

The Phi Beta Kappa Society

REPORT OF THE 2008 STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

Background

On December 6, 2003, the Senate of the Phi Beta Kappa Society adopted a strategic plan to “guide the Senate and officers of the Phi Beta Kappa Society.” That plan included a statement about the mission and values of the Society, as well as nine broad goals, each supplemented by a series of specific subgoals, towards which the Senate believed the Society should strive. Those goals were:

1. To increase the visibility and effectiveness of Phi Beta Kappa as a national advocate for the liberal arts and sciences
2. To maintain and extend Phi Beta Kappa’s standing in the setting of standards of excellence in the liberal arts and sciences
3. To develop the resources of the Society in order to support its activities in an adequate and sustainable way
4. To promote the effectiveness of existing chapters
5. To support the activities of existing associations
6. To encourage cooperation among chapters and associations
7. To create new chapters and associations in a manner consistent with historic standards of excellence.
8. To support the Society’s publications at sustainable and appropriate levels and to assure their effectiveness as representatives of Phi Beta Kappa
9. To integrate the website more fully into the Society’s activities.

Four years after the adoption of that plan, the Senate determined that it was time to evaluate how well the plan was operating and whether revisions were needed, and therefore invited the President to appoint a committee for this purpose. In early 2008, President Allison Blakely appointed a Strategic Planning Committee composed of Senator Catherine W. Berheide, President Blakely, Senator Fred H. Cate (chair), Senator Theopolis Fair, and Senator Katherine Soule, with Secretary John Churchill and Associate Secretary Scott Lurding serving *ex officio*. This document is the committee’s report.

Introduction to the Committee’s Recommendations

The committee believes that the Society finds itself at an unusual and happy moment in its history. The chapters, associations, and Fellows appear committed to a mission that, even if at times ill-defined, remains both important and relevant. The work of the national office is being carried out by capable and committed staff, and there are no major staff vacancies. The Society is financially solvent and enjoys growing donor support and financial reserves sufficient to survive anticipated challenges.

This propitious confluence of circumstances leads the committee to two conclusions:

First, there is no need for any significant change of course. The 2003 Strategic Plan has provided appropriate guidance for the Senate, officers, and staff of the Society. Under that plan, the Society has made significant strides towards achieving the nine goals. And those goals remain both relevant and necessary for the Society to continue to pursue.

The committee does believe that a more clearly articulated statement of the Society's vision and mission would enhance communication with internal and external constituencies. We also propose below five additional goals to those in our existing Strategic Plan to help fine-tune and update that plan and provide clearer priorities for the Society for the foreseeable future.

The committee's second conclusion is that the Society's relative stability provides a welcome opportunity to address longstanding issues concerning the Society's governance that we believe hinder the Society's ability to more fully pursue its important mission.

The committee therefore recommends to the President, the Senate, and the Council the following strategic plan encompassing these two recommendations.

STRATEGIC PLAN 2009-2014

A. Vision and Mission Statements

Vision Statement

The values of the liberal arts and sciences include academic excellence, freedom of inquiry and expression, informed deliberation and understanding, and active engagement with important issues, both contemporary and enduring. Those values are essential to the realization of individuals' personal and intellectual potential, their effective participation as citizens, and to the achievement of a culturally rich, intellectually diverse civil society. For more than two centuries, Phi Beta Kappa has promoted these values by recognizing the achievement of outstanding arts and science students in the nation's leading colleges and universities. Today, Phi Beta Kappa seeks to build on its longstanding reputation as the nation's premier academic honor society to foster a culture in which the importance of these values is widely recognized and public and professional discourse is advanced by their prevalence.

Mission Statement

Phi Beta Kappa promotes the values of the liberal arts and sciences by inducting into membership the most outstanding arts and sciences students in the nation's leading colleges and universities, and by advocating academic excellence, freedom of inquiry and expression, informed deliberation and understanding, and active engagement with important issues.

B. Additional goals and new emphases

1. Expand the role of chapters, associations, districts, Senators, and Fellows in outreach to public officials, the higher education community, the press, and the public.

During the past five years, the Society has expanded and enhanced its efforts to communicate about the Society and to promote the values of the liberal arts and sciences among public officials, the press, and the higher education community. These efforts have primarily involved the Secretary, Associate Secretary, and other national office staff, and therefore have been necessarily limited by the time available to these few individuals for these important tasks.

To achieve a higher level of prominence and influence, the Society must expand the role of chapters, associations, districts, Senators, and Fellows in its outreach efforts. The national office staff, while continuing to work directly with important external constituencies, must also help to develop broader capacity for external communication throughout the Society, and to facilitate and coordinate that communication.

2. Strengthen chapters, increase induction rates, and enhance institutional investment in chapters.

Strengthening chapters has been an important focal point of the existing strategic plan. Unfortunately, despite significant effort from the national office staff, the Senate, and the chapters, frequently low induction rates in large chapters, and under-performing chapters

remain a serious threat to the vitality of Phi Beta Kappa. The Society should therefore devote greater efforts to enhancing chapters in the years ahead.

The effort to do so will require the close cooperation of other chapters, associations, and the Fellows, but it is increasingly clear that a stronger relationship with the sheltering institution is also critical in supporting chapters. The national office staff, in cooperation with the Committee on Chapters, should therefore identify chapters that might be considered at risk or in need of additional support, and develop tools for enhancing the support those chapters—and, ultimately, all chapters—receive from their sheltering institutions.

3. Strengthen associations, increase membership, and facilitate improved communication and collaboration.

Supporting associations has been an important objective of the existing strategic plan, and there have been significant improvements in some areas, but there remains a critical need to enhance our work in this area. Associations are a vital part of the Society and the primary means by which the Society interacts with its members, the vast majority of whom are not academics, following graduation. Associations are therefore key to enhancing the scope and impact of the Society, demonstrating its relevance, improving its development efforts, and serving its mission.

The national office staff, in cooperation with the Committee on Associations and the Conference of Association delegates, should therefore expand its efforts to support existing associations; establish new ones in unserved areas; improve communication within and among associations and between associations and other parts of the Society; facilitate collaboration among the associations, the chapters, and the Fellows; and strengthen the role of the associations in the Society's governance, outreach, and development efforts.

4. Focus on annual giving and the cultivation of a broader donor base.

The Society has made significant strides in its development efforts over the past five years, including expanding the number of regular donors and adding new tiers of donors. The existing strategic plan contemplated the beginning of a capital campaign for the Society. Recent experience suggests, however, that the Society's development efforts for the foreseeable future should remain focused on expanding the number of donors who contribute to the Society, the amount that they contribute each year, and their opportunities for substantive interaction with the Society and in pursuit of its goals, in addition to enhancing the Society's planned giving and major gifts programs. Continued collaboration with the Fellows will be critical to these efforts.

5. Develop and implement an integrated communications plan.

The national office has expanded its efforts to promote specific elements of Society activities—for example the book awards dinner, the *American Scholar*, the *Key Reporter*, and the Society's web site. It is now time to build on those efforts by developing an integrated communications plan that includes, to the extent feasible, all of the Society's units, including chapters, associations, and the Fellows. Such a plan would allow for cross-promotion of important activities, greater coordination among programs and publications, and economies of scale.

C. Structural Changes

As a national institution of more than one-half million members that depends almost entirely on volunteers to carry out its longstanding tradition of recognizing excellence in the liberal arts and sciences, Phi Beta Kappa faces the challenge of how to maximize participation, transparency, and accountability in its governance; operate efficiently, economically, and with sufficient consistency and flexibility to cope with changing conditions; and maintain its rigorous standards. This is a daunting task.

It has been made more difficult by outdated provisions in the Society's constitution, which as the Society has grown have had the unintended effect of reducing participation, transparency, and accountability, and substituting procedural debate for substantive discussion at the Triennial Councils. If the Society is to act consistently with the values it espouses, structural change is required. The Strategic Planning Committee therefore recommends the following goals and amendments to the Society's constitution.

1. Enhance the nomination and election process for officers and Senators by making it more transparent and inclusive.

At present, officer and senatorial candidates are selected by a Council Nominating Committee, which is brought together every three years solely for this purpose, and elected at the Council based on short written presentations of their experiences and views. District Senators are nominated through a variety of district-specific processes and then elected through the same process. Given the importance of Senators and officers to the Society, it is important that they be selected through a more thoughtful, systematic, consistent, and transparent process. The committee therefore proposes enhancing the selection process through:

- a. Replacing the current ad hoc Council Nominating Committee with a standing Nominating Committee the members of which are appointed by the President, confirmed by the Senate, and include representatives from the chapters and the associations, as well as non-Senators.
- b. Ensuring that there are at least two nominees for each Senate seat to be filled and for Vice President.
- c. Requiring that the nomination process followed by each district include basic procedural protections, including:
 - i. A nominating committee,
 - ii. The members of which must be publicly identified, and
 - iii. Include members selected from the associations and the chapters in that district, and
 - iv. Each nominating committee must solicit nominations from the membership of the associations and the chapters within that district.
- d. Voting by chapters and associations (except for individual Senators and past presidents) (see 3.d below).
- e. Engaging in a more aggressive and far-reaching search for candidates (not just for the Senate, but for all Society committees and positions), including a specific effort to expand the pool of younger and more diverse candidates who more broadly reflect the Society's membership.
- f. Expanding the range of information provided to Council members about the candidates and the positions to be filled, including opportunities for Council members to interact with the candidates in person and electronically.

- g. Exploring the potential for using information technologies to permit the direct election of one or more Senators.

2. Reconsider the purpose, composition, and operation of committees.

Phi Beta Kappa relies heavily on committees of volunteers in all aspects of its operations. These committees are integral to the Society, they impose often considerable demands on their members, and the costs of their meetings are significant. The Strategic Planning Committee believes that the committees should be evaluated periodically to consider:

- a. The function and purpose of existing committees.
- b. Whether new committees are necessary.
- c. The membership of committees.
- d. Staff and other support provided to committees.
- e. Methods for expanding the range of members and others willing to serve on committees.
- f. Clearer information about the objectives and activities of committees and the workload of their members.
- g. The training and evaluation of committee members.
- h. The timing and frequency of meetings.
- i. Tools for moving the work of committees forward between meetings.
- j. Electronic and other alternatives to in-person meetings.
- k. The relationship among chapter, association, district, national office, and Senate committees.

The Strategic Planning Committee has not attempted to undertake this evaluation, but we believe that the Senate and the national office staff should undertake to do so.

3. Refocus the role of the Triennial Council.

Every three years, the Triennial Council brings together a collection of the brightest minds in the liberal arts and sciences throughout the United States. If focused on the key substantive issues facing the Society and the nation, the Council has the potential to constitute an unparalleled brain trust for addressing those issues and an intellectually rich and invigorating experience for participants. The committee therefore proposes refocusing the Triennial Council to:

- a. Be a more substantive and intellectual experience, featuring prominent speakers from within academia and without.
- b. Focus on the Council's historical and critical role in strengthening, energizing, and facilitating information-sharing among the Society's chapters and associations.
- c. Define its governance activities to be electing Senators, the President, and the Vice President; awarding and suspending chapter charters; adopting model chapter constitutions; and amending the Society's constitution.
- d. Vote by chapters and associations (except for individual Senators and past presidents), thereby accentuating the reality that in those key governance matters that are determined by the Council, they are determined by chapters and associations, rather than individuals.
- e. Be more accessible and ensure earlier and faster dissemination of information through better use of information technologies and applications, such as webcasting.

Conclusion

While the Society is healthy, it nevertheless faces real challenges if it, and the ideals it espouses, are to remain vibrant and relevant in the future. This Strategic Plan is intended to build on the current stability of Phi Beta Kappa to address those issues that are likely to impede the Society's future success. The opportunity to address those issues reflects the positive condition of the Society, but the longer they remain unaddressed, the greater the risk that they pose to the Society's continued health. This is especially true with regard to the constitutional changes recommended above. The committee believes they are the right thing to do if the Society is to be faithful to its own ideals and to promote participation by the broad range of Phi Betes and transparency and accountability in all of the Society's activities. But they are also the necessary thing to do to make possible not only Phi Beta Kappa's continued strength, but also the fulfillment of its vision of an American society in which the values of the liberal arts and sciences thrive.

Adopted by the Strategic Planning Committee, Nov. 25, 2008

Accepted by the Senate, Dec. 5, 2008