

# Academic Dispatch

Communication from the Office of Academic Affairs

April 24, 2025

## In celebration of the liberal arts as a uniting force

Every spring a select group of some of our most talented and creative students are [officially inducted as members of Phi Beta Kappa](#), the nation's oldest and most prestigious honor society. This past Saturday afternoon, I had the pleasure of attending the annual induction ceremony in UNM's Hodgin Hall at which for the last several years I have been asked to give remarks. I am always eager to oblige because I believe strongly in the ideals of the society and the importance of carrying those values into the world. (I was also thrilled that the New Mexico Alpha Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa decided this year to induct me as an honorary member – a true honor indeed!)

I try never to repeat a speech, so in preparing, I pondered what I should share this time. It is difficult to escape the times in which we live, fraught as they are with political and social strife. Because Phi Beta Kappa is dedicated to recognizing and encouraging excellence in the liberal arts, and because the very name “liberal arts” has become unnecessarily associated with the divisions in our nation, it seemed natural to address the meaning and importance of liberal arts and the hope they hold for a fractured society in search of enlightenment and optimism.



University of New Mexico photo

Phi Beta Kappa was formed in the rebellious colony of Virginia during the American Revolution. The very idea that it was legitimate for a people to rebel against their government, to rebel against the English King, was a concept of liberal democracy espoused by Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke, who conceived that the consent of the governed was foundational. Phi Beta Kappa comes from this liberal tradition, the tradition of liberty.

The name, liberal arts, is a curious one to modern eyes. It might seem to be about liberals, those on the “left” as we often say in present parlance. And it seems to be about art. But liberal here, derived from the Latin *liberalis*, means “relating to a free person.” And arts is also derived from the Latin, from the word *ars*, meaning skill. The liberal arts, as an educational form, refers to creating a free person by educating them in the skills of the mind. Yet since the beginning of the 19th century, the word “liberal” has taken on a new meaning, owing to its adoption by the adherents of particular political and social ideologies. Today, we live in a nation divided along lines associated with this relatively new meaning of the word.

The liberal arts are not about a particular set of subjects, nor are they about a particular set of political or social ideologies. Instead, they are about a particular set of mental skills, those skills that allow a free person to act with self-agency in the world because they can think, hear, and consider conflicting ideas, evaluate truth or falsehood,

reach their own conclusions, and ever be wary of self-certainty. It is for this reason that all education in the United States from kindergarten up is in fact based on the ideas of the liberal arts. For as a liberal democracy, meaning a free democracy, our nation requires citizens to act with thoughtful self-agency.

In our nation today, it is too easy to adopt the view that those who disagree with us, those who oppose us, have not absorbed the skills, the ars, of a liberal arts education. Too easily do we think that our opponents must be failing to evaluate evidence and deploy reason, and instead must be proceeding from ignorance or else with nefarious intent. And from this thinking to demonization is but a tiny step. Surely those who oppose me are evil.

This is a very human response. We are, after all, tribal, owing to the long evolutionary benefits that have been brought to individuals by having a small, close group who collectively – and even viciously – defend the group from outsiders. Yet larger civil societies are possible because our minds can be trained. We are the species who is least shackled by our evolutionary and structural constraints.

We evolved empathy too, which provides a means to live together with good grace even toward those with whom we disagree and who offend us. Together, with the deeper understanding possible through our skillful minds, this has allowed us to place ourselves in the shoes even of those far away whom we have never met. Through our liberal arts training we learn the skills to transcend our biology. We can free ourselves as conscious actors in the world and extend our evolutionary traits to a broader humanity with whom we might never personally engage.

Today, we live in a nation divided along ideological lines. Those lines have been etched more sharply by inequality, by our neglect of our fellows who are struggling to make their way in the world, and by the echo chambers of media channels too numerous to chart. Rapacious actors are then only too happy to step into that divide and wield it against the principles of a liberal education and a liberal democracy.

Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican president of the United States, also faced a nation divided. In his first inauguration address, he called back to those patriots of the American Revolution, some of whom were the very founders of Phi Beta Kappa, when he closed his inauguration address by saying:

“I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Despite all our differences and disagreements, however strong, the skills of the mind that a liberal arts education provides to all of us contain the tools to carry us forward as friends.

## **Provost Committee for Staff Kindness Award nominations open**

Through April 30, the [Provost Committee for Staff](#) is accepting nominations for the Kindness Award. Nominations can be [submitted here](#). The Kindness Award is a special recognition given annually to a staff member at UNM who has demonstrated extraordinary kindness through service. A certificate and monetary award will be presented to the individual staff selected. An awards ceremony will be held in the fall.

**James Paul Holloway**

**Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs**

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