday honors, Scouting pledges that begin "on my honor," or marriage vows to love, honor, comfort and keep are just a few examples. Since even before accepting this position, I have been thinking about the value of honor to those we invite to membership and the sustained value of remaining an active member. We are currently working with membership consultants who ask those same questions.

Noted philosopher and public intellectual Kwame Anthony Appiah explores the notion of honor in his 2010 book, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*. He examines four distinct behaviors tied to honor — dueling, human enslavement, foot binding, and honor killings — and chronicles how redefining honor has led to changes in social norms regarding these activities. Appiah believes that "Attending to honor ... can help us both to treat others as we should and to make the best of our own lives." He extends that thought by adding, "if we can find the proper place for honor now, we can make the world better."

Making the best of ourselves and the world — such goals are often held before graduates by commencement speakers to encourage both individual personal growth and lifelong learning. But these goals also summarize well the mission of honor societies.

Since 2006, Phi Kappa Phi has participated in an informal gathering of like-minded honor societies. Together with the secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, the executive directors of Sigma Xi, Omicron Delta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi meet annually to discuss common issues and concerns and to share news and initiatives.

Known simply as the Honors Caucus, our meetings rotate among our office locations —the group was welcomed at Phi Kappa Phi's newly renovated offices in the spring.

In 2011-12 the Caucus focused its work on the development of a statement that is posted on each of our websites. Entitled "Why Accept Our Invitation?" the document was drafted in response to the plethora of honor societies available to college students these days and to address the reasons students should take seriously an invitation from Caucus societies. "Our invitations," the document explains, "recognize distinguished performance in study, research, or leadership, sustained over a period of years," for the purpose of each of our organizations "is to celebrate excellence in academics and integrity of character." You can find the statement at [http://www.phikappaphi.org/downloads/caucus\\_statement.pdf](http://www.phikappaphi.org/downloads/caucus_statement.pdf)

When it was decided that the summer 2014 issue of *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* would focus on the theme of honor, I thought immediately of asking my colleagues in the Caucus to join in something of a roundtable. We are, by the nature of our positions, all people whose daily work is infused with the word honor. As the idea took hold, we decided to ask the chairs of our respective boards to join us in the project.

So what follows is a "conversation in print" on the role and value of honor in today's society or culture. Sprinkled among the comments are additional thoughts on the role and value of honor societies.



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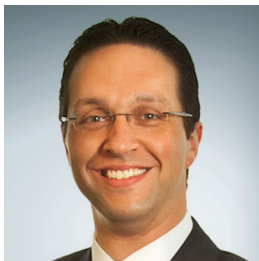
**Jerry Baker, Ph.D.**  
Executive Director, Sigma Xi,  
The Scientific Research Society

The role of honor in today's society is to create a plumb line against which we measure actions and behavior. We state that we honor someone, which might mean that we recognize them for a noble action or because of a position they hold. Those honorable attributes contribute to this plumb line and give us a measurement to which

we hold ourselves accountable.

When we honor someone we frequently are making

an inference about character. We imply that the individual is honest and trustworthy. There is also a linkage between being honored and being honorable. Yet, the height of character cannot be judged solely on honesty or position, but also on whether an individual puts their position at risk by standing up for those unable to stand up for themselves and holding all of society accountable to the plumb line. The value of showing gratitude is that everyone else may strive to make contributions to the greater good because we take time to recognize those who have already moved us forward. The founders of Sigma Xi in 1886 understood the timeless importance of honor, and through their constitution identified the term "come up higher" as encouragement to its members. I applaud our founders and also proclaim, *Ascende Superius!*



**Michael N. Christakis, Ph.D.**  
National President, Omicron Delta Kappa,  
The National Leadership Honor Society

Let's not underestimate the value of being truly exceptional.

While I don't necessarily share in the chorus of those who claim that we increasingly celebrate "mediocrity" in this country — that is, the notion that everyone is honored so that no one is excluded — I am of the mind that collegiate honor societies may be the last remaining

vestige for honoring and celebrating the small percentage of students who truly are exceptional on our campuses each year.

The vast majority of college students have already distinguished themselves from their peers by virtue of the fact that they chose to apply and were accepted to their respective

colleges. Further distinguishing those students who excel in the classroom, outside of the classroom, and in their communities is the unique opportunity that today's honor societies have to distinguish the great students from the good students.

Further, honor societies do more than simply honor, they also bring those whom they are honoring together — introducing exceptional students to other exceptional students. We honor hard work, we honor perseverance, we honor those who are exceptional now and, who will undoubtedly be, exceptional later.



**OMICRON DELTA KAPPA**  
The National Leadership Honor Society



**John Churchill, Ph.D.**  
Secretary, The Phi Beta Kappa Society

Phi Beta Kappa's fundamental purpose is to honor and advocate excellence in the liberal arts and sciences. By inducting about 19,000 students annually through our 283 chapters around the country, we honor them and their accomplishments. But in doing so, we also assert the importance of the studies in which they have excelled. Implicit in the honor is the claim of advocacy: that the liberal arts and sciences can be good for everyone. Phi Beta Kappa's current

project, our National Arts & Sciences Initiative, is designed to carry that message to those who shape American higher education.

Phi Beta Kappa does not simply single out for attention and admiration those who have done very well at something or other. The world is full of contests; the appetite for competitive spectacle seems insatiable. But we are not just honoring winners. Our mission

is to increase the influence, in the world, of humanity enlarged by engagement with the arts and sciences. Recognizing exceptions, it remains true that in general and for the most part, the



best way we know for the cultivation of the traits and capacities that tend to make us most fully human, is the pursuit of education in the arts and sciences.

That is why dignity attaches to these pursuits, whatever the student's level of attainment. That is why every American college student should have the opportunity to read and discuss important works, consider the structures of the human reality, and confront, even contribute to, scientific knowledge. It is increasingly evident that arts and sciences education is sound preparation for productive and remunerative careers in an unpredictable world. Further, democracy itself depends upon the widespread capacity to make reasonable, informed choices. Finally, the personal growth and fulfillment that come with immersion in the arts and sciences can themselves be transformative. Those who do very well should be honored, reflecting the dignity of the studies themselves, as well as the transformation they offer to all.



**Linda Meadows, Ph.D.**  
President, Sigma Xi

Honor is an enduring concept that is as valued today as it was in ancient times. In today's society, however, its cachet has been translated into a metric, value assigned according to what commodity it can produce for the bearer — promotion, tenure, scholarship, fellowship, elite admission, etc. Nonetheless, it is still recognized as a synecdoche for the apotheosis of achievement, representing the highest degree of excellence in doing and in being.

Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Society, is an honorary society that holds honor as a notable accomplishment in scientific research while adhering to a code of ethics that is the quintessence of respect for how research is conducted, for how scientific discourse is elevated, for how all members of the scientific community are esteemed and for

how science is served by its ambassadors. When nominated for

induction into Sigma Xi, a scientist or engineer is acclaimed by peers, validating and affirming the quality of the research and the caliber of the person. It is a moment of applause for the individual but more, its role is to lift high the scientific endeavor to create a light for all. The honor inspires members to lift up others and to serve science with the greatest distinction.







### Tara Singer, Ed.D.

#### Executive Director, Omicron Delta Kappa

Not long ago, one of our members said to me that he thought OΔK was “just an honor society.” He was surprised that our organization provided scholarships, partnered with other groups to offer leadership experiences, and had research and curriculum interests. He was focused on the recognition component of celebrating individual achievement, and yet, I think it is more important to concentrate on the educational potential of an honorable life.

When our society focuses on what it means to be honorable, we teach by example. Honoring individuals is a way that we express our values — whether they be excellence in scholarship or professional accomplishment. Beyond celebrating past performance, we also expect that these individuals will do the right and responsible thing when faced with a challenge. In many ways, all of us hope to learn from the examples they provide and to model our own behaviors on how they discharge their responsibilities with honor, loyalty and respect.

Focusing on leadership, honor, and education guides our daily decisions as we think about how we not only develop and educate our members but also how we contribute to the advancement and improvement of our society. Living an honorable life is education by example, and it is certainly worth celebrating.



### Diane G. Smathers, Ed.D.

#### President, The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi

Honor is responsibility; it is also rare. Honor is an obligation to think and act in ways that benefit the common good. Honor can be found in all sectors of society and at all socioeconomic levels. Whether CEO of a Fortune 500 company or president of the local PTA, whether an Olympic gold medalist or a spectator at a Little League baseball team, whether an elected official or a

recipient of food stamps — the way in which one fulfills responsibility determines if one is honorable.

The role of honor is to validate, to motivate, and to reward. If one fulfills his/her responsibility, the result is enhanced self-esteem, respect, pride and a sense of accomplishment. It is knowing that one has contributed positively to society. Research has shown that a sense of belongingness and wanting to be part of a greater whole are inherent in human beings. Thus, these outcomes of honor serve to motivate and guide one's behavior. Similarly, when one engages in honorable behavior, there is often reward. Reward validates and motivates, so the cycle becomes complete.

The value of honor is determined by its rarity. Within a free market, the cost of an object is what the consumer is willing to pay. Although intangible, honor is a benefit to society. Unfortunately, it is also a rare commodity. If honor were easy to achieve, everyone would uphold it; honor would be commonplace. Since that's not the case, the value of honor increases and becomes almost revered.



### Katherine R. Soule, MBA

#### President, The Phi Beta Kappa Society

Phi Beta Kappa's well-known emblem dates from our founding in 1776. In addition to the Greek letters themselves, our original key features a pointing hand gesturing toward a grouping of three stars. The stars, we learn, were stipulated to represent Literature, Friendship, and Morality. Since this gesture frames the letters

Phi Beta Kappa, with their meaning “Love of learning is the guide of life,” we can decipher the whole ensemble as saying this: “These are the stars to steer by.”



That assertion poses the question what these terms would have meant to our founders. “Literature,” in their time, may have meant something like learning in general. “Friendship,” we may suppose, they would have conceived — in addition to its convivial connotations — as a sort of league of mutual help in self-improvement. And “Morality,” likely a broad and empowering notion, would have

supplied a framework of earnest commitment.

So we can see that in their adoption of these terms, the founders of Phi Beta Kappa were not merely stringing together a series of high-sounding words. They were actually embracing a common purpose. It is as if they were saying, “We commit to helping each other strive, through learning, to live better lives.”

The word “honor” does not actually occur in this analysis. But arguably, honor is what it amounts to. Honor is directed toward learning, toward one's fellows, and toward the as-yet-unrealized selves our mutual efforts can aid us to become. In this rich sense, Phi Beta Kappa has, from its very beginning, conceived honor as arising from the shared pursuit of merited distinction, not the mere accumulation of personal accolades.



### Mary Todd, Ph.D.

#### Executive Director, The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi

As an undergraduate at Valparaiso University, I quickly learned what it meant to abide by an honor code — on every paper, quiz, and exam we were required to write this pledge in full: *I have neither given or received, nor have I tolerated others' use of unauthorized aid.* Students at Valpo still do.

As a teacher I wanted nothing more than to hold my students to the same expectation that my Valpo faculty held before me, but an honor code has to be embedded in the culture of an institution for it to be lived. When it is, academic integrity becomes the *mentalité* of a campus community. But when it's not, it remains an elusive expectation at best. Perhaps that's why honor codes are found on so few American colleges.

These many years later, I see more clearly than I did then how deeply living by an honor code permeated my being. Honor and honesty share a root word. But our culture sends mixed messages about those notions. Honors educators are used to hearing the critique of elitism when creating opportunities for the best students. Cheating scandals are heightened when discovered in military units or academies. Honorable people are frequently considered naïve.

Honor can be a deeply conflicting term. Or it can be an ethic. I like to think the invitation to an honor society implies not only recognition and esteem but also an expectation of excellence going forward. ♦

