Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society: Raising Visibility on Campus.

Kristina Wirtz
Western Michigan University, kristina.wirtz@wmich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/acad_leadership

Part of the Higher Education Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/acad_leadership/65

This Poster is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Faculty Development at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership Academy by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.
Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society: 
Raising Visibility on Campus

Kristina Wirtz

Department of Spanish, Western Michigan University

WMU’s Phi Beta Kappa Chapter

- Phi Beta Kappa is the nation’s oldest and most prestigious honor society, founded at the College of William & Mary in 1776.
- Western Michigan University is among 10% of American colleges and universities to host a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.
- Our chapter, Theta of Michigan, was founded in 1997 after more than a decade of efforts by WMU faculty and administrators. We are a WMU “point of pride.”
- Phi Beta Kappa celebrates and advocates excellence in the liberal arts and sciences.
- Just a few well-known PBK members:
  - James Buchanan, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economics
  - William Jennings Bryan, four-time U.S. Vice President
  - James Earl Jones, Academy Award-winning actor

Activities of our chapter: Theta of Michigan

Each spring, our chapter carefully selects the most excellent undergraduate students who are invited to join based on highly selective criteria, and comprising no more than 10% of their graduating class.

- WMU is rare in covering the initiation fee for students!
- Members in Course committee selects invites each spring;
- Spring Initiation Ceremony & Celebration each April;
- Listing of new initiates in Graduation programs;
- Web site & brochures;
- Visiting Scholar Program (every 2-3 years);
- Honorary and Alumni Initiates;
- Phi Beta Kappa national Triennial Council; Every three years, we send a (different) representative to this 2-day conference, where our chapter can network, get ideas, and find inspiration.

I attended in October, 2015.

Below: photo from April, 2011 initiation ceremony; national (left) & chapter (right) brochures

The Problem: PBK’s Low Profile on Campus

1) Low student response rate
- Students at a large public university are not aware of PBK, especially amid a sea of Greek-lettered organizations and honor societies.
- PBK invites students to membership at the end of their undergraduate careers; no chance for on-campus involvement.

2) Low faculty participation
- Structural issues: fewer TT hires; aging professoriate; higher workload.
- Most active chapter members have been involved for more than 10 years, and retired faculty fill several key roles.
- The same small group takes on responsibilities each year, risking burn-out (and not attractive for new participants).

Study: Best practices of our own and other chapters

Introduce PBK to students earlier in their careers:
- Pamphlets and brochures in LHC orientation materials and a first semester meeting (starting Summer 2016)
- LHC Dean, CAS Dean, and Provost all send congratulatory messages to invited students (started Spring 2016)
- Faculty and Department Chairs are urged to contact invited students they know to explain the honor (Existing practice)
- PBK chapter congratulatory letters to students making Deans List or joining the Lee Honors College (Proposed)
- PBK chapter newsletter, like the student-produced Cornell University chapter newsletter excerpted below (Proposed)
- "Introduce students to the benefits of being a PBK member, especially if they are considering entering graduate school or law school."

Involves undergraduates in Chapter activities (Proposed)
- Some chapters involve undergraduate and graduate students.
- Ask those inducted as juniors to join chapter meetings and help plan events and/or assemble newsletter.
- Involve students in planning, as well as attending, our occasional Visiting Scholar events.
- Co-sponsor other campus events related to PBK’s mission of advancing excellence in the liberal arts & sciences.
- Attract faculty to participate with small, discrete, time-limited commitments and gentle persistence
- Spread out officer responsibilities (Started 2015-16)

New Interventions: A Plan and Progress Report

1) Identify partners to implement these best practices: I have met with and/or plan to maintain contact with each of the following:
- Humanities Center
- Lee Honors College
- College of Arts & Sciences Dean’s Office
- College of Arts & Sciences Advising
- Faculty Development Office: New faculty orientation
- SW Michigan PBK Alumni Association
- PBK National Office & other chapters, e.g. through existing regional council networks

2) Build Our Recognition and Public Presence:
To raise PBK’s visibility on campus and give us an increasingly attractive presence to faculty & students

Events:
- Major Excitement (continue)
- Co-host student welcome event(s) at LHC;
- Co-sponsor & connect with Humanities Center series;
- Join events with LHC student groups and departmental;
- Disciplinary honors societies such as in English and Math;
- Invite the new national PBK Secretary Fred Lawrence, to make a site visit and give a talk at WMU (to propose);
- Visiting Scholar Dr. Marshall Lester, Nov. 10-11, 2016
- Co-organize with Chemistry Dept & LHC students
- Seeking co-sponsors (other Depts; LHC)
- Provost-sponsored (Net)Working Lunch for chapter, during Keys to Action Week (December 2016)
- Keys to Action Week for 240th anniversary (national initiative); maybe social media photos with “Giant Key” and “why liberal arts & sciences (personally) important.” Dec. 5-10, 2016.

Initiatives:
- Registrar: ask to add PBK to transcripts (more official)
- Involve initiated juniors in planning senior-year events
- Initiated juniors and LHC students can also advise on the most effective new media alternatives for reaching those we invite (since regular mail and email are often not effective).
- Newsletter by/for students featuring initiate bios.
- Seek out co-sponsorship opportunities for events & speakers
- Identify faculty & alumni to induce as Honorary/Alumni members as frequently as allowed by PBK national rules

Efficiencies:
- Continue to simplify and re-organize officer workflows;
- Seek new recruits to learn each role & other tasks;
- Continue to urge colleagues on our member list to pitch in, even in small ways (use Net-working Lunch to inspire action);
- Collaborate with partners to co-sponsor more existing/already planned campus events.

Some Guiding Principles for Busy People

- Go where students already are, on campus (Advising, LHC, department majors) and online (social media).
- Appeal to our common ground: love of learning, intellectual curiosity; educated engagement in issues of our time
- Seek efficiencies by connecting to and building on existing resources and efforts, rather than adding whole new tasks.
- Frequently review what we do, why we do it, and how it’s going.
- Seek to involve many people with smaller time commitments, rather than a few people who try to do it all.

Acknowledgments

Sincere gratitude to:
- Provost Tim Greene and the Provost’s Office
- My fellow chapter officers:
  - Dr. Paul Pancella, President
  - Dr. Linda Lehnink, Treasurer
  - Dr. Pablo Pandrana-Perez, Secretary
  - Mr. Jason Glatz, Historian & Website Administrator
  - Dr. John Petro, chair of Theta’s capital campaign
- All of Theta of Michigan’s active faculty members
- Dean Carla Koresky and the staff of the CAS Dean’s Office
- Dean Jane Baas and the staff of the Lee Honors College
- Dr. Katherine Joslin and the Board of the Humanities Center
- The Southwest Michigan PBK Alumni Association
- Kathy Navascues and the PBK national office

Contact Information

Dr. Kristina Wirtz, Professor of Spanish
Vice-President of Theta of Michigan Chapter

417 Sprau Tower
Department of Spanish
MS 5338
Theta of Michigan Chapter
CAS Dean’s Office
417 Sprau Tower
MS 5338
kristina.wirtz@wmich.edu
www.wmich.edu/pbk