

FIFTY YEARS OF VISITING SCHOLARS

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In the Middle Ages, centers of learning such as Paris, Orleans, and Chartres were familiar with what were known as *Vagantes*, Wandering Scholars, who had a unique place in the transmission of knowledge and the development of European culture from the 10th century to the end of the 13th. So, too, American centers of learning over the last 50 years have become familiar with the Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars. They were, in fact, provisionally named Itinerant Scholars, surely a reminiscence of their mediaeval forebears, but their present title was approved when the program was established by the Triennial Council of 1955, and it is as Visiting Scholars that we salute them this year and celebrate their half-century of service to liberal education.

As early as 1949, the Committee on Chapter Activities had reported to the Council that the most helpful activity of the chapters is the provision of lectures by distinguished scholars. Inspired by this observation, the Committee on Policy in its report to the Senate on December 4, 1954, proposed that the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa develop a program of lectures providing for the appointment annually of one or more distinguished scholars, each of whom would spend two to three days at each of 10 or 15 Phi Beta Kappa-sheltering institutions desiring to participate in the program. Their activities were briefly described as giving one public lecture and rendering "whatever other service to the institution and academic community as might appropriately be arranged."

From such modest and experimental beginnings, the program took root and flourished. In that first momentous year (1956-57), five Visiting Scholars were appointed, four men and one woman (as Aesop might have said, "one, but a lion" — or rather a lioness, for she was Lily Ross Taylor of Bryn Mawr, the finest Latinist of her day). Out of 163 chapters, 32 requested visits, and 29 were accommodated. By comparison, in 2005-06 we had 270 chapters, 146 requests, 13 Scholars, and 101 chapters were visited. The total number of visits from 1956-57 to 2005-06 was 4,450, and the total number of Visiting Scholars to date is 529. To read the names of these scholars is to scroll through American intellectual life in the last half-century, identifying the dominant figures in the three major categories from which they have been chosen: humanities, social and behavioral sciences, and natural sciences, with their many subdivisions. Not all Visiting Scholars have been members of Phi Beta Kappa, nor were they all from academic life, and a few have come from other countries, like Sean O'Faolain from Ireland and H.D.F. Kitto from England.

How has this increasingly complicated program operated? Each triennium, a Committee on the Visiting Scholar Program is appointed. The committee is usually composed of a dozen or so members, some of them Phi Beta Kappa Senators and others non-Senators, chosen because of their familiarity with fields not covered by the Senators. Many committee members have served as Visiting Scholars themselves. Up to now, there have been 53 committee members, all trying to live up to the example of such 1955 pioneers as Marjorie Hope Nicholson and Helen C. White. So far, five men and three women have chaired the committee, and, in the opinion of at least one chairman, they have the best assignment of all committee heads. This enthusiasm is due, in part, to the intrinsic value of the program and the abiding interest in scrutinizing from year to year the wealth and diversity of American academic culture. It is also due to the superb direction provided by the national office once the program is set up each year. During all these years that direction has been provided by only two women, Frances Robb and Kathy Navascues. Frances Robb directed the program from 1955 until 1977 and then worked part time until she retired in 1991. It was she who set up the program in very much the way it is run today. Kathy Navascues worked with her from 1969 to 1977 and became director in 1977. To appreciate the expertise and tact with which she coordinates the program every year, we need only read the comments by Werner Gundersheimer in

the summer 2005 issue of *The Key Reporter*. He calls Kathy "one of Washington's more accomplished diplomats," but in fact, that is an understatement.

The original intent of the program was to give priority to those chapters located at institutions where opportunities were not already abundant for public lectures of a scholarly nature and where the presence of a Visiting Scholar would be most likely to contribute towards enriching the intellectual life of the academic community. This is still a basic aim. Small, relatively isolated liberal arts colleges throughout the country receive preference in the assignment of Visiting Scholars, as do those chapters whose requests in the previous year have had to be refused.

When a request is granted, the success of a visit depends in large measure on the skill and enthusiasm with which the lucky chapter tackles its job. It is no small burden, and the already overworked chapter officers deserve the utmost praise for all they do to ensure this success. The chapter works with the interested departments in setting up a two-day campus program that will bring together many students, faculty, and members of local Phi Beta Kappa associations and provide a wide variety of opportunities for the exchange of ideas, ranging from large public lectures to discussions with individual students and faculty and, on occasion, with administrators. Reports from the chapters often describe the advice on graduate study or career plans offered to a single person by a generous Visiting Scholar, in addition to the inspiration afforded by electrifying lectures delivered by world-famous leaders in their fields. It is especially gratifying to learn of occasions on which the Visiting Scholar has been the agent for winning stronger support on the part of an administration for a neglected liberal arts program.

And what of the Visiting Scholars who regularly report themselves as exhausted, but reinvigorated, by their experiences? Their accounts are fascinating, so often do they reveal the unique character of a college, its strengths, its struggles, its dedication to learning. It is not uncommon for Visiting Scholars to come away from their year of visits with a new perspective on their own work, a significant broadening of their experience, even a renewed inspiration for future scholarship. One example may stand for all. Freeman Dyson of the Institute for Advanced Study, one of the few scholars invited to renew his engagement for a second term, dedicated his book *Disturbing the Universe* to the students he met during his first Visiting Scholar tour in 1975-76. Listing every one of the eight colleges and universities he visited, he says, "They asked the questions, which this book tries to answer." Such a symbiosis is not unique.

To keep all this happening is the challenge that confronts us now. The future will see no lack of Visiting Scholars or of chapters eager to invite them, but there will be a growing need for adequate funding to support them. The Updike Memorial Fund, which has supported two visits by one humanities scholar each year since 2000, offers an example of what might be done on a much larger scale, and the Society will explore other avenues as they open up. As we look ahead to the next 50 years, we can foresee many changes in the academic culture that we exist to nourish. Many others will surprise us. Whatever they may be, the love of wisdom, which Plato assures us is the steersman of life, will continue to be our guide.