

# Williams PBK: 2015—2016 Chapter Report

## Officers:

Steven J Miller, Associate Professor of Mathematics (Faculty President)

Frederick Strauch, Associate Professor of Physics (Faculty Secretary/Treasurer)

Stephen Fix, Robert G Scott '68 Professor of English (Faculty Historian)

## Membership:

We inducted 27 seniors at the start of the year, and another 39 at commencement; Todd Hall was chosen by the fall members as the PBK graduation speaker, and Lucy Page was the valedictorian; their speeches are available online:

- <http://commencement.williams.edu/commencement-2016/todd-m-hall-phi-beta-kappa-speaker-2016/>
- <http://commencement.williams.edu/commencement-2016/lucy-e-page-vaedictorian-2016/>

The student officers were Blake Mackall (president) and Chris Bravo (vice-president).

We have arranged for free one year membership for all Williams PBK graduates with the New York PBK Association. To help support the NY Association and to hopefully increase involvement between our two groups, we have purchased a lifetime membership which can be used for any active officer to attend their events.

## Events:

We had a very busy year, split between laying the groundwork for future events and co-sponsoring numerous items on campus.

- First, working with OIT we reached out to all Williams PBK alumni to create a membership list. We had over 500 respond; we created an email list, and have started investigating events. One of the first events from this outreach was a discussion this past January on “Human Rights 2.0: How Technology is Challenging and Transforming Efforts to Promote Human Rights and the Rule of Law Around the World” by Elizabeth Anderson from the American Bar Association, Williams College Class of ‘87 and member of the Board of Trustees.
- Second, we have been active in promoting PBK’s principles of freedom of inquiry and liberty of thought and expression on campus. Much of this activity was in response to a group of students known as “Uncomfortable Learning” (an unofficial, externally funded student group), who invited two controversial speakers whose talks were cancelled this year. The first cancellation was by the students under unfortunate circumstances, which prompted an official statement from President Adam Falk:

- <http://williamsrecord.com/2015/10/28/how-to-disagree/>
- After this controversy, the faculty and student officers decided to co-sponsor the next Uncomfortable Learning speaker in the spirit of free inquiry. This generated a great deal of discussion among student members, both because of the choice of the speaker and because of issues with how Uncomfortable Learning operated. We arranged for a number of conversations among the student, staff and faculty members about what we can and should do. In the end, an all-member vote elected to co-sponsor this event (33 for and 18 against). We submitted a public statement on this issue:
  - <http://williamsrecord.com/2015/11/11/letter-to-the-editor-on-promoting-conversation/>

The event was a talk by former Williams professor K. C. Johnson, from Brooklyn College and the City University of New York, on issues related to sexual assault on campus.
- We co-sponsored a talk (with the Williams College Debating Union, among others) by Joseph L. Graves of the University of North Carolina on the science and sociology of race (this occurred just before a talk by Charles Murray, co-author of the controversial book “The Bell Curve”, who was invited by Uncomfortable Learning).
- We were not asked and did not co-sponsor Uncomfortable Learning’s invitation to John Derbyshire, who was disinvited by President Falk. An article on this controversy appeared in the Washington Post:
  - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/02/20/williams-college-cancels-a-speaker-invited-as-part-of-a-series-designed-to-bring-in-provocative-opinions/>

PBK organized a series of lunch conversations regarding this cancellation, some of which included directed readings (some open to students, faculty and staff, and some just to faculty and staff) on these topics. Choices of reading ranged from John Stuart Mill’s “On Liberty” to Anthony Lewis’ “Freedom for the Thought We Hate: A Biography of the First Amendment” to Burt Neuborne’s “Madison’s Music: On Reading the First Amendment”, as well as the statements on academic freedom and freedom of expression from Yale University and the University of Chicago.

- We also sponsored, in coordination with the Gaudino Fund, a discussion among students on the topic of “uncomfortable conversations” as part of Claiming Williams Day (a day when classes are cancelled so the community can reflect on a variety of issues), and This was moderated by two student moderators / facilitators (one from PBK and one from the Gaudino fund).
- With the campus group “Why Liberal Arts” we co-sponsored Eugene Korsunskiy of the University of Vermont, Williams College Class of ’07, on harnessing creativity in the curriculum.

- We had several wine and cheese socials where students, staff and faculty mingled and discussed a variety of issues.
- Finally, we had a very active spring induction. In addition to the usual festivities, we had two distinguished guests, Jacques Ohayon (the president of the NY PBK Association) and Frederick M. Lawrence (Williams '77 and the incoming secretary/CEO of the national PBK and former Williams PBK student officer). We were honored to have Dr. Lawrence present the opening remarks at this ceremony, and we are inspired by his first message as Secretary/CEO of PBK, which includes the following:

*“Our mission has never been more vital than it is today. There is an enormously important opportunity for us to become a more active voice in nation-wide conversations when issues pertinent to higher education and freedom of thought are debated. The boundaries of free expression and academic freedom are being tested severely today on many campuses and in many contexts. Phi Beta Kappa is well-positioned to articulate the ways in which free and open debate can and indeed must coexist with civility. If higher education is the gatekeeper to the American Dream, then the Phi Beta Kappa Society is the path to the highest level of that dream. It is thus especially important the Phi Beta Kappa be broadly diverse and inclusive.”*

For Dr. Lawrence’s full statement, see:

- [https://www.pbk.org/web/PBK\\_Member/Opening\\_Secretary.aspx](https://www.pbk.org/web/PBK_Member/Opening_Secretary.aspx)

### **Future Plans:**

For 2016—2017 we plan on continuing many of the above items. We are constantly working with a variety of student and faculty organizations on campus, both to help build consensus for activities as well as to ensure good attendance at events. We are currently coordinating with The Gaudino Fund to bring speakers to campus to continue public dialogue on free inquiry. We are also working with the Williams College Library to develop events for the Banned Books Week (of the American Library Association). We have had two Visiting Scholars in the past five years, and are applying with the physics department for one for next year.