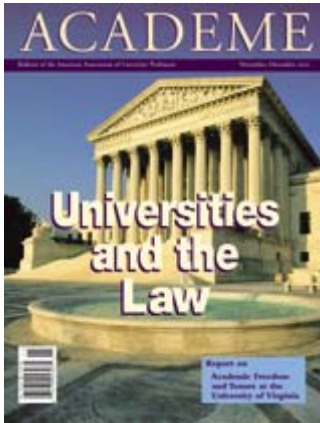


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A Key Collaboration

Phi Beta Kappa, the AAUP, and the Future of the Academy

By Douglas W. Foard

Both organizations seek the same goal—enhancing higher education. The former head of the nation's main academic honor society explains how his organization tries to protect and strengthen the liberal arts.

It was my privilege in June to address the annual meeting of the AAUP. Since the missions of the AAUP and the Phi Beta Kappa Society are so closely intertwined, I was surprised to learn that I was the first secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society to speak at such a gathering. Both organizations devote enormous time and resources to maintaining the highest standards for postsecondary education in the United States, and both are profoundly committed to safeguarding academic freedom. The AAUP undertook these efforts as a result of its commitment to the teaching profession. Phi Beta Kappa, which is celebrating its 225th anniversary in December, adopted the same mission as a consequence of the unique and revolutionary circumstances of its origins.

Phi Beta Kappa was created as a secret debating society by a handful of privileged young men enrolled at the College of William and Mary during the formation of the United States. Many of our society's founders fought for American independence and helped fashion the new republic. Phi Beta Kappa's founders were impatient with the curriculum at the college and its emphasis upon the memorization of accepted authority. They were eager to apply their intellects to the issues confronting the colonies. So in December 1776 they created the first Greek-letter organization on this side of the Atlantic, swore each other to secrecy, and began debating in their dormitory until the wee hours of the morning. Their commitment to freedom of inquiry led them to dispute such topics as the abolition of slavery, the disestablishment of the church, the relative merits of republican versus monarchical forms of government, and the creation of public education. So engaging did they find this form of extracurricular activity that they encouraged their friends at Yale and Harvard to create their own chapters of Phi Beta Kappa. The initial chapter at William and Mary subsequently fell victim to an invading British army, but Phi Beta Kappa's future was secure in the New England chapters.

As the society slowly expanded, it was transformed from a student-run debating society into a faculty-governed academic honor society. One important characteristic of Phi Beta Kappa remained unchanged, however. Since its beginnings, Phi Beta Kappa has been committed to fostering freedom of inquiry. In the memorable words of our 1777 initiation ceremony: "Here too you are free to indulge in matters of speculation that freedom of inquiry that ever dispels the clouds of

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falsehood by the radiant sunshine of truth."

For 225 years we have endeavored to place our chapters only at those American institutions of higher education that share our commitment to freedom of inquiry. The process for obtaining a chapter is lengthy and complex. The Phi Beta Kappa members on the faculty of a college or university must make a formal application, which is screened by a committee made up of representatives of the broadest possible cross-section of disciplines, institutional backgrounds, and personal characteristics. This committee recommends chapter charters to the society's highest governing body, its triennial council. Our standards are so high that when the council convened last year, the applications of only seven of the fifty-one institutions seeking chapters during the 1997–2000 review cycle were approved.

One of the first things the committee considers in the chapter application process is the AAUP's list of censured administrations. Should an applicant's name be found there, the review process for that institution comes to an immediate halt. The committee is also interested in such matters as teaching loads, professional development opportunities for the faculty, instructional and library facilities, the role of the faculty in governance, and the quality of students being admitted as undergraduates.

During my tenure with Phi Beta Kappa, one of my principal joys has been informing faculty members who have devoted their time to pursuing chapter applications that their work has been crowned with success and their applications have been successful. But as pleasant and memorable as that task has been, the conversations I have had with unsuccessful applicants, often university presidents and provosts in the company of their Phi Beta Kappa faculty members, have been far more significant.

Many of these conversations have made a real difference in improving the quality of higher education. I have pointed out the deficiencies of libraries, and whole new structures have resulted. I have indicated the society's displeasure with the SAT scores of entering classes, and these scores have over time dramatically improved. In one particularly dramatic case, I advised a college president that unless he restored academic tenure at his institution, it would never gain a chapter. He restored tenure and now that institution shelters one of our chapters.

Not too long ago, we received a chapter application from a fine institution that insisted that every member of its faculty be a Christian. While I could say much that was commendable about the institution, I had to point out to its president that this restriction was inconsistent with Phi Beta Kappa's commitment to freedom of inquiry. He was most unhappy, and following our meeting, Phi Beta Kappa received angry letters from the institution's alumni and friends. Recently, I learned that the restriction would be lifted and that Phi Beta Kappa had been instrumental in the change. While George Marsden's book, *The Soul of the American University*, complains about the society's "prejudice toward religiously defined education," many religiously affiliated institutions shelter Phi Beta Kappa chapters and join us in upholding the highest traditions of academic freedom.

As former AAUP president Linda Pratt wrote in her article on liberal education in the November–December 1994 issue of *Academe*:

Our responsibility is to preserve and protect liberal education for those students who come to us in the trust that education can change lives of base metal into gold. The news we need is as old as the university itself. Philosophical habits of mind do not come quicker through fiber optics. Clear thinking is not aided by better dot resolution. Understanding ourselves and feeling for others does not come with a software upgrade. These are the objectives of liberal education, and though they may not seem to sell well in the marketplace, they are in the end the best collateral we have to secure our future.

As the breadth of the subjects argued by our founders indicates, Phi Beta Kappa's chief curricular interest is the liberal arts. Our chapters are charged to elect only the most promising juniors and seniors, and only those who have studied broadly. We ask the faculty volunteers who are the backbone of our organization to study student transcripts carefully and invite only those undergraduates who have accepted the challenge of significant study outside of their specialized area. These students, we believe, constitute the nation's best hope for the future.

In 1997 our council expanded the society's mission to move beyond simply recognizing excellence in the liberal arts to "fostering" that form of higher learning. To that end, Phi Beta Kappa has created a partnership with the National Honor Society in the secondary schools and Phi Theta Kappa in the community colleges to make the case for liberal education. All three organizations are addressing the common theme of community building in the 2001-02 academic year, and will be drawing upon each other's resources and publications. For example, Phi Beta Kappa will provide a program on community building at this year's annual meeting of the National Honor Society and host a taped version of the program on its Web site. Phi Theta Kappa will furnish the meeting's attendees with a copy of its study guide on the same theme. Phi Theta Kappa and a fourth organization, the National Collegiate Honors Council, will conduct a satellite discussion of the theme.

We know that we are in some senses swimming upstream. Phi Beta Kappa relies on the work of volunteers. Those who devote countless hours to making our chapters function and those who serve on our committees are volunteers. So, too, are the thousands of Phi Beta Kappa members who make up our sixty community-based Phi Beta Kappa associations and raise hundreds of thousands of dollars every year for student scholarships and faculty recognition programs. About half of the society's funding comes from the voluntary contributions of its members, who this year responded in record numbers to an appeal based on the need to bolster liberal education in the nation's colleges and universities. Persuading faculty members to volunteer their time to Phi Beta Kappa is a challenge, especially when the mandate to publish often overshadows all the other faculty responsibilities. Championing the liberal arts to a generation schooled in "work force development" is no simple undertaking, either.

Our venerable and sometimes archaic society has prepared itself to accept these challenges and is seeking partners in this initiative. We recognize how much the AAUP has already accomplished in supporting the liberal arts, and we hope to begin a sustained collaborative effort between our two organizations in upholding the best in American higher education.

Douglas Foard is executive director of the Loudoun Museum in Leesburg, Virginia. He was previously executive secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society.