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[Phi Beta Kappa]

JMU's landmark decision

Phi Beta Kappa taps Madison

BY MARTHA BELL GRAHAM

There should have been fireworks on the Quad on Oct. 2, 2009, when the Phi Beta Kappa Society announced their decision to invite JMU to charter its own chapter. "If you look at landmark events in the university's history, this is one of them," says Douglas T. Brown, provost and vice president for academic affairs.

Phi Beta Kappa, the oldest and most prestigious academic honor society in the United States, chose JMU during its 42nd Triennial Council in Austin, Texas, as one of the newest Phi Beta Kappa institutions. JMU joins fewer than 300 chapters nationwide. Only about 10 percent of American institutions are invited to join the elite company of Phi Beta Kappa societies.

Phi Beta Kappa's invitation reflects "the quality of JMU undergraduate programs in the arts, humanities, natural science and social sciences" says Linda Cabe Halpern, dean of university studies and Phi Beta Kappa member. "While the chief beneficiaries are our students, it is also a wonderful validation of the quality of our faculty and academic programs."

"JMU has been in a new category of institutions for some time," Brown says, "what Dr. Rose calls the new American university. We integrate learning, practice and social responsibility into all aspects of student life. The inclusion in Phi Beta Kappa's prestigious ranks only provides external validation for what we do so well."

"Frankly," Brown says, "the progress JMU has made in its academic programs during the past 15 years is almost unheard of in academia." He cites the alliance with technological pioneer SRI International as yet another indication that the quality of a JMU education is undeniable.

Brown says that while JMU has been demonstrating a high level of academic rigor and performance for some time, recognition by the Phi Beta Kappa committee is "a clear indicator that we are among the best universities in the country."

JMU's mission aligns closely with Phi Beta Kappa's goals. "Reasoned inquiry and heartfelt exploration are central to JMU's efforts to help students become educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives," says Charles Blake, professor of political science and Phi Beta Kappa member.

Blake, Halpern and Donna Harper, executive assistant to the president, co-chaired the committee



JMU Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Douglas Brown says, "If you look at landmark events in the university's history, this is one of them." In October, Phi Beta Kappa invited JMU to charter a campus chapter.

that spearheaded the extensive application process that included a 435-page report and a campus visit.

Blake adds, "the site visit team was impressed by JMU students, by the quality of undergraduate research at JMU, and by the commitment to civic engagement among our students and alumni."

Blake, Brown and Halpern agree that the ramifications of Phi Beta Kappa are broad.

The opportunity for future students to be recognized with a Phi Beta Kappa key will attract top students who might otherwise attend the University of Virginia or William and Mary, Brown says.

"With the installation of this new chapter," Halpern says, "JMU's best undergraduate students will now have an opportunity to join a nationwide network of lively and accomplished individuals. Phi Beta Kappa is not only a high honor that our best students in liberal arts and science majors can earn, but it will also provide ongoing support for a celebration of the value of the liberal arts in the modern world."

In addition to the opportunities Phi Beta Kappa affords students, there will be significant impact on faculty recruitment. While the designation is meaningful to prospective students, it will also draw top professors, Brown says.

Currently, 40 JMU professors are Phi Beta Kappas. By next spring, they will be joined by the first inductees to the JMU chapter.

Provost Brown doesn't mince words: "This is a really big deal." **MI**

* See the list of JMU's 40 Phi Beta Kappa professors at www.jmu.edu/bethechange/education.shtml.

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