To: Phi Beta Kappa Faculty and Staff of George Mason University

From: Rick Davis, President, Omicron of Virginia

 On behalf of Chapter Officers Tom Owens, VP, and Rosemarie Zagarri, Historian.

Cc: Keith Renshaw, Senior Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education; Megan Breuning, Director, Office of Fellowships

Re: Chapter Matters

Greetings, PBK colleagues. I am writing to ask you to join our efforts to revitalize the Phi Beta Kappa chapter at Mason. I’m entering my last term-limited year as President of our chapter, the Omicron of Virginia (insert your favorite pandemic nomenclature jest here). As we plan the year’s activities and look ahead, I want to engage with you on some ideas for chapter activities, think about succession planning, and begin laying the groundwork for observations marking the Semiquincentennial (my first time typing this word!) of both the Phi Beta Kappa Society and, beyond our purview but equally interesting, the United States of America, in 2026.

I attended the PBK Triennial Council in Baltimore in August and came away, as I always do, with renewed enthusiasm for the project of advancing the study of the liberal arts and sciences in the distinctive context of a fast-changing research university with a deep commitment to access and inclusion. I also came away feeling that our Chapter is holding up its end of the bargain pretty well, right about in the middle of the pack as regards our level of activity. But I also feel that we could serve the cause (and our university) better with some fresh ideas and more visibility on campus. That’s where you come in, if you so elect.

We have done some very good work since we installed our chapter in 2013 under the guidance of the late Professor Marion Deshmukh, Founding President, and Provost Emeritus Peter Stearns, who served as President from 2015-2018. The very existence of our chapter – which was rejected several times by PBK Triennial Councils – speaks to the grit and perseverance of those founders and many other PBK faculty who labored over the application(s) and hosted the site visitors – so we can truly feel that we earned our place at the table. Coupled with George Mason’s continuing growth and maturation as an increasingly diverse and distinguished institution AND one where the liberal arts and sciences have real presence and value, our membership in the Society is a signal to any number of communities, internal and external, of our stature in the higher ed landscape.

Only slightly interrupted by the pandemic, we have kept up our commitment to identifying and inducting a highly qualified class of members. Our Chapter’s inductees every year represent George Mason’s excellence, scope, and diversity from every point of view, and it is always a joy to see the pride that these students (and their friends and families who attend) take in joining this venerable society dedicated to the “love of learning.”

We have sponsored several PBK Visiting Scholars, who give public lectures, attend classes, and meet with students and faculty. But there are other activities that some of our colleague chapters have found to be invigorating, and, being George Mason after all, we might come up with some of our own!

Most importantly, of course, membership in PBK confers benefits on our students, from a valuable résumé credit to networking opportunities (and one of the current officers of the DC PBK Association is a Mason alum). So there’s every reason to support a thriving chapter here on campus.

Now… if you’ve read this far, you’re probably wondering a) why, and b) can I get my time back, and c) what is the ask?

Skipping right to c): we are planning to gather our PBK members on the faculty and staff to explore some ideas for chapter outreach and activities, and to discuss the plan for a new slate of officers for the next three years. Please look out for that email and if your schedule permits, join us for an hour of good conversation about the liberal arts and sciences at George Mason University and throughout our land.

And if you are interested in learning more about PBK matters here at George Mason University, please send me a note at rdavi4@gmu.edu, no obligation expressed or implied.

Best wishes for the new semester!