Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society: Raising Visibility on Campus.

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

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Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society: Raising Visibility on Campus

Kristina Wirtz

Department of Spanish, Western Michigan University

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**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:

  ![Phi Beta Kappa Members](Image)

**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;
- Capital Campaign;
- PBK 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

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**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.

![Low student response rate graph](Image)

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 find 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)

**Involve 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)

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**New Interventions: A Plan and Progress Report**

1) Identify partners for collaborations: To explore ways 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 national PBK Secretary Fred Lawrence, to make a site visit and give a talk at WMU (to propose);
- Visitng Scholar Dr. Marsha 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 240 members in course committee selects invitees each spring;
- A ΦBK sponsored event
- SW Michigan PBK Alumni Association
- PBK National Office & other chapters, through existing regional council networks

**Sincere gratitude to:**
- Provost Tim Greene and the Provost’s Office
- My fellow chapter officers:
  - Dr. Paul Pancake, President
  - Dr. Linda Lees, Treasurer
  - Dr. Pablo Padrast – 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
Kristina.wirtz@wmich.edu

Western Michigan University

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**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.

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