

An Important Update on the Avenue M Project

*From International President Dr. Debbie LeBlanc and
Executive Director Nita R. Scott, CAE*



The following update was presented by International President Dr. Debbie LeBlanc and Executive Director Nita R. Scott, CAE, at the 2023 International Conferences in Detroit, Phoenix, and Tampere. The presentation included information critical to the growth of the Society and a challenge from President LeBlanc to members as DKG approaches its centennial anniversary. Due to the conversational style delivery of the presentation, the script published here includes an indication of the content delivered by each speaker.

DEBBIE: This is a somber, necessary conversation. Our members matter, and without you, this organization would be extinct. We are facing challenges of membership, leadership in a variety of roles, and marketing our organization. As a membership organization, we are at a crossroads that could determine our sustainability in the future. Members matter at each level of the Society, and we need them for this organization to flourish and thrive into the next decade and beyond. The Society's vitality, relevance,

and sustainability are keys to the survival and ultimate growth of our organization. And these begin with the chapter. Chapters are the heart and soul of this organization. Interactions at this level of the Society are powerful and clearly can make or break our Society. After all, as I said earlier, we can move heaven and earth at the international and state organization levels, but the buck truly stops with the chapters.

This past fall, I asked the Administrative and Executive Boards to approve the hiring of a firm to complete a *See AVE p. 2*



*Dr. Debbie LeBlanc,
International
President 2022-2024*

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deep-dive analysis of multiple facets of the organization to provide a fresh, neutral perspective that would provide our members with critical information to make informed decisions. This information is important to meet the goals

of relevancy, vitality, and sustainability as a valuable organization for women educators. With that in mind, we interviewed three very reputable firms and decided to recommend Avenue M, a firm based in Chicago, with Sheri Jacobs as CEO. Shortly after, a detailed work plan listing tasks, responsibilities, and deadlines was developed and accepted.

This plan included a deep-dive discovery of relevant documents, including the strategic plan, past research and data, and the Society's website. Membership input is critical to a deeper understanding of the needs, interests, motivations, and jobs to be done by women educators. To that end, oral interviews and surveys were completed with women who represented these categories: members in the organization, women who have dropped their membership, and educators who are eligible for membership but, for a variety of reasons, have never joined DKG.

To date, the firm has completed an analysis of our governing documents, more than 25 oral interviews (including the use of translators when necessary), and almost 11,000 surveys. The plan is to provide preliminary results by early September with more detailed plans for future growth by the end of the year. The recommendations they provide are not just for international use; they are intended to be shared with state organizations and chapters. This support is for 12 months so that all levels can benefit

from understanding and communicating the information and creating plans for measurable and sustainable success.



*Nita R. Scott, CAE
Executive Director*

NITA: As most of you know, our organization was founded in 1929 by a small group of women led by Dr. Annie Webb Blanton in Austin, Texas, on the campus of the University of Texas. These women understood that, at that time, women organizing for any purpose other than social was frowned upon – to the degree that jobs, careers, and more would be at risk. So, although they were actually fighting for women's rights and better conditions for women in education, they shielded themselves from risk by making the organization look like a sorority. At that time, there was a definite need for secrecy, so they borrowed paraphernalia from a sorority on the campus, created the organization, and ultimately adopted the name "Delta Kappa Gamma."

But even so, the 12-person membership of the one small chapter in one state quickly grew. The organization grew from 12 to 10,000 in 10 short years! That one chapter grew to more than 300 chapters and that one state to 35 states. Remember, at that time they had no email, no Facebook, no Twitter, and phone calls were expensive and cumbersome. They increased membership by over 9000% and expanded organizational reach by 97% with mail and personal travelers as their main methods of contact!

However, after reaching our peak in 1991 with over 168,000 members, we have unfortunately fallen to less than 1/3 that number this year. Many of you who know me have heard me report membership data repeatedly over the years, and I have always promised that if it ever became critical, I would tell you. *See AVE p. 3*

**“
...The future is
in your hands.
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Well, ladies, we are there – our decrease has become critical.

And while our membership is decreasing, and I do think we are at a crossroads, I have to share with you that I believe we are still as relevant today as we were in 1929. Our story touches women of all ages and walks of life every time I share it. Our Founders were amazing and progressive women – agents of change and mavericks in their time. They worked to build the organization we know today as DKG – and I hear them cheering us on as we face the challenges of a new era.

I have shared our story in many places where women, young and old, have heard how we were founded and learned about these women. And every time, those women who hear it express how very relevant and meaningful it is to them as they navigate a world still so challenging for us.

I love DKG and what we represent. I love that I was honored with membership and will do all I can to sustain this organization into the next 100 years. And I hope you are just as committed – because, quite frankly, the future is in your hands.

So, let's go back to the data. The truth is that, if we continue to lose membership at the current rate, the organization may not survive. It is an uncomfortable thought, but it is time we face the truth – because, you see, as executive director, it is my job to be concerned about fiscal and financial sustainability. So, of course, I am concerned about the effect membership loss may have on our budget, and I believe it is my responsibility to be honest about that.

But the fact is – not only as executive director but also as a member – I am even more concerned about what membership loss is doing to the IMPACT WE HAVE in the world, and in the education

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profession, and on behalf of those who educate and learn. From 1991 to today, it is not the loss of more than 100,000 members' dues payments that concerns me most – it is losing what those more than 100,000 women could be doing for education, educators, and children today! I am concerned that we have lost our voice and our impact worldwide. And I have to believe the world has missed us and the impact we had and could have again. It is about the nurturing of that many more young women joining the profession and the growing of that many more women into the outstanding educators they were meant to be. Who better to grow great teachers and build up our profession than DKG?

So, to circle back to my story. I am a totally different person today – only 18 years later – as a result of DKG. Membership has been a life-changing experience. My only regret is that no one invited me sooner. . . . So, I am going to ask a bold question – for a moment of reflection: How are you different today as a result of DKG? Are you glad for your membership experience? What if DKG had not survived long enough for you to have that opportunity? How would your life be different if DKG ceased to exist tomorrow? Our largest number of members, as best we can estimate, fall between the ages of 66–75 years old. And that concerns me because it is those younger than I who will take the helm when I am gone.

I serve on the board of directors for the Texas Society of Association Executives, and we (as well as many other organizations) consider under 35–40 as “Next Generation” members – those members who will carry on the work of the organization and grow us into the future. About 2% of our DKG membership would be considered Next Gen – at least as best we can estimate ... and that's a whole other story for another day. But in cross referencing data, I find it interesting that it appears a large number of us are inducting new members, but not only are we not netting growth because we lose more than we induct ... it appears that we are inducting members who look like us, act like us, talk like us, and ... something critical to our long range future ... are about our same age. While I know talking about the Next Gen is not always popular, we have to ask ourselves: When we are all gone from this world, who will carry the organization on? Who will be the DKG of the future?

I want DKG to continue to grow into the future for the benefit of my colleagues who follow me, to ensure the

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future of the profession I love and believe in, and for the future of my children, grandchildren, and their children. I believe this organization can change the world. Do you?

DEBBIE: We are at a pivotal place in our organization that we must be ready to make changes. We must go forward informed by the past but, intentionally and skillfully, find new ways to meet our Purposes, foster leadership growth, and impact women educators for the future. Our ongoing work will need to focus on fulfilling the needs of long-term members while simultaneously enriching the experiences of future generations. *If we cling to our conventional approaches and structures, we will lose our relevance. We will have members but not influence. We will have lost our voices. Radical change is necessary if we are not only to survive but also to be successful in rebuilding this organization. A new focus with a new vision and purpose is mission critical at this point.*

In [early September], Avenue M will provide to us – and I don't mean international leadership, I mean us ... I mean you and the entire organization – a draft report including an executive summary, key findings, summary of interviews, gap analysis, SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis, Member Value Canvas, implementation strategy, and recommendations. I am confident it is not going to be pretty and all wrapped up in a purple bow. Most likely, it will cause us to be uncomfortable, but that's ok. We asked for this – so we will listen, reflect, and decide next steps. There must be a realization that change with action cannot happen without difficult conversations. If this organization means as much to you as it does to me, I know we are ready, willing, and quite able to take that stand.

Revitalization in DKG is a process where members of a state organization realize there is a grave concern that the state organization could dissolve for a variety of reasons. There is a process that includes gathering information to identify areas of greatest need, meeting with members of the state organization with a trained facilitator, and developing a plan for revitalization. It has been a highly successful initiative for these states. Frankly, I envision a process such as revitalization happening with this entire organization.

I challenge each one of us to find our remarkable selves. Do you remember the commercial that said, "Be like Mike!" (as in Michael Jordan)? Well, why don't we say, "Be like Annie!" She would say this: "Keep up with the moving world while not discarding what in the old has value. But don't cling to the old when the worth has passed. *Don't be a person so set in your views that nothing can change you.*" She would want us to have these important, challenging, and most likely uncomfortable discussions so that we are informed to make decisions that will move this Society forward. The time to act is NOW. Our Founders were not afraid – they dreamed, persevered, and accomplished what many thought could never be achieved. Let's be like them. We are not afraid of what can go wrong but excited about what can go right. It's time to make changes, time to take action, and time to move forward before it is too late. And finally, If not us...Who? If not now...When? I'm ready. Are you?

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