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Academic Honor Societies Promote Both the Access and Quality Agendas

Jayne M Comstock, *Butler University*

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Finally, more people are making the connection: We must link access and quality in higher education if we are to fully address education as the key civil rights issue of our time.

Fortunately, those of us working on policy and program delivery designed to support “access” seem to be collectively making progress on that important national goal. On the other hand, the discussion on improving quality is strained right now.

We fully embrace “quality” as the primary objective. And we collectively know how to create quality and essential learning outcomes. But most of the High Impact Practices that produce these outcomes initially seem to entail substantial budget allocations. Institutions struggle because it is difficult to figure out how to fund the programmatic investments required for quality improvements.

Academic honor societies are part of the solution to this problem.

Sheltering a chapter of a prestigious honor society is a mark of excellence for colleges and universities. [Phi Kappa Phi](#), [Phi Beta Kappa](#), [Omicron Delta Kappa](#), [Phi Beta Delta](#), [Alpha Sigma Lambda](#), and the host of other Societies all have high standards for institutions that desire to host and sustain a chapter of their honor society. So the goal to attain and sustain this type of external endorsement motivates institutions to uphold quality standards and programming. In turn, individual membership in honor societies provides recognition to students and faculty that sets them apart from others and provides them opportunities not available to non-members. The desire to earn this recognition motivates students and faculty to achieve scholarly distinction. In these ways, honor societies in general are a low cost way of raising quality and recognizing excellence.

Some people lament the proliferation of “Greek Letter” honor societies. But not me.

I know from experience that raising the visibility of honor societies added distinction and real quality to the colleges and universities I served. And I know for sure that striving for membership motivated our students to higher levels of scholarship and civic engagement.

If you haven’t thought of honor societies in this way before, it might be because the societies on your campus are almost invisible because they are coordinated by a relatively uninvolved faculty member who has the group meet only once per year for a perfunctory induction ceremony. Imagine what an honor society could do for an institution if campus leadership makes honor societies a priority through talk and presence. With this type of heightened visibility,



faculty are more likely to value the service that chapter leaders provide. Then some of our best, most creative faculty members will want to be an honor society sponsor.

Done well, honor societies promote access and retention because they offer scholarships or a credential that leads to scholarship. Done well, honor societies promote retention by creating an engaged community of students and faculty who could and should work together to provide campus programming or community service. And, done well — with an engaged advisor who takes advantage of the chapter development ideas most societies offer — honor societies support the delivery of many of the High Impact Practices, including Common Intellectual Experience, Learning Communities, Undergraduate Research, Collaborative Assignments & Projects, Service Learning, and Global Learning.

So, if you are struggling to find cost-effective ways to enhance quality at your institution, to motivate traditional and/or non-traditional students to reach higher levels of academic distinction, and to create a more engaging community of scholars learning and serving together, then you might try chartering and or re-invigorating an honor society (or two) whose mission matches the mission of your institution.

If we uplift and promote the visibility of honor societies, we can inspire students to seek and earn membership and to be fully engaged in the learning community the honor society creates. If we do this, then honor societies truly can be part of the solution for enhancing quality higher education on individual campuses and nationwide.