

## Sixty Years of Visiting Scholars

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 60 years have become familiar with the Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars. They were, in fact, provisionally named Itinerant Scholars, surely a reminiscence of their medieval 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 honor them and celebrate their 60 years 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 was 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 Phi Beta Kappa Society develop a program of lectures to provide 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 inaugural year (1956–1957), five Visiting Scholars were appointed, four men and one woman, Lily Ross Taylor of Bryn Mawr, one of the finest Latinists of her day. Out of 163 chapters, 32 requested visits, and 29 were accommodated. By comparison, in 2015–2016, of the 283 chapters, 127 requested visits, and 100 of those requests were fulfilled by a panel of 13 Visiting Scholars. The total number of visits from 1956–1957 through 2015–2016 was 5,288, and the total number of Visiting Scholars to date is 648. To read the names of these scholars is to scroll through American intellectual life in the last 60 years, identifying 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 65 committee members, all leading scholars and teachers in their fields and broadly familiar with current trends in higher education. So far, five men and four women have chaired the committee, and, in the opinion of several chairpersons, 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 direction provided by the national office once the panel of Visiting Scholars has been selected each year and chapter requests solicited. During the past 60 years that direction has been provided by Frances Robb and Kathy Navascues. Frances Robb directed the program from 1955 until 1977 and then worked part time until she retired in 1991. Kathy Navascues worked with her from 1969 to 1977 and became director in 1977.

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 toward 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 chapter arranges the scholar's time on campus. It is no small burden, and the often overworked chapter officers deserve praise for all they do to ensure the success of each visit. The chapter works with interested departments to set up a two-day campus program that brings together students, faculty, and members of local Phi Beta Kappa associations and provides a wide variety of opportunities for the exchange of ideas, ranging from large public lectures to individual discussions with students and faculty and, on occasion, with administrators. In a report on a recent visit, the Franklin and Marshall College Phi Beta Kappa chapter expressed sentiments voiced by many others: "We had the rare pleasure to host a singular scholar who both illuminated a world of historical and conceptual richness while at the same time drawing in members of various campus constituencies with skill, humor, and masterful scholarship." 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 or small seminars delivered by scholars of national distinction. It is also not unusual for Visiting Scholars to have the opportunity to speak with administrators about enhanced support for neglected liberal arts programs and to champion their importance.

And what of the Visiting Scholars who regularly report themselves as exhausted but reinvigorated by their experiences? Their accounts are fascinating. They often reveal the unique character of a college and the ambitions of its students and faculty. It is not uncommon for Visiting Scholars to come away from their year of visits with new friends and colleagues, certainly, but also with an expanded appreciation for the special role that small liberal arts colleges play in American higher education and with a new perspective on and enthusiasm for their own work. Gary Jacobson, Distinguished Professor of Political Science at UC San Diego, writing of his campus visits, concluded with this observation: "After preparing and delivering the talks, I've decided I should do a book on the Bush Presidency and the American public that combines various themes from the talks and other work I've been doing. So credit PBK for helping to set up scholarly agenda." As testimonials from Visiting Scholars regularly remind us, the program benefits them even as it is a source of inspiration and intellectual energy for the host institutions.

To keep the program vital is the challenge of tomorrow. While there will be no lack of Visiting Scholars or chapters eager to invite them, the continued expansion of the program will depend on increasing the funding that underwrites its activities. 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 larger scale. As a flagship program of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, the Visiting Scholar initiative is an outstanding fundraising opportunity. As we look ahead, we can foresee many changes in the academic culture that we exist to nourish. Many others will surprise us. But the Visiting Scholar Program is one way in which Phi Beta Kappa will continue to meet the emerging needs of its chapters, however our disciplines and our institutions may change in the coming years.

Visiting Scholar Committee Chairpersons:

Kirtley F. Mather, 1955–1958, Professor of Geology, Harvard  
John W. Dodds, 1958–1970, Professor of English and Humanities, Stanford  
Hallett D. Smith, 1970–1979, Professor of English, California Institute of Technology  
Mina Rees, 1979–1985, President, Graduate School, CUNY, Mathematics  
Hazel Barnes, 1985–1991, Professor of Philosophy, University of Colorado  
Neil Harris, 1991–1997, Professor of History and Art History, Chicago  
Werner Gundersheimer, 1997–1998, Director, Folger Shakespeare Library, History  
Helen North, 1998–2012, Professor of Classics, Swarthmore  
Jean Howard, 2012–, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia