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## Phi Beta Kappa Rejects GMU

Honor Society Concerned About Academic Freedom

By Maria Glod

Washington Post Staff Writer

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George Mason University Prof. Marion Deshmukh was feeling good last fall as she finished the school's 177-page application seeking to establish a chapter of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa honor society. The university, growing in size and reputation, counted two Nobel laureates among its faculty, new majors had been added and the library's collection had grown to more than 1 million volumes.

But the very day Deshmukh delivered the application, George Mason got some unwanted attention: Leaders of the state university in Fairfax County, under pressure from conservative Virginia lawmakers, withdrew a speaking offer to liberal filmmaker Michael Moore, the outspoken director of "Fahrenheit 9/11." The controversial cancellation of an event scheduled days before the presidential election made headlines nationwide.

University President Alan G. Merten said it was Moore's \$35,000 fee, to be paid with state funds, that prompted the university to pull out, not opposition to the filmmaker's rhetoric. But Phi Beta Kappa officials apparently were not convinced: The organization, citing concerns about academic freedom, promptly rejected George Mason's application, according to university professors involved in the process.

Phi Beta Kappa's second and final rejection, which came in January after university leaders launched an appeal for another chance, was a blow to the university, which has been working to cement increasing regard for the institution. Although the flap has not rippled through the academic circles like recent controversy surrounding Ward Churchill, a professor at the University of Colorado who has been criticized for calling victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, attack "little Eichmanns," it has prompted debate on campus about freedom of speech and fiscal responsibility.

John Churchill, Phi Beta Kappa's secretary, would not discuss the society's decision, saying that all deliberations regarding schools seeking chapters are confidential.

In the weeks after the cancellation, the American Association of University Professors sent George Mason a sharply worded letter that accused administrators of canceling the speech to "placate members of the state legislature." Faculty members questioned Merten about the incident during a faculty senate meeting.

Several professors, including James T. Bennett, faculty senate chairman and economics professor, said they are disheartened that one result of the controversy is that the university will go at least

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another three years without a Phi Beta Kappa chapter. The society, the nation's oldest and largest academic honor society for students in the liberal arts and sciences, was founded in 1776 at the College of William and Mary and has chapters at 270 colleges nationwide. It is known for its gold key emblem.

"Phi Beta Kappa is the ultimate recognition of undergraduate academic achievement," Bennett said. "We owe it to our students. We really have some talent here."

Bennett said most of his colleagues felt "very strongly" that \$35,000, to be paid by the state, was too much to pay for a speaker and that Moore should not have been invited to speak on the state school's dime. Still, he said, he and many other professors felt that once the invitation had been extended, the university should have stuck by it.

"We really don't look good in the academic community," Bennett said. "This gives the appearance of some outside meddling in the university."

Provost Peter Stearns acknowledged that the university "fumbled a bit" by offering and then rescinding an invitation but said Moore would have been welcome if he had appeared for a small stipend or if the event had been funded with private money. He said he thinks Phi Beta Kappa rushed to an unfair judgment in a misguided effort to defend academic freedom.

"I thought this was seizing on a complex single event as a comment was disappointed," Stearns said.

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Moore's speech was canceled after Del. Richard H. Black (R-Loudoun), a leading conservative lawmaker, along with one of his colleagues, complained that the fee was too high and that Moore was too partisan. University officials said they responded to the price tag alone.

Perry A. Zirkel, a Lehigh University law and education professor, said Merten's decision should have been driven solely by principle. He said a more-established university would have paid the agreed-upon price and perhaps balanced Moore with a conservative speaker.

"They've reinforced the idea that if legislators don't like something they're doing, legislators can micromanage," he said.

Phi Beta Kappa uses a rigorous three-year review to select colleges to host new chapters. Institutions seeking to establish a chapter must submit a preliminary application. A handful then are invited to turn in a more detailed report. Phi Beta Kappa officials visit the campus and interview students and professors before making a final judgment.

During the previous cycle, which ended in 2003, George Mason was among 10 finalists but was turned down because Phi Beta Kappa officials had concerns over curriculum and other spats between the university's Board of Visitors, a 16-member body appointed by the Virginia governor, and faculty members, said Deshmukh, a history and art history professor who headed the university's efforts to obtain a chapter.

Although the university's inclusion in the current cycle was not guaranteed and getting in often takes several cycles, she said that Phi Beta Kappa officials had indicated that George Mason was a solid contender. But soon after the Moore cancellation, the society sent a letter expressing concerns about the incident, Deshmukh said.

Deshmukh declined to provide copies of letters sent to the university from Phi Beta Kappa, but she read some portions to a reporter. One

letter from the organization asked about media reports that a Virginia legislator had "influenced your president" to cancel a speaking event. Phi Beta Kappa officials also wrote that the incident "renewed concerns about governance problems" at the university.

Ultimately, Phi Beta Kappa decided not to visit the university and rejected a request by about 40 Phi Beta Kappa faculty members to reconsider, Deshmukh said. She said she was frustrated that society officials did not come to campus to question students and professors about the incident.

"We vehemently denied that academic freedom was impinged. The fee was the issue," Deshmukh said. "If they had come and talked to us and walked around campus and not just closed the debate . . . I think they would have found mostly the reaction was this guy is charging a lot of money that would be better spent elsewhere."

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