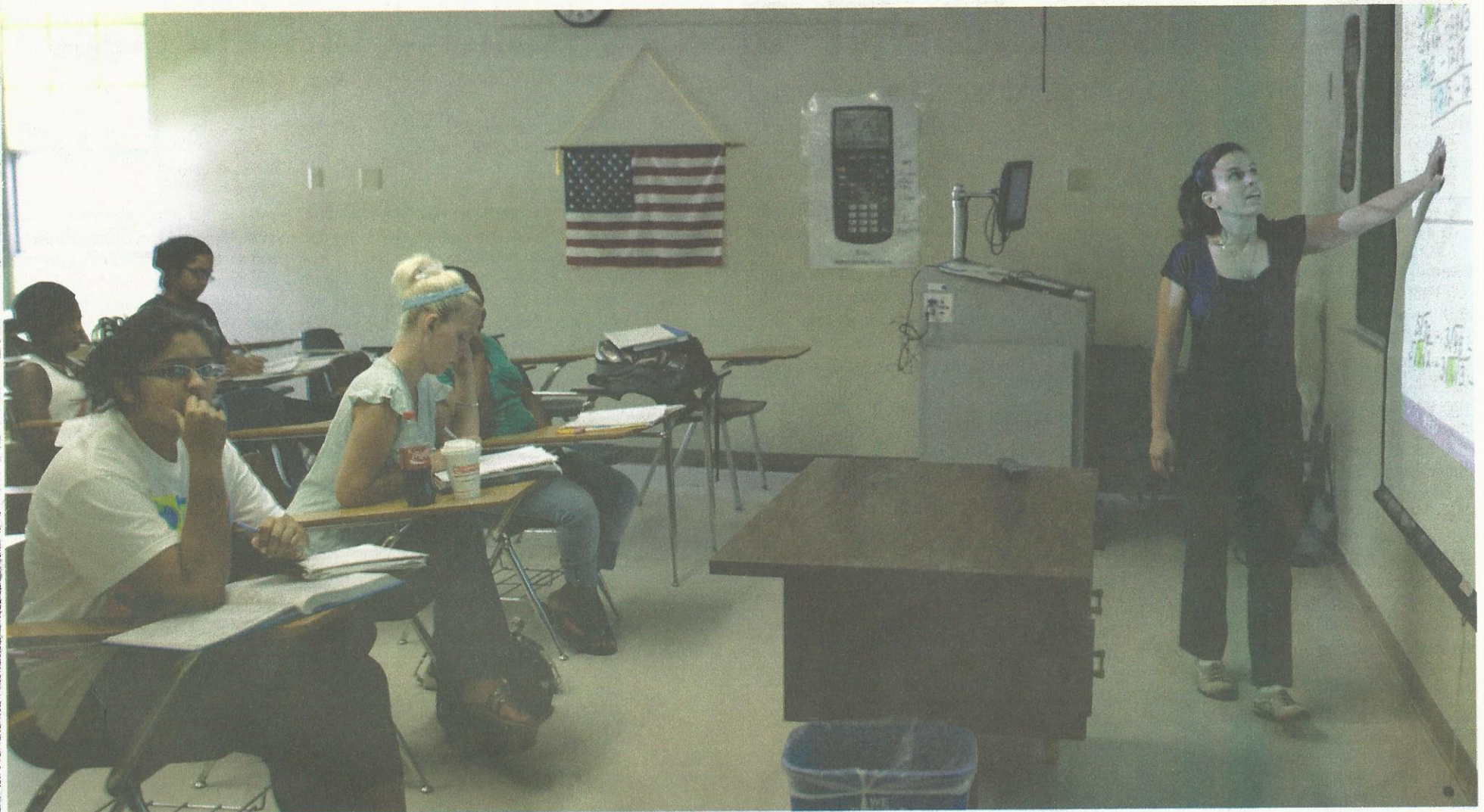


COVER STORY



CCWEEK FILE PHOTO

Members of the Phi Theta Kappa honor society are much like other community college students, but they are heavily engaged in their own educations.

Expanding Honors

Bouyed by Success, Phi Theta Kappa Looks To Expand Its Footprint

BY PAUL BRADLEY

To glimpse at the numbers that define Phi Theta Kappa, the community college honor society, is to see an organization that is helping students thrive and prosper in a big way.

According to a study that tracked 11,000 PTK members starting in the 2008-09 academic years, the overall six-year completion rate of members was 85 percent. Another seven percent were still enrolled and working toward a degree, making the overall completion rate 92 percent. That compares to the six-year completion rate for all community college students which was 40 percent.

There's more. The rate of Phi Theta Kappa members transferring to a four-year college or university is 71 percent; community college students overall transfer at a rate of 33 percent. The PTK member six-year bachelor's degree completion rate was 68 percent. The comparable figure for community college transfers overall was 42 percent.

But another number at once spotlights PTK's primary shortcoming, while at the



same time illustrating its potential: 11 percent, the portion of students who are eligible to join PTK who actually do so.

Now, under the leadership of a new executive director and new chair of its Board of Directors, the group is striving to greatly expand its footprint and membership roster.

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— LYNN TINCHER-LADNER
PRESIDENT AND CEO, PHI THETA KAPPA

“We have great potential to grow,” said George Boggs, the former president and CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges who recently was elected chair of PTK’s Board of Directors. “We want more students to be successful. That will be our focus going forward.”

“If we could get half of the students who are eligible, we’d have a lot more students

getting involved and being successful.”

Together with Boggs, the expansion effort will be led by Lynn Tincher-Ladner, who took over as president and CEO of PTK in January. She succeeds Rod Risley, who retired in 2015 after serving as the society’s CEO for 31 years. Tincher-Ladner is just the third CEO of Phi Theta Kappa in its 98 years; the late Margaret Mosal was the society’s first executive director.

While PTK is well-known to community college presidents, Tincher-Ladner, armed with the study, wants to remind them that PTK can greatly benefit students.

“When college presidents make those difficult choices on how to allocate their resources, we want them to think about Phi Theta Kappa,” she said.

To some observers, the fact that PTK members succeed at greater rates than their peers is unsurprising. After all, members are by definition high-achieving, highly motivated students. To be eligible for membership, students must have a GPA of 3.5 and have earned at least 12 credits. Nearly 80

percent of members attend college full-time.

There is little doubt that PTK students are smart, but there are other reasons that account for the group's success — particularly the emphasis on getting students deeply engaged in their own academic careers.

In an email, Terry O'Banion, president emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College, said PTK membership gets students more engaged in college.

"By joining Phi Theta Kappa, community college students may feel more connected to the college culture and, therefore, are more motivated to perform better," he wrote. "I remember a (Community College Survey of Student Engagement) study that reported student response to the question 'What is the most important factor in your staying in college?' the answer in study after study: 'Someone knows my name.' Just having a connection helps our kind of students. And when that connection is one that comes with high expectations and a group of friends who are similarly motivated it can be a very supportive experience."

He added: "I think the idea of helping students make a connection in the first few days of college can be applied to all community college students. It is one of my six guidelines I use for student success in all my speeches, and faculty grasp the idea immediately."

The students who were tracked in the PTK study were, in many respects, similar to other community college students, with some important exceptions.

"While members are very similar in age and gender when compared to all community college students, members are slightly less diverse, and somewhat less likely to receive federal funding," the report says. "However, members do differ greatly from the average community college student in one major way — 79 percent of members attend full-time and only 39 percent of community college students are classified as



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PHI THETA KAPPA

full-time students. The dominance in Phi Theta Kappa by fulltime students contributes to the group having increased completion rates. It is well known that at the institutional level, community colleges with higher concentrations of full-time students tend to have higher completion rates."

Kay McClenney is the former director of CCSEE and a special assistant to the president of the AACC. She said the connections that PTK members make with one another and with faculty members, both inside and outside the classroom, are critical to its success.

"There is no magic answer when it comes to the community college student success agenda," she wrote in an email. "But a very powerful message needs to be heard about the central importance of building connections with and among students. And that goes hand-in-hand with the importance of holding and expressing high expectations for what students can achieve academically. These things are baked into the PTK experience, but they can be generalized; that simply requires a high degree of intentionality. The good news? They cost nothing — except the decision to be that kind of college, that kind of advisor, that kind of faculty member."

Whether the PTK success can be expanded to large swaths of community

college students is less certain, she added. Large numbers of community college students attend part-time and don't get involved in extracurricular activities such as PTK.

"The reason likely lies simply in the commonly understood circumstances of community college students," she wrote. "They are unlikely to choose to participate in extracurricular activities because they typically are multi-tasking adults with jobs, families, community and church responsibilities, and so on. They may encounter PTK and other opportunities only by accident or serendipitous circumstance. Many of them never envisioned themselves as 'honor students.' As is the case with many other important opportunities provided by com-

munity colleges, the successful strategy likely involves greater intentionality and structure in design of students' curricular and co-curricular experiences. What would have to happen to make connection with PTK inescapable for students who qualify?"

While Tincher-Ladner wants to expand the number of students who are part of PTK, she wants to do so deliberately. Enlisting more students in PTK without the support of college presidents and faculty members to head individual chapters would be a mistake, she said.

"It can be nine times bigger. But the solution is not to just have more members. Any expansion has to be matched with resources. To not do so would be shortsighted," she said.

But in the short-term, colleges need to do a better job of marketing Phi Theta Kappa and making incoming students aware of the organization, she added.

"We have to teach the colleges how to market PTK better," she said. "It's an educational component that has been missing."

To John Roueche, who led the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas for 41 years, getting involved in PTK is an obvious choice for college presidents.

"I have wondered for a long time why colleges are not more proactive about PTK, given its track record," he said. "It would make no sense for colleges not to promote and market Phi Theta Kappa." ▼

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Membership Means Success

Members of the Phi Theta Kappa honor society have success rates far in excess of national averages.

PHI THETA KAPPA HONOR SOCIETY

NATIONAL AVERAGES.

The overall six-year completion rate of Phi Theta Kappa members was **85 percent**.

The National Student Clearinghouse six-year completion rate for all community college students was **40 percent**.

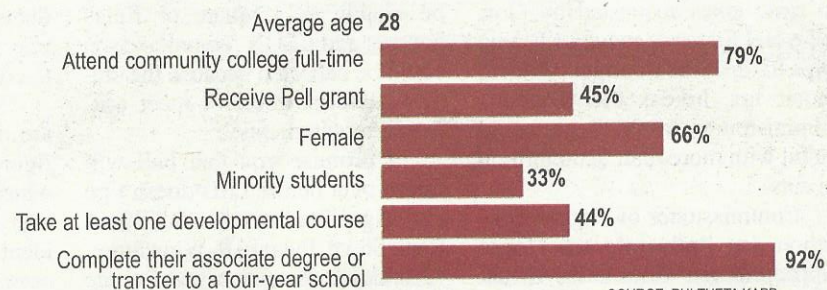
The rate of Phi Theta Kappa members transferring to a four-year college or university is **71 percent**.

Community college students overall transfer at a rate of **33 percent**.

The Phi Theta Kappa member six-year bachelor's degree completion rate was **68 percent** and **78 percent** of members either completed a bachelor's degree or were still enrolled at a university at the end of six years.

The bachelor's degree completion rate of community college transfers overall is **42 percent**.

Phi Theta Kappa Membership Facts



SOURCE: PHI THETA KAPP