A Force for Good

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

“I will apply, for the benefit of the sick, all measures [that] are required.”

“My skill and knowledge shall be given without reservation for the public good.”

These excerpts from oaths taken by many doctors and engineers are strong vows to work toward the common good. As physics is a field of study from which one may go into virtually any career (including medicine and engineering), it does not have such a widely accepted statement of its own. This certainly doesn’t mean, however, that we do not believe in serving something larger than ourselves.

Sigma Pi Sigma, with its tenet of service, is perhaps the best organization to promote the value of service among all who study physics. Every physicist, in particular those inducted into the honor society, can and should reach out to the larger physics community. As soon as new members receive their key, they should take this ideal very seriously. I cannot imagine a better group than enthusiastic students to lead the charge.

Unfortunately, this does not happen at many chapters. For many new members, Sigma Pi Sigma becomes little more than a line on a resume. This meets the first tenet of Sigma Pi Sigma, to honor outstanding scholarship in physics, but it fails to address the other three tenets. At many schools the Society of Physics Students (SPS) chapter steps up and serves as the more active physics organization. Much of the work of Sigma Pi Sigma is done through and in support of SPS at the national level, and this naturally translates to the chapter level as well. But even at colleges with active SPS chapters, Sigma Pi Sigma members should take active leadership roles. I am particularly concerned with chapters in which no one steps up to address issues of service.

So what can be done? The fact that you are reading this article gives me hope. I am speaking to three key audiences here: recent inductees who are still on a college campus, chapter advisors, and all of our alumni members.

To the recent inductees, I am encouraged to have heard from some of you about this very issue. The fact that you ask about public service means that you are willing to step up. You just need a bit of guidance. Seek ways to get involved. Look to your SPS chapter, talk to your faculty, and explore your community.

To advisors, I simply ask you to promote that idea of service to your new members. You only need to plant the seed; your students will make it grow.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I ask alumni members to consider contacting a chapter, either the one at which you were inducted or one at a nearby college. You can offer to come speak with them, and encourage them to become more involved. Not only can you be a great example and inspiration to the students, but you can also give them the guidance and support they need to succeed in service activities (and in the process be doing a wonderful service for yourself!).

We may not have an oath with lofty words, but we have each other. If we all work together, Sigma Pi Sigma can truly be a force for good.

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1 Excerpt from modern version of the Hippocratic Oath, written by Louis Lasagna in 1964.
2 Excerpt from the Obligation of the Engineer, taken by members of the Order of the Engineer.
3 Codes of ethics for research scientists have been developed for those who do physics or another science as a profession, but they are relatively new and not widely implemented. They also are aimed at “professional scientists” rather than our larger community of physicists.