

FEATURE

SCHOLARSHIP MATTERS BY JENNI BIRCH SZOLWINSKI

For the last one hundred years, Mortar Board has been the premier national honor society recognizing college seniors for their exemplary achievement in three distinct areas: scholarship, leadership and service. But what do these three concepts represent and in what ways do they still matter in today's markedly different world? As we celebrate Mortar Board's centennial, we have an important opportunity to reflect upon our Society's Ideals and their relevance as we head into our second century.

The first Ideal, scholarship, may seem somewhat obvious, but I'd like to consider it in more depth. My daughter, a high school senior, would surely define scholarship as a financial reward or incentive—that is, outside monies for which you apply and write countless essays about yourself in the hope that someone else will help fund your higher educational pursuits.

College seniors would probably take the concept of scholarship one step further to encompass academic accomplishment in the classroom, evidenced primarily by grade point average or class rank. When I was a section coordinator for Southern Ohio, the chapters I worked with used these criteria to evaluate future candidates for membership in the area of scholarship. The Mortar Board *Bylaws* even set forth minimum standards based on these markers. But does a straight-A average necessarily make a student a scholar?

Seasoned Mortar Board members and faculty advisors would surely define scholarship more broadly than GPA and include other pursuits such as academic research, journal publications, teaching, international study, and participation in lectures and symposia. These manifestations of scholarship are expected from graduate students and professors in higher education. But outside of academia, does scholarship even matter in today's ever-changing 24-hour news cycle, where tweets seem to matter more than theories?

To answer that question, I reached out to some of the best and brightest scholars I know—Mortar Board Fellows. Since the fellowship program's inception in 1941, the Mortar Board National Foundation has awarded

over \$750,000 for postgraduate study to members who demonstrate "robust scholarship that is competitive nationwide." I was fortunate enough to become acquainted with some of these exceptional scholar-leaders when I helped to coordinate cohort conversations among Fellows. I continue to be amazed by the depth and breadth of their accomplishments and the ways in which their scholarly pursuits are effecting change for the greater good.

Named a Mortar Board Fellow in 2015, Bryan Dosono (*University of Washington, 2011*) is currently a Ph.D. candidate in information science and technology at Syracuse University. In his postgraduate work, Bryan employs qualitative research methods to analyze large collections of social media data to better understand how Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders construct and express their identity in online communities. His scholarship identifies impactful design opportunities that improve the quality of life for marginalized citizens.

Nicole (Nicki) Perry (*Wittenberg, 2013*), chosen as a Mortar Board Fellow in 2014, is presently working toward her Ph.D. in pharmacology at Vanderbilt University. Her scientific research involves using structural and biochemical approaches to study the interactions between certain proteins and alterations in cells that could ultimately result in the progression of cancer. She has published several middle-author manuscripts and a book chapter and methods article. Upcoming are several first-author publications. Receiving a Mortar Board Fellowship helped make it possible for her "to pursue scientific research and achieve [her] goal of becoming a research professor."

Selected as the Barbara Cook Fellow in 2016, Thomas E. Kim (*Pacific Lutheran University, 2014*) is a law student at Arizona State University. Thomas was the very first chapter president of Mortar Board at Pacific Lutheran University, and he now serves as chair of the American Bar Association Law Student Division. The Mortar Board Fellowship was critically important to him because loans and federal financial aid were unavailable due to his undocumented immigration status. Soon, Thomas will be one of this country's first undocumented-status licensed attorneys. Thanks to Mortar Board, he is now "equipped with knowledge and skills to provide free legal services to members of [his] local community who would not otherwise have access to them."

As I had hoped, scholarship still matters. Rather than seeking knowledge for knowledge's sake (which can still be a worthy endeavor), these Mortar Board Fellows are stepping out of the ivory tower to pursue important research in both the physical and social sciences. Thomas gauges the value of his scholarship as a way to "tangibly change this nation's landscape" by drafting, advocating for and passing a policy that removes bar admission barriers for all undocumented individuals in the United States. Bryan's scholarship has led to the creation of data-driven toolkits on salient issues like bullying prevention, immigration and mental health. Their work stands to make a difference in everyday people's lives.

Nicki emphasizes the importance of presenting her scientific research at conferences and at other institutions; and Bryan seconds with, "Support from the Mortar Board Fellowship allowed me to travel to distant research conferences and share my work with junior scholars and senior faculty from around the globe." Nicki further points out that she has "made it a priority to engage in mentorship opportunities in the lab and as a teaching assistant. For all three of these fellows, teaching and mentoring have broadened their reach and ensure that those who follow them will value the concept of scholarship as much as they do.

This spring, when Mortar Board chapters undertake their selection meetings, I hope that they will consider a broader definition of scholarship as they evaluate candidates based on merits that extend beyond GPA. Similarly, as Mortar Board seniors graduate and begin to contemplate their future endeavors, I am optimistic that many of them will consider seeking more than just a "good job" but rather scholarly pursuits that go beyond oneself to have a positive impact on our global community.

Pictured: (top) Bryan Dosono is working on his doctorate at Syracuse. (middle) Nicki Perry poses with her mentor at Vanderbilt. (bottom) Thomas Kim has used his fellowship to make his mark in law school.

Ed note: The author is secretary-treasurer of the National Council. She holds her baccalaureate and master's degrees from Purdue University and is a freelance consultant and small business owner.

