You are a Physicist

by Sean Bentley
Director: Sigma Pi Sigma and Society of Physics Students

It is my great pleasure to introduce myself to you, the members of Sigma Pi Sigma. When I started as director of the Society of Physics Students and Sigma Pi Sigma this summer, I was very excited to bring to the societies my vision for advancing the quality of the undergraduate physics experience and promoting the value of undergraduate physics education. At the same time, I didn’t want to reinvent the wheel or change what makes the societies wonderful. I greatly respect the nearly 50-year history of SPS and the over 90-year history of Sigma Pi Sigma.

With more than 95,000 members inducted into Sigma Pi Sigma to date, any decisions that we in the National Office make need to consider all of the members—where we’ve been, where we are now, and where we’d like to go in the future. I’ve enjoyed every chance I’ve had to meet members, speak with you on the phone, and receive your letters and emails. It is encouraging to know how deeply connected many of you still are to the society, and I hope to meet and hear from many more of you during my time here.

Prior to this position, I spent 11 years at Adelphi University in Garden City, New York, where I was a physics faculty member as well as advisor for the SPS and Sigma Pi Sigma chapters. Working with undergraduates is inspiring; I have seen them transform from high school students into adults ready to tackle graduate school, careers, and life in general. Students I have taught are now doctors, lawyers, research scientists, engineers, teachers, and much more. When I chose to dedicate my career to undergraduate education, I decided to judge my success not on papers published or grants received, but on the outcomes of my students. As most of you know but most of the rest of the population does not, students who study physics as undergraduates can go on to virtually any profession. Starting from a common undergraduate experience, SPS and Sigma Pi Sigma members spread through all areas of society and choose a multitude of professions.

However, this diversity also presents a challenge. Even though you, the members, are distributed across an array of fields, we still want you to feel connected to your roots and know that in a very real sense, regardless of your career path, you are a physicist. You have a way of looking at the world and its problems that very few outside of physics fully understand. As individuals and a collective group, we can do great things.

I have several goals for my time in this position. For the Sigma Pi Sigma membership specifically, I want to provide more opportunities for you to connect with each other, and more importantly, give you ways to reach out to the current undergraduates and help them develop into professionals. I want to see the undergraduate members of SPS get the most from their experience and have SPS become an integral part of their educations, not just an extra. My long-term goal is to see undergraduate physics education get the respect it deserves, and not be treated as an afterthought in an academic world that primarily focuses on graduate programs. In upcoming communications, I will speak with you about specific programs aimed at achieving each of these goals.

I look forward to the opportunity to communicate and work with each of you. As Sigma Pi Sigma approaches its 100th year and 100,000th member, the future is bright! 😃