

The Uniqueness of the Society for Values in Higher Education

The Society for Values in Higher Education is – we acknowledge – not widely known, since it devotes little of its energy to publicity, and for years it was a sort of in-group. It took its present form in 1963, with the merger of two lively ongoing communities: the recipients of national Kent fellowships and the recipients of national Danforth fellowships. Both of these graduate fellowship programs, no longer in existence, recruited future college/university teachers. In recent years the Society has opened its membership widely, to person both inside and outside the academy: all Fellows (i.e. members) are entitled to nominate new Fellows.

The present name of the Society dates to 1975, with the word Values replacing Religion. These days, with “values” a politically charged term, the name is regarded by some Fellows as a challenge and even an irritant. Still, as with the familiar slogan for seatbelt laws, “It’s a law we can *live* with,” the word *Values* is one that Fellows manage to put up with and even to thrive upon. It gives them a special chance to “live” their membership by unfolding to colleagues and prospective Fellows what values mean in the long and rather special SVHE tradition.

From the Society’s mission statement, adopted in 1991: *We create openings in the walls that separate persons from one another (e.g. professions, disciplines, race, gender, class, age) and that separate the members of the academy from the larger society. We challenge ourselves, our families, and higher education in general to develop whole person who are prepared to play a constructive role in a rapidly changing world.*

As is clear from its meetings, projects, and publications, the Society believes that institutions and individuals in higher education behave as they do because of the values they hold but do not often enough express and, indeed, examine. The Society itself emphasizes certain values it believes crucial to the health and reform of higher education, and it is the gathering of those values in one organization that makes the SVHE unique:

INTERDISCIPLINARY
INCLUSIVITY
INNOVATION

A FELLOWSHIP THAT INCLUDES SPOUSES AND CHILDREN
AN INCREASING RESPONSE TO INTERNATIONAL CONCERNS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

SVHE takes for granted that all academic organizations tacitly affirm two other values: First, Inquiry that is both rational and passionate. Second, Dialogue/Conversation that makes inquiry a collegial enterprise. But while many such organizations work for the health of specific disciplines or categories of people (undergraduate students, administrators, racial and gender groups), SVHE brings individuals of various disciplines and loyalties into fruitful engagement. Thus the Society relishes in its fellowship graduate students, government officials, physicians, attorneys, pre-college teachers, business executives, consultants, and foundation officers, in addition to the teacher/scholar from a wide array of disciplines.

The word Interdisciplinary refers to this mix of people, as does the word Inclusive. The Society, through its Danforth-Kent heritage has a long and unapologetic history of affirmative action. The Danforth Fellowship program was non-elitist; it deliberately sought bright undergraduates from small colleges (often church-related colleges) to send to graduate programs at places like Harvard, Stanford, Chicago, and Duke – not just bright people to shift from, say, Cambridge to New Haven. Today, in often relying for leadership on women and men of color and varied ethnic backgrounds, the Society affirms not only its pioneering tradition but a value that it believes essential to the health of higher education.

The Society has always encouraged Innovation, and is a change agent nationally, as its Fellows are locally. The Kent Fellowship began with the concern of Professor Charles Foster Kent at Yale, in 1923, that

religious studies should be taught more widely – and much better – in U.S. colleges. Determined to make this change, he gathered support to recruit students and pay their way to the best graduate programs. As another example, the Danforth Foundation asked applicants to demonstrate a vision beyond the two conventional academic pursuits: teaching/research and personal career ambition.

The Society has long affirmed that academics should do some of their most important talking and listening in settings where spouses and children will be comfortable enough to join the conversation. The annual Fellows Meeting (not “conference” or “convention”) is therefore an inexpensive FAMILY gathering, with child care, on a campus rather than at a conference center or in a hotel. Some current Fellows, active in academia as adults, have attended since childhood. Increasingly, the Society recognizes that American academics ought to do some of their important talking with INTERNATIONAL participants on hand, and has found ways of doing this.

Adding to the Society’s uniqueness is the respect for the values and traditions that each Fellow individually brings to the Society. There is no political or cultural “party line” in the Society, and there are no regnant fashions. But there is the shared conviction that individuals in academia need a place where values and concerns are heard in a spirit of fellowship rather than fear – where thoughtful discourse replaces hidden agendas, cryptic silences, and frustrated anger. Kent and Danforth gathering nurtured both camaraderie and candor, and one of the best places to see these qualities in operation is the intensive give-and-take of the Morning Groups in the annual Fellows Meeting – and in the optional special-focus groups that spring up to fill the afternoons. As the Society recruits new Fellows, it seeks individuals who need a larger and more humane vision than their other academic organizations provide.

The heart of the Society is its Annual Fellows Meeting in August, in which *all* Fellows are expected to participate, on a frequent basis if not literally every year. SVHE membership is intended to a hands-on matter, not simply dues and good will. Typically about one fourth of the 1,000 society members attend the Meeting in a given year, or helps organize it. Second in importance, depending on the individual Fellow, will be either: the Society’s refereed interdisciplinary journal, *Soundings*; the intensive one- or two – day regional meetings; the national Society projects undertaken with foundation support; or the network of personal friends and colleagues built over the years.

It’s worth noting that camaraderie and candor do not make the Society an “encounter group,” and while the Society strongly affirms the centrality of undergraduate teaching, it does not value the generalist over the productive scholar. At each Fellows meeting a table of books displays Fellows’ scholarship published in the last year or so.

FURTHER INFORMATION

MEMBERSHIP requires a nomination letter from a current Fellow, a vita supplied by the prospective Fellow, and a genuine desire to get involved. Nominees have often acquainted themselves with SVHE by attending a Fellows Meeting as a paying guest, invited by a Fellow or by the executive director upon expression of interest. Automatic standing invitations go to young scholars who have earned such fellowships as AAUW, Dorothy Danforth Compton, Mellon and Charlotte Newcombe.

ANNUAL FELLOWS MEETINGS take place on campuses in different parts of the U.S.: 1993, Bowdoin College, ME; 1994, Emory University, GA; 1995, The Claremont Colleges, CA; 1996 North Central College, IL; 1997, University of Maine at Farmington, ME. The Morning Groups are well-planned interdisciplinary explorations; the evening sessions are plenaries; and the afternoons are free for relaxation and special interests. For a number of years no Meeting has been complete without a late-night singing group. The Meeting is often preceded by an optional day of physical work, a service project to address local needs.

PROJECTS of the Society in recent years have included a workshop for beginning teachers (an ongoing project), a study of good practice in general education, a “values audit” applicable to a variety of institutions, an extended retreat on ethical issues in management, and formation of a consortium of colleges and universities seeking institutional renewal. External funding sources have included the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, the Arco Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, the Luce Foundation, the Exxon Education Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (U.S. Office of Education).

PUBLICATIONS of the Society include its quarterly interdisciplinary journal *Soundings* (published jointly with the University of Tennessee, Knoxville); a general newsletter several times a year, a newsletter for the People of Color Caucus; and various project reports available on request.

FINACIAL SUPPORT comes from dues, additional contributions of the Fellows, other gifts and grants, institutional memberships, grants for specific projects and yield from a small endowment.

OFFICE of the Society is in Portland, Oregon on the campus of Portland State University, with a permanent staff equaling 2.0 FTE, including the executive director. SVHE is not affiliated with Portland State but is housed in the Campus Ministries Building at the University. Visitors are always welcome.

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This introduction to the Society is in draft form and is not an official statement adopted by the Society. Written for facilitating the recruitment of new members by Charles Vandersee, Danforth '60, chair of the Membership and Fellows Services Committee, November, 1994