

Spring 2006 Newsletter Column

From Your President: *Phi Beta Who?*

The qualities which brought each of us an invitation to join Phi Beta Kappa, high scholastic standing in a program broadly based in the liberal arts and sciences, earned on a campus where there is an active chapter and where we have established a reputation for good character--this is the combination which has helped PBK to remain a "calling card to the vestibules of power." I borrow this phrase from the article "Phi Beta Who?" from the November 4, 2005, edition of the *Wall Street Journal*. The author, Nancy Keates, attempts to answer the question of why some young people are turning down the invitation which we chose to accept. Though Ms. Keates does not attempt to provide figures on national acceptance rates she does mention that smaller colleges seem to score higher than the giant universities. Our national offices, however, provide these figures: 82 of 234 reporting chapters (35% inducted 100% of their invitees in 2005; 127 chapters (54% inducted over 95%; 156 chapters (67% inducted over 85%. Of the 25 chapters (out of 270) with poorest induction rates (50% or below), 24 are state universities.

The article explores the various reasons given for rejecting an invitation: changing populations, a virtual plague of invitations from other honor societies, and most worrisome, lack of awareness of what Phi Beta Kappa is and stands for. At Delta Chapter, UPS, acceptance hovers near 100%. At Alpha UW, it is slightly less, but inquiries of well-qualified student candidates too frequently reveal that initiation costs are the principal deterrent. Your association has taken various steps to help these young people who otherwise would miss this opportunity. We have provided scholarships on the recommendation of faculty members, and some of our members have "adopted" deserving invitees.

The article which at first seemed critical of our beloved organization actually seems to have performed a service for us. Our national offices, attempting to find ways to "market" our association, no doubt have found here the fuel for further conversation, and education for the general public. John Churchill, our national secretary, says the group needs to boost its visibility. "It should not be necessary for anyone to peer at Phi Beta Kappa and ask, 'Who are they?'" he says. He is right. But we maintain our identity by doing what we do well, continue our vital contributions to education and our communities.

Kate Ostrom, President PSA-PBK