

STRENGTHENING OUR ROOTS

The day I graduated with my bachelor's degree, it stormed. No, not a gentle rain. Live oak trees that stood tall for hundreds of years were ripped from their roots and lay helpless on their sides atop on-campus Indian mounds dating back to 5000 B.C. With my scholarly hat off, I took this as a sign. But of what?

This was a time before climate and change were two words regularly conjoined. And before companies uprooted the lives of workers in regular layoffs, with no pensions or health care to fall back on.

But that day was a sign, all right. A sign, to an innocent graduate, of what was to come. A foreshadowing of the powerful forces that can act beyond our immediate control. A warning to develop strong, deep roots within, to build resilience for challenges none of us graduates could ever imagine — and thus in some small way, to positively influence the future.

Trees provide an example. New research published by *iScience* in July shows that using their root systems, trees can make a difference in the lives of the other trees — and the leafless living stumps — around them.

“Trees are commonly regarded as distinct entities, but the roots of many species fuse to form natural root grafts allowing the exchange of water, carbon, mineral nutrients, and microorganisms between individuals,” the professors from Auckland University wrote.

Most plants need deep watering to develop strong root systems — and they take the time to develop those roots before focusing attention on their showy flowers.

This wisdom in plant behavior is familiar to members of Phi Kappa Phi, where the love of learning rules. We know we need to put in the hard work to study and to test ourselves in a variety of contexts in order to grow.

Phi Kappa Phi provides those kinds of experiences for its members.

National service in Phi Kappa Phi, on committees and at the board level, can help us as members develop the deep roots necessary to handle the variety of leadership challenges we'll face throughout our careers.

As Phi Kappa Phi moves into the next decade, our organization confronts new realities. “Higher education is an ecosystem,” college leaders told *Inside Higher Ed* in February. And the Phi Kappa Phi board is being called upon to

steer our organization at a time when college and university closures and plummeting enrollments are uprooting the academic landscape.

Board membership in Phi Kappa Phi is an invitation to use one's knowledge and experience to strengthen our organization's vitality. It is a call like the call to membership was, to make a commitment to build upon the legacy of the past to create a new future for ourselves and others.

Just like the trees and the tree stumps studied by the New Zealand professors, it's a perfect symbiotic relationship. Phi Kappa Phi benefits through our service, and so do those who serve diligently, strengthening their own resilience and capacity to thrive, whatever storms may come their way.

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