

Chapter Projects: Greater Interest in Government Survey of Student Apathy

LAST YEAR THE IOWA ALPHA CHAPTER of Tau Beta Pi became aware of an alarming trend in our membership. The number of eligible students who complete all requirements and become members through initiation has been sharply declining in recent years. At the 2000 District conference, we realized that this problem is not specific to our chapter alone. Moreover, after discussions with other organizations on campus, we realized this growth in apathy is seen in almost every volunteer organization. Iowa Alpha received a GIG Chapter Project Grant to study the reasons for this trend.

THE SURVEY

Iowa Alpha chose to collect data via a survey mailed to randomly selected undergraduate students from all majors. The survey contained four parts. The first part inquired about general information of each participant. Questions were concerned with the participants' majors, year in school, time spent at school, and time spent at jobs. The next part asked questions about what companies look for when hiring new employees and how this affects the participants' choice of which organizations to join. The third part asked participants to answer questions about one specific organization to which they belong. They were asked to rank such things as social activities, résumé building, and gaining technical skills as reasons for being involved. These questions were designed to establish why they joined the organization and what they have gained from staying active in the group. The final part of the survey asked participants to select one group that they had considered joining or did join, but in which they no longer participated. There were questions similar to those in part three, as well as a place for participants to provide open-ended explanations as to why they decided not to be active.

SENDING THE SURVEY

In the process of trying to acquire the random sample of names and sending out the surveys, the GIG committee learned a great deal about the hierarchy of the university system and the chain of approval needed to conduct a study. Most of February and March, 2001, was spent trying to track down university officials and employees for signatures of project approval. The first step we took in the process was to register for a business-reply code that could be placed on the envelopes. By using the reply code, we were charged only for those surveys that were returned. After the code was acquired, 800 surveys were printed. The next step was to obtain a list of 800 under-

graduate students who would be asked to participate in the survey. This posed the greatest delay in the process. We started with the statistics department, which started the chain of referrals through the undergraduate research center, office of the vice-provost of undergraduate affairs, human subjects committee, and finally the office of the registrar. After many signatures and delays from moving offices, the approvals were attained for the registrar to provide the list of 800 names. On March 28 the surveys were mailed. On April 3, the first eight surveys were returned. By May 1, nearly 80 surveys had been returned, of which 72 contained viable data.

RESULTS

As the surveys started to accumulate, we entered the results in a spreadsheet and began to analyze the information. In general, through all parts of the survey, we found no appreciable difference in the responses among different age groups or majors. From the second part of the survey, we identified student attitudes about what companies look for and, if this parallels, what students seek in organizations. The number one response to what companies seek was interpersonal communication skills, followed by job experience and skills. Grade point average and extra-curricular activities were not highly rated as factors that companies consider.

Because Tau Beta Pi is an honor society that performs service, we were saddened to find that community service was by far the lowest-ranked characteristic, being ranked as one of the least important by more than half the participants. This trend was mirrored in the responses for what students look for in organizations. Once again, obligation to the community was the lowest-ranked motivator for joining groups. Students rank the top two criteria that they seek in groups as personal satisfaction and meeting new people. Building their résumés and social activities were also highly ranked reasons for joining.

From the third and fourth parts of the survey, we also learned what activities students participate in for their selected organizations. Groups that students joined had many social activities and speakers as well as educational activities. In groups not joined by students, the organizations were viewed to have primarily business meetings and very few social activities. This agrees with the earlier results that showed students are mainly interested in personal enjoyment and friends when looking for groups to join.

In parts three and four, participants were also asked how they became aware of the group. They were given options of posters, letters, teachers, friends, clubfest, and

Trust Advisory Committee

James A. Runde, *Wisconsin Beta '69*, a vice chairman and managing director of Morgan Stanley, has been selected to serve on the Tau Beta Pi Trust Advisory Committee.



Since joining his firm in 1974, he has been responsible for restructuring, privatization, mergers, and financing for airlines, airports, logistics, railroad, shipping, and waste companies worldwide and for investment banking relationships with a wide variety of clients.

Mr. Runde holds a master's degree in finance from George Washington University in 1973 and a bachelor's degree in

electrical engineering from Marquette University in 1969. He was a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy assigned to the staff of Admiral H.G. Rickover's naval reactors branch of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. As an engineering manager, his responsibilities involved designing and building naval nuclear reactors.

He joins Chair Rodger F. Smith, *WI A '64*, a partner in Greenwich Research Associates, Darien, CT, and James W. Johnson Jr., *NC A '77*, a technical associate with Eastman Chemical Company, Inc., in Kingsport, TN.

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the Internet. For the organizations students joined, the responses showed that a vast majority heard of the group through friends and personal invitations. There was only one occurrence where a student joined a group he heard about through a letter or email. In part four, students were asked why they did not join a specific organization. Some common responses were that either they didn't want to pay money to join or that they were not aware of enough benefits for it to be worth the effort. There were also responses relating to an overly elaborate initiation process and members who were unpleasant to be around. The most frequent response, given by one third of the participants, was that they did not have enough time to be involved in any more activities.

SYNOPSIS AND CONCLUSION

In short, there are a few things we can learn from this survey. First of all, students look primarily for enjoyment as they decide how to spend their free time. Secondly, the practice of sending letters to attract initiates is probably not the most effective method. We probably cannot overcome the lack of time in students' lives, but we can hope to create better uses of their time for the benefit of the students, Tau Beta Pi, and, most importantly, the community.

ADDENDUM

We did receive comments of how impressed students were that Tau Beta Pi actually did things other than just promote the Society. These were often accompanied by requests to join. Whatever changes may be considered, we think that devotion to service should, if anything, be stressed more rather than improving other aspects of the Association. This is what distinguishes us the most from any other organization on the Iowa State campus and perhaps most other universities too.

About the GIG Program

The purpose of the Greater Interest in Government Program, established in 1969 by Frederick A. Faville, Illinois Beta '19, is to stimulate interest in civic affairs and public-policy issues among student members of Tau Beta Pi.

The Executive Council awards annual grants of up to \$750 each for these activities from the investment earnings of the Greater Interest in Government Fund.