# Spring 2024 President's Newsletter

Dear Chapter Representative,

I trust your semester is drawing to a successful conclusion in these waning days of April. It has been an extremely busy but exciting few months at the national level for Theta Alpha Kappa, and for that reason this President's Newsletter appears in an adapted format. Please see below news from the board, updates about several awards programs and other TAK activities, and information about recent TAK constitutional changes.

Eric F. Mason
President, Theta Alpha Kappa

## BOARD UPDATES

This message is coming to you as the first to be sent through our newly updated database. Transforming our database into a more workable structure has long been a dream of the national TAK board. We trust this will make possible more effective and efficient communications with you as the vital contacts for the activities of the society's local chapters, and we will have new capabilities for other kinds of contacts in the future.

We also hope the new database structure will better allow us to make timely updates to chapter representative changes so that the right people are getting the proper messages. Please continue to inform us of all changes to local chapter leadership through the change-of-chapter representative form on the TAK website (https://thetaalphakappa.org/chapter-representative-resources-2/). Please note that this is the only way we can process such changes effectively; we are unable to do so via things like personal emails to the treasurer or other board members.

Speaking of the TAK website ... our long-awaited new website went live about a month ago, and we hope you have already explored it. While its visual design is similar to that of our previous website, the new version works much more smoothly and is reorganized so that key information may now be found more easily. More updates are coming (you will see notes on certain pages about this), but we hope you find this to be a good start. Please send any comments about the website to theta_alpha_kappa_inquiries@thetaalphakappa.org.

In addition to our regular online Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 board meetings, the national board convened in person for the first time since 2019 (remember life before COVID?) for the second meeting of our new strategic planning program to discuss what Theta Alpha Kappa presently is and should be in the future, especially in the context of the challenging trends impacting academic study in our disciplines. Thanks to TAK treasurer Michael Berger for hosting us in Atlanta at Emory University on April 6–8 and for organizing this program with an excellent outside facilitator.

The timing of this initiative is very important. As we know all too well, many individuals and departments affiliated with TAK have been impacted by personnel cutbacks, department closures or reconfigurations, and institutional closures in recent years. Even our founding chapter at Manhattan College has not been immune, as religious studies was recently among numerous departments eliminated. The TAK board seeks to envision what the society can and should do to support its members at all levels in this extremely challenging context, especially as the society's fiftieth anniversary is approaching in 2026. Watch for more information between now and then about new ideas that arise from the strategic planning process and details about how we will celebrate this significant golden anniversary.

Finally, the board is delighted to announce the appointment of Najeeb T. Haddad as an at-large member to fill an unexpired term. He is a Ph.D. graduate of Loyola University of Chicago, assistant professor of Religious Studies at Notre Dame of Maryland University, and author of two recent books, *Paul, Politics, and New Creation* (Fortress, 2020), and *Paul and Empire Criticism: Why and How?* (Cascade, 2023). He was inducted into TAK as an undergraduate at Saint Xavier University in Chicago.

## GRADUATE FELLOWSHIP AWARDS

After a delay related to the website and database projects, we are happy to announce that the 2024 Graduate Fellowship Awards competition is now open. The adjusted application deadline is June 18, 2024. Please see the full GFA announcement at https://thetaalphakappa.org/graduate-fellowship-competition/.

## UNDERGRADUATE ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

There is still time for chapter representatives to request Undergraduate Achievement Awards for the 2023–2024 academic year. Chapters are eligible to present this $100 cash award to a deserving student every other year, and those whose chapter numbers end in the digits 0–4 and whose annual chapter dues for this academic year have been paid may select an honoree for 2023–2024. For more information, see https://thetaalphakappa.org/undergraduate-award/. The deadline to request awards for this year is May 20.

## ALBERT CLARK AWARDS

We are pleased to announce the winners of the 2024 Albert Clark Awards program. In the undergraduate category, first place went to Elizabeth Elin of Saint Vincent College for her paper titled "'In You, O Lord, I Have Hoped': Disability, Identity, and Dialogic Relationship in Psalm 38," followed by Lin Henke of Georgetown University for "Reframing Disability through 'Usefulness' in the Zhuangzi." In the graduate category, congratulations to Andrew McNeely of the University of Dayton for "Between Authority and Service: The LeBar Sisters and the Making of Progressive Evangelical Education," and to James Mor of Wheaton College for "Augustine, Deification, and the Feast of the Ascension." These four distinguished papers and other

outstanding entries to the Clark competition will be featured in future issues of the *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa*.

## *JOURNAL OF THETA ALPHA KAPPA* and CORRECTION TO INDUCTION WELCOME LETTER

Please remember that *JTAK* is now available online in a free, open-access format at https://jtak.scholasticahq.com/. The Spring 2024 issue will be posted soon.

It has recently come to our attention that the letter accompanying new induction certificates still says that new inductees receive a one-year print subscription to *JTAK*. That is no longer the case since publication has shifted online, and we have now provided an updated letter to Jernigan. Please use this opportunity to inform your students (both present and past) about the new format of the journal.

## TAK EVENTS AT ACADEMIC CONFERENCES

Ten TAK chapter representatives and board members enjoyed a wonderful meal at the 2023 AAR/SBL Annual Meeting in San Antonio on Saturday, November 18, 2023, in lieu of the traditional TAK reception. Please watch for information about plans for the 2024 Annual Meeting in San Diego. These are very important opportunities for chapter representatives to make new connections and for TAK as an honor society to express appreciation for all the good work chapter representatives do!

In addition, the TAK board is piloting similar events at two other spring and summer conferences. Board member Elizabeth Coody hosted a TAK dessert reception at the joint meeting of the Upper Midwest AAR and Iowa Interfaith Conference in Des Moines on Friday, April 12. Also, plans are underway for a TAK event at the upcoming joint meeting of the College Theology Society and National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion on May 30–June 2, 2024 in Denver.

## CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES and CURRENT TAK UNDERGRADUATE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

As you may know, several constitutional changes were on the agenda for the TAK annual business meeting last fall, held online on November 8. Those concerning board composition and language about board and business meeting dates and formats were passed, but the proposed revision to undergraduate eligibility criteria was pulled from the agenda on the day of the TAK business meeting due to differences of interpretation of new guidelines about class rank issues approved by the Association of College Honor Societies (ACSH). As such, no action was taken on the latter matter at our TAK business meeting, and TAK undergraduate induction standards for 2023–2024 remained unchanged.

In short, ACHS acted at its own 2023 business meeting to address an issue that has long troubled not just TAK but also other honor societies: so many of our universities will no longer provide class rank information, and many honor societies (including TAK) presently require that undergraduate inductees rank in the top 35% of their class. In response, ACHS approved a new policy for an overall GPA criterion in lieu of class rank. ACHS had not previously had an overall GPA criterion but approved the class rank alternative as 3.3 on a 4-point scale. (TAK already had an overall GPA requirement of 3.0.)

The TAK board interpreted this new ACHS-approved GPA criterion as a true, equivalent alternative to the class rank requirement, therefore we moved to streamline our undergraduate induction criteria and delete discussion of class rank completely, subject to approval of the membership at the 2023 TAK business meeting. But we were informed at the last minute that ACHS insists that class rank remain the preferred induction criterion and that its new 3.3 GPA criterion may be used only if class rank is not available.

Please watch for new constitutional amendment language on this matter for consideration at the 2024 TAK business meeting.

Best wishes for the remainder of the semester and for the summer!

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