

**Clemson Phi Beta Kappa Chapter Induction**  
**Given by Scott Lurding**  
**April 2, 2007**

On behalf of the Senate, the national headquarters, and the more than half million members of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, it is an honor and a pleasure to be with you on this very important day in the life of this institution. The satisfaction and pleasure that seem to be the dominant emotions of the day are well-founded and hard-earned. On a personal note, I should say that living in Washington, DC, it is rare to enter a room where everyone is happy and smiling, so being with such a collectively joyful group is a real pleasure!

The Phi Beta Kappa Society is the oldest and most prestigious academic honor society in America. Its mission is to celebrate and advocate for excellence in the liberal arts and sciences in higher education primarily, and in society more broadly. The Society sponsors activities that advance the humanities and the social and natural sciences. The chapter that will be sheltered at Clemson University represents the fact that this institution maintains the highest standards of excellence in the liberal arts and sciences. And it speaks to the priority that the faculty and administration place on the liberal arts and sciences and its role in the undergraduate experience.

The chapter installation and member induction ceremonies that will take place this afternoon here at Clemson will create the 273<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, and the new members will become part of a continuous, uninterrupted chain of membership that dates back more than 230 years. Throughout the history of the United States, and, indeed, before, since it was founded before the Constitution or the Bill of Rights, the Society has counted among its members many of the most important personages of their time.

However, more important than its membership, the Society has stood for a standard of excellence and basic values that are at the core of our democratic society. To quote from the Handbook for Members, which a number of you will be receiving very soon: "Phi Beta Kappa stands for freedom of inquiry and expression, disciplinary rigor, breadth of intellectual perspective, the cultivation of skills of deliberation and ethical reflection, the pursuit of wisdom, and the application of the fruits of scholarship and research in practical life. We champion these values in the confidence that a world influenced by them will be a more just and peaceful world." In short, Phi Beta Kappa and the values it promotes matter far beyond the campus and the academic world.

### **History and relevance of PBK**

Phi Beta Kappa was founded on December 5, 1776 in the in the Apollo Room of the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg, Virginia. Five College of William and Mary students sought to create a secret social and literary society, a "philosophical society" as they called it that offered an opportunity to debate the intellectual, philosophical, and political issues of the day. Subjects for those early debates addressed some of the most controversial questions of the day such as "Ought the slaves of America be emancipated?" But the questions spanned the range of inquiry: from the metaphysical, "Does matter exist?"; to the moral "Does conscience have a greater influence on our actions than interest?"; to the now seemingly quaint "Does the wearing of low bosom in compliance with custom and fashion be any impeachment of a lady's modesty?"; to the timeless "Are lawyers beneficial to society?"

The Society was the first fraternity to adopt Greek letters for a name. The Greek letters Phi Beta Kappa represent the first letters of the phrase *philosophia biou kybernetes*, which translates to “love of learning is the guide of life.” The Society also adopted a badge, to which a stem and post were later added to create the current gold key. Engraved on the front of that badge were the Greek letters “Phi Beta Kappa” in the center and a hand in the lower right pointing to three stars in the upper left. Those three stars symbolize the three aims of the Society’s founders: friendship, morality, and literature. Today literature is better translated as learning. On the reverse of the badge is engraved the founding date of the Society and the letters “S P,” representing the Latin phrase, *Societas Philosophiae*. Early in the Society’s history, it stopped being a secret society and its secret handshake and sign became known to the public. For anyone who is interested, I would be happy to demonstrate both at the reception following the ceremonies.

Four years after the founding of the Society, the only non-Virginian in the membership, Elisha Parmele, was authorized by the members to carry founding documents to Yale in 1780 followed by Harvard in 1781. It is because of this expansion that Phi Beta Kappa survived, since the College of William and Mary closed in 1781 as General Cornwallis was amassing the British army in Virginia.

The impact of Phi Beta Kappa’s membership on early American society was outsized and remains so to this day. The first fifty members of the Society included leading figures in the Revolutionary struggle, delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention, and elected representatives of the Continental and United States Congress. This extraordinary group included the first clerk of the House of Representatives, who also served as the Librarian of Congress, two U.S. Senators, and two Supreme Court judges, including John Marshall the first Chief Justice. That level of Phi Beta Kappa representation at the highest levels of American society continues today with two of the last three presidents and seven of the current nine Supreme Court justices as members.

During the next half century, new chapters were installed at Dartmouth, Union, Bowdoin, and Brown. By 1883, there were 25 chapters. Those chapters came together that year to create the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa, which was the first time that there had been a unified organization to strengthen the federation of chapters around the country. The name of the national organization was changed from the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa to the Phi Beta Kappa Society about twenty years ago to better represent the comprehensive nature of the organization, with activities far beyond just chapters.

The next century was one of expansive growth in higher education in the United States, and the Society grew apace, expanding from 25 chapters to 240. And as of today there will be 273 chapters! And when all of the chapters elected in the 41<sup>st</sup> Triennial Council are installed, the Society will have 276 chapters at colleges and universities around the country.

This is extraordinary growth. However, the growth has been proportional to the expansion of institutions of higher learning. There are Phi Beta Kappa chapters at about 8.5% of U.S. colleges and universities, a ratio that has remained fairly constant over the last century. This constancy is a tribute to the rigorous process of qualifying new chapters at sheltering institutions, since there has never been a quota on the number of chapters. Expansion of Phi Beta Kappa to a new institution is based solely on the quality of the faculty, administration, students, and academic programs at that institution.

As the number of chapters grew, the membership in the Society expanded accordingly. In 1900, there were about 10,500 living members, while today there are over 600,000. Something that the Society can take great pride in is the fact that the membership was inclusive long before that became the cultural norm. In 1875, Ellen Hamilton and Lida Mason became the first women inducted into the Society, long before women had a prominent role in American society. And only 12 years after the Civil War, the Society inducted George Washington Henderson as its first black member.

### **Relevance of PBK**

From its earliest history, membership in Phi Beta Kappa has reflected academic and intellectual merit, rather than wealth or social standing. That meritocracy is the great strength of the organization and the power behind its long-standing prestige.

The simple fact is that it is hard to get elected to Phi Beta Kappa. One must attend a college or university that shelters a chapter. One must achieve an outstanding academic record over the course of an entire college career. Consideration of that record includes not only a high GPA, but also the types and difficulty of courses taken. One cannot simply be smart to get in; one must work hard and be consistent throughout one's college career.

Being invited to join Phi Beta Kappa is proof of one's hard work and intellectual capacity, and membership often serves as an example of one's ability. Because people recognize this, Phi Beta Kappa has become a unique symbol of excellence in this country. Employers look for it, noting that it serves as one of the best proxies for an applicant's potential. People refer to others as being Phi Beta Kappa, or sometimes as Phi Bete's, as a sort of short hand for smart, capable, hard working, or excellent. And that short hand to describe excellence is ubiquitous in our culture. Last year during a televised Yankees game, a sports announcer described Derek Jeter as "Phi Beta Kappa at shortstop." And this fall, a sports writer described a football coach's game losing call as "not a Phi Beta Kappa move."

Given that Phi Beta Kappa is recognized as a symbol of excellence and that it is so hard to achieve, it will not be surprising to you that many people hold it as one of the top five most important and meaningful experiences of their life. In my role as Associate Secretary, I am in frequent contact with our members and it is amazing how consistently they will tell me of their pride in being invited to join and how it ranks in the level of personal importance just below their marriage and children.

However, Phi Beta Kappa is more than just an honor that recognizes outstanding achievement; it is a diverse, active organization that has a number of different programs that collectively help it to serve the mission of advocating for the liberal arts and sciences.

In addition to its Chapters, Phi Beta Kappa has over 60 active Associations around the country. These Associations allow members living in an area to come together for social and cultural activities. Many of the Associations offer scholarships and prizes to outstanding local high school students and have done great work in promoting the values of the Society in their communities. The first Association began in 1877 in New York City, and there are new ones being created every year. Here in South Carolina, there is the Low Country Association based in Charleston. I would be remiss if I did not mention that we would welcome a new Association based in this area, if anyone feels inclined to start one!

For the last 50 years, the Society has been sending eminent scholars, scientists, journalists, artists, and other professionals to campuses with Phi Beta Kappa chapters through its

Visiting Scholars program. Each year there are over 100 campus visits by the 15 Visiting Scholars selected annually. In addition, for the last few years, Phi Beta Kappa has been sending similarly distinguished speakers to historically black and Hispanic serving institutions without a Phi Beta Kappa chapter through its Couper Scholar program with funding from the Mellon Foundation.

This year through a generous grant from the Teagle Foundation, the Society will be partnering with ten colleges and universities to sponsor a series of events focused on the teaching and learning of deliberative skills with a focus on major issues of meaning or value.

Through its publications *The American Scholar* and *The Key Reporter*, the Society promotes the liberal arts and sciences and the life of the mind to its membership and the broader public.

That desire to advance values of the Society in print led to the creation of three book awards several decades ago. The awards are given for the best book in literary criticism, in the scholarly studies of intellectual and cultural condition of humanity, and in the literature of science.

The Society also offers two scholarships and several prestigious prizes for teaching and leadership in the liberal arts.

All of these activities are managed and supported by a committed (and busy) staff of 20 at the national headquarters in Washington, DC. Our office is in the Dupont Circle area of the city and we welcome your visit when you are in town.

### **Importance of liberal arts in democracy**

By serving as a leading advocate for the liberal arts and sciences in America, Phi Beta Kappa is promoting a broad-based, well-rounded education in college that begins a continuing intellectual journey lasting a lifetime. It is that lifelong intellectual curiosity and desire to learn about the world around us that is fired by the liberal arts education.

An education based in the liberal arts and sciences is about freedom of inquiry and intellectual honesty. It recognizes that everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. It trains people to take the facts and apply critical reasoning to them, to construct arguments and defend an opinion, to clearly communicate that argument in speech and writing, to listen well to others, to understand opposing arguments and weigh the evidence, and to arrive at a well-formed decision. The deliberative, reasoning, and communication skills that one develops as a result of studying the liberal arts and sciences are the reason that the liberal arts are so important, not only for personal success, but also in preparing an informed citizenry in a democracy. Citizens in a democracy must be able to consider an argument and make an educated decision. They must be free thinkers willing to stand up for what they believe, who at the same time do not dismiss out of hand those with whom they disagree.

A mere five months and a day before Phi Beta Kappa was founded, a few brave men signed a Declaration. In one of the boldest moves in history, they broke thirteen distant colonies away from the greatest monarchy and military power of its time. That juxtaposition is not insignificant. Those were important times and the founders understood the importance of being able to reason and communicate in the new form of self government the colonists hoped to achieve. A liberal arts education not only leads to a more self-fulfilling life, but it prepares us to be better citizens, whether it is making informed voting decisions, or whether it is serving our communities and country as so many of our members have done over the years.

I would like to close with one of the **best summaries of the benefits of an education in the liberal arts and sciences** that I have read. Several years ago *The American Scholar* published a wonderful essay called “Only Connect” by William Cronon. Many of you are no doubt familiar with this piece. In his essay, Professor Cronon developed a non-hierarchical examination of ten attributes ideally produced among those who have benefited from an education in the liberal arts and sciences:

- They listen and they hear.
- They read and they understand.
- They can talk with anyone.
- They write clearly and persuasively and movingly.
- They can solve a wide variety of puzzles and problems.
- They respect rigor not so much for its own sake but as a way of seeking truth.
- They practice humility, tolerance, and self-criticism.
- They understand how to get things done in the world.
- They nurture and empower the people around them.
- They follow E. M. Forster’s injunction from *Howard’s End*: “Only connect...” This tenth characteristic, Professor Cronon argues, is the sum of the others: “Every one of the qualities I have described here — listening, reading, talking, writing, puzzle solving, truth seeking, seeing through other peoples’ eyes, leading, working in a community — is finally about connecting. A liberal education is about gaining the power and the wisdom, the generosity and the freedom to connect.”

As we install the newest chapter of Phi Beta Kappa at Clemson today we are proud to connect the people of these two fine institutions. The luster of Clemson brings added brilliance to the reputation of Phi Beta Kappa and we are thrilled to have a chapter here.

Thank you.

Scott Lurding  
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