

Journal Editorial: “Phi Beta Kappa Induction Remarks”

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This journal editorial is an abridged version of the Provost’s remarks at the University of Oregon Phi Beta Kappa induction ceremony on June 14, 2025, which the Provost’s Office has graciously offered for inclusion in this issue of the Oregon Undergraduate Research Journal. Since its founding in 1776, Phi Beta Kappa has celebrated excellence in the liberal arts and sciences and championed freedom of thought. As America’s most prestigious academic honor society, it is uniquely equipped to advocate for the value and benefits of liberal arts and sciences education; the University’s Alpha of Oregon chapter recently celebrated its centennial anniversary.

Today, as we induct a new generation into the nation’s oldest academic honor society, we do more than confer a distinction, we affirm a commitment: a commitment to curiosity, to intellectual rigor, and to the hard-won joy of understanding. We mark not only personal achievement, but a shared faith in the university as a sacred place of transformation and of truth-seeking. In a time when these ideals are under siege, such faith is no small thing.

Phi Beta Kappa has always stood for the life of the mind, for the belief that the liberal arts and sciences are not luxuries but necessities; that freedom of thought is not an abstraction, but the condition of our collective flourishing; that ideas, tested and challenged in open exchange, are the very engines of a vibrant democracy. Today, we celebrate students who have excelled within that tradition. And we also acknowledge the mounting pressures it now faces.

The threats are no longer veiled. In recent years, and with escalating force under the current federal administration, we have seen policies that seek to narrow, censor, and constrict the mission of higher education. Federal funding for basic and applied research—the fuel of human progress—has been haphazardly cut or reallocated to serve partisan aims. Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives have been vilified and dismantled, ignoring that diversity of backgrounds, diversity of thought, and diversity of experiences are what make research and teaching excellence possible. International students and faculty—whose ideas and presence have enriched our campuses and communities for generations—now face unjust restrictions on visas, work permits, and legal status.

These are not isolated skirmishes. They are symptoms of a deeper, organized effort to redefine what education should be and who it should serve, to discredit expertise, to replace complexity with control, and to transform the university from a place of inquiry into a place of indoctrination. Yet, I believe—as did the founders of Phi Beta Kappa, as did the leaders of this nation throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries—that public universities serve the public good through research and education, by exploring and generating new ideas, and by teaching future citizens to discern how to live meaningful lives.

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As the 1965 legislation that created the National Foundation for the Arts and the Humanities so succinctly puts it: “Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens.”¹ To make good on this demand of democracy itself, we must support, sustain, and defend the public research university as a sacred space of inquiry and learning. To call the university a “sacred” space is not to infuse it with a holiness founded upon religious dogma, but to recall the connotations of the Latin *sacrare*, which means “to set apart” and “to dedicate.” The university is set apart as a space dedicated to the search for truth and the cultivation of the habits of dialogue and thinking that awaken us to the world and deepen our relationships with one another.

The university is a sacred space for thinking in its most active voice. The activity of thinking is rooted in what Hannah Arendt calls the human condition of natality, the capacity to bring something new into the world. Thinking thus acts in unpredictable ways. This is one reason ideologues and demagogues find universities so dangerous and seek to control them. The university, however, can only be a catalyst for new and unexpected ideas if it is protected and sustained.

Despite the very real threats of the current moment, I want to conclude today on a note of hope and possibility. This is not the first time our university has weathered mighty storms. And it will not be the last. Higher education has endured wars, recessions, cultural upheaval, swings in public opinion, and political backlash before. And it has survived—not through complacency, but through principled resistance, the relentless belief that truth is a value worth defending, and the enduring commitment to imagine a more just and beautiful future.

We do well today to remember the words of poet Audre Lorde, who wrote: “Within each one of us there is some piece of humanness that knows we are not being served by the machine which orchestrates crisis after crisis and is grinding all our futures into dust.”² The university is not immune to change; it is the crucible through which we deepen our understanding of the world and one another so we might create together a future worth wanting.

As Audre Lorde reminds us: “What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strength of our individual identities. And in order to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness.”³ And as long as there are students willing to question, to wonder, to speak truth even when it is hard or unpopular, the university will remain the beating heart of a free society and a catalyst for a more just future.

To our new Phi Beta Kappa inductees: you inherit this legacy and commitment. You carry forward the work of keeping inquiry free, of ensuring that knowledge serves not power, but that piece of humanness that makes a better world possible. You have distinguished yourselves not only through achievement, but through the questions you have dared to ask. Higher education, like democracy itself, is not static. It breathes through us. It survives when we defend it. And it thrives when we create and sustain it together.

¹ National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act,” Pub. L. No. 89–209, 951 20 U.S.C. 845 (1965), sec. 3, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-79/pdf/STATUTE-79-Pg845.pdf>.

² Lorde, Audre, and Cheryl Clarke. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Reprint edition. Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, 2007, 139.

³ *Ibid.*, 142.