

Gabriel Paquette
Phi Beta Kappa Address
University of Oregon
June 2019

You are among the highest-achieving students at the University of Oregon. Scholastic attainment is the visible flowering of a number of laudable traits that operate beneath the surface-- brilliance, diligence, and persistence among them. And it is these qualities and habits of mind that we celebrate more than the superabundance of “A’s” bursting from your transcript. **Congratulations.**

Now in being elected to Phi Beta Kappa, as previous speakers have mentioned, you join a long list of distinguished scholars, professionals, politicians, Nobel Prize winners and so forth. You might be forgiven for assuming that Phi Beta Kappa from its inception was intimately linked to superlative scholastic achievement, a vehicle for universities to recognize and honor their finest students, to say to the world “look here at these exemplars of academic excellence, these avatars of our mission statement”.

But those of you listening closely to Professor Hatfield’s remarks earlier or those who have dipped into the Handbook for New Members, will know that Phi Beta Kappa took on its current character in the early 1820s.

Its founders in December 1776 consciously established their society outside of and against the university, not in support of it. Its founding was an unvarnished critique of the existing university and the student organizations that were, to put it mildly and generously, academically disinclined.

If you read the Handbook, you learn that a group of College of William & Mary students met off campus, without professors, in the Apollo Room of the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg, Virginia. They developed secret handshakes, devised cryptic symbols, concocted mottos, and swore oaths to maintain the secrecy of their meetings. And your initiation today is into these rites and rituals.

But what on earth were they doing? This hardly seems an auspicious beginning for what became the largest honor society in the world.

Instead, you might speculate that this was a radical, even revolutionary organization. The American Revolution had broken out and Virginia had already seen and would see more of the worst of the fighting. The Apollo Room at the

Raleigh Tavern was no random choice. In 1769 and then again in 1774, when Virginia's Governor has disbanded the colonial assembly (called the House of Burgesses), the members had gathered there. And in 1773, Thomas Jefferson and a clutch of other leading colonists had convened there to create a standing committee of correspondence, to foment connections among the 13 colonies, seeking to foster a unity that might prefigure that of an independent nation.

So, meeting surreptitiously in the Apollo Room was fraught with symbolism. It wasn't just like booking a room in the EMU. Phi Beta Kappa's founders also distanced themselves from the university: they said, "here you may for a while disengage yourself from scholastic cares and communicate without reserve whatever reflections you have made upon various objects". Its members, they said, would "indulge ... that freedom of inquiry" to "dispel clouds of falsehood".

The inference was, of course, that one could not do these things at the university. And whether in America or in Europe, the 18th century was anything but the great age of universities, generally speaking. They were considered conservative buttresses of the status quo. The mitochondria of intellect were found far from cloistered quads with their antiquated curricula. Intellectual excitement was overflowing from fashionable salons, often suppressed secret societies, and learned academies.

These were the nodes of new forms of sociability that we now associate with the Enlightenment. Universities, by contrast, were backwaters. Then, as now, universities were forced to adjust, adapt, remain nimble, and respond constructively to the evolving interests of their students. Canon law and theology were swapped out for what was deemed "useful knowledge"—natural sciences, political economy, civil law, medicine etc.-- in many places across Europe and the Americas.

The students who founded Phi Beta Kappa did not commit themselves to secrecy because the university was hidebound and sterile, however, even though it was. They did so because they realized, as did those authorities whose surveillance they feared, that ideas have power and that learned conversation had the potential to transform the world.

The founders may have first known one another at the university, but their bond, their brotherhood, as they called it, transcended their university and, indeed, all universities. What they envisioned was a network, if not a confederation, of students not bound to any institution of higher learning in particular but to one

another in general, a scholastic and youthful province of the wider republic of letters.

And those young Virginians were not alone. Universities in the Americas, north and south, in the eighteenth century were places where late night debates on Linnaeus or Newton or the excavation of Pompeii could slip easily into seditious talk about liberty, rights, and political order. They were places where provincials metamorphosed into cosmopolitans, all in spite of the fact that the universities themselves remained staid, retiring places bereft of intellectual vitality.

The charter of Phi Beta Kappa is well known, but the minutes of the early meetings of the first society were somehow misplaced and temporarily lost to posterity between 1779 and the mid 19th c. Once recovered, they tell us something of the early topics that the William & Mary students felt that they could not debate within the walls of their university. Your Handbook mentions two of them:

- “Whether there is anything more dangerous to civil liberty in a free state than a standing army in time of peace?”;
- whether a wise state should have any interest nearer to its heart than the education of the youth?

But there were at least 2 more topics that were equally interesting, at least to me, and much more radical:

- whether slavery could ever be considered consonant with the principles of justice?;
- whether there was any form of government more conducive to the public good than a republican commonwealth?;

I am not saying that the founders were revolutionaries in the strict sense. Some joined the rebel cause in the American Revolution and some key figures of the early republic were members. But they were not keen to overthrow the existing social, political, and economic order. Instead, they sought ample latitude for the full operation of the intellect, even if the consequences of this unencumbered exercise proved revolutionary.

Well after Phi Beta Kappa had been converted into a national honor society, after it had been absorbed by and made acceptable to the universities its founders had fled, the older spirit endured.

We see this old spirit lingering in several places. Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1837 Phi Beta Kappa oration, *The American Scholar*, is well known (clichéd even if brilliant?), but it is less well known that he penned, in 1834, a Phi Beta Kappa poem, read in Cambridge, MA. It was customary for a poem or an oration to be read at this ceremony, but we've drifted away from poetry, preferring prose.

Emerson permitted very little of this poem to be published in his collected works, but it survived in manuscript and was transcribed and published in 1950. Emerson thought it was very bad, but he put a positive spin on its awful-ness: "My entire success, such as it is, is composed wholly of particular failures", he said. For him, to fail was to dare to learn.

Yet, Emerson's and posterity's judgment notwithstanding, the poem is one that the founders of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776 might have applauded. It celebrates the power of the intellect to withstand, even topple, tyranny and the unraveling, or unmooring, of society.

If I may, I'd like to read its final stanza:

I speak unto the generous and the good,
Unto New England's choicest brotherhood [THAT's YOU GUYS!];
Trust not the guarding sea, the fertile land,
Nor fleets, nor hosts, nor law's unsure command;
Build in the soul your citadel apart,-
The true New England is the patriot's heart.
The day of elder states may come to us
When public faith shall be ridiculous.
When times are changed, and the old cement gone,
Nor longer laws can yield protection;
Even then, when justice is put up to sale,
Shall one resource redress the unequal scale,
For, the true man, as long as earth shall stand,
Is to himself a state, a law, a land;
In his own breast shall read the righteous laws,
His own heart argue injured Virtue's cause,
With cheerful brow undauntedly shall face
Or frowning kings, or roaring populace;
And, spending in man's cause his latest breath,
Shall greet with joy sublime the Angel of Death

This is the heroic dimension of the individual's intellect, its private as well as public utility. But maybe, perhaps, like me, you are not enthusiastic about a showdown with the Angel of Death today? Another, regenerative dimension of Phi

Beta Kappa's founding ethos was captured well in a Phi Beta Kappa oration delivered by George Perkins Marsh in Cambridge, MA, in 1847, 13 years after Emerson's forgettable poem was read. A Vermont congressman and later American ambassador to Italy, Marsh was also a formidable philologist and later wrote an important book on the relationship between humankind and the natural world. Entitled Man and Nature, it is now almost forgotten, but in the 19th-c. was an important text for conservationists and later environmentalists.

Marsh understood Phi Beta Kappa not as a society to honor scholastic achievement alone, but rather as a community of peers notable for their fondness for learning as they entered, as you are entering, "the big whirl of the great world", in his phrase. The person, he observed,

"who has wisely kept alive their interest in letters, or art or abstract science finds in them the stimulus to secure the mind from the rust of inaction ... the love of knowledge is the magic fountain of perpetual youth, and [she] that is ever learning is ever young".

To this the students of William & Mary in December 1776 might have added: if forever learning, then forever questioning, and then forever challenging, chasing knowledge and seeking truth regardless of where it leads.

Our universities depend on being challenged, for they are revived by students impatient with the old patterns, methods, and traditions, students like the founders of Phi Beta Kappa and, now, you. We who spend our careers in universities are refreshed and recalled to our mission by your catalytic probing, by your propensity for asking "why?".

As the late former President of Yale, A. Bartlett Giamatti, noted,

"When [universities] are not challenged within themselves to justify themselves, to themselves as well as to the society they serve; when they are not held accountable by themselves and are not constantly urged to examine their presuppositions, their processes and acts, they stiffen up and lose their evolving complementarity to other American institutions".

This, then, is the timeless mandate of Phi Beta Kappa, whose birth was coterminous with our national founding, to keep our universities vibrant by keeping them honest and relevant.

Thank you for this service and please once again accept my hearty congratulations on your election to Phi Beta Kappa.