



Phi Theta Kappa is an international honor society for two-year colleges. Saddleback College's local chapter is known as the Beta Epsilon Beta chapter.

BETA EPSILON BETA BULLETIN

COMMUNITY COLLEGE HONOR SOCIETY COMMITS TO BOOSTING GRADUATION RATES

SEATTLE – Commit to completion. Complete your degree. Move onward and upward! These were among the motivational slogans that echoed throughout the 93rd Annual Phi Theta Kappa Convention held April 7-9.

More than 3,500 community college students from around the world -- including six honors students from Saddleback College's Beta Epsilon Beta Chapter of Phi Theta Kappa (Michael Clute, Alex Lopez, Neda Mosafaei, Marie March, Stephanie Hepner, and Rebekah Nixon) – attended the three-day event at the Washington State Convention Center in Seattle. The convention is sponsored annually by Phi Theta Kappa, the international honor society for two-year colleges.

A study by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy at California State University, Sacramento, concluded that only 30 percent of community college students in California complete a degree or certificate, or transfer to a university. Most of the remaining 70 percent drop out within six years of enrolling.

Hoping to reverse this nationwide trend, Phi Theta Kappa has launched a Community College Completion Corps, urging its chapters to become involved in calling attention to the issue and developing support systems for students at risk of dropping out. These support systems include offering scholarships to provide financial aid and encouraging honor students to reach out to their peers to help them become successful students. Phi Theta Kappa is asking campuses nationwide to set up "signing days," in effect asking students to sign pledges to commit themselves to completing their education. The goal: 100 signing days at 100 colleges.

Ellen Carmody Roster, Phi Theta Kappa's Associate Executive Director/Chief Operating Officer, told a room full of students and instructors at one of the educational forums held during the convention, "Access is not enough. You have to help students succeed."

Educational experts cite a variety of factors that prevent students from completing their degrees or credentials. "The fault is not with our students – it's with our system," asserted Hilary Pennington, Director of Education, Postsecondary Success, and Special Initiatives for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has pledged \$35 million over five years to help more community college students graduate each year.

Featured as one of the keynote speakers at the convention, Pennington noted that colleges and universities are not sufficiently accommodating many of today's students who, instead of attending a higher-education institution full time, are more likely to work part- or full-time while going to school part-time and are less likely to live on campus. Many also are taking care of children. Factors such as obstacles in maintaining academic schedules, making the transition from high school to college, and receiving sufficient financial aid can lead students to drop out before completing their education. Solutions cited by Pennington include diversifying class schedules, enrolling students in cohorts, and incorporating technology more extensively as a vehicle for teaching.

Throughout the convention, Phi Theta Kappa members shared inspirational stories about their own struggles to commit themselves to their educational careers. On the closing day of the convention, chapter delegates voted into office five new international officers, who will serve as worldwide ambassadors of the honor society. The four division vice presidents are Danielle Swartz of Southern Maine Community College in South Portland, Maine; Esteban Smith of H. Lavity Stoutt Community College in the British Virgin Islands; Sarah Yates of Pulaski Technical College in North Little Rock, Arkansas; Jeremy L. Mathis of Pikes Peak Community College in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Tameka Wilson of Hinds Community College in Raymond, Mississippi, will serve as the new international president of Phi Theta Kappa.

--Gina Victoria Shaffer, Assistant Professor of English and Co-Advisor of the Beta Epsilon Beta Chapter of Phi Theta Kappa at Saddleback College
